

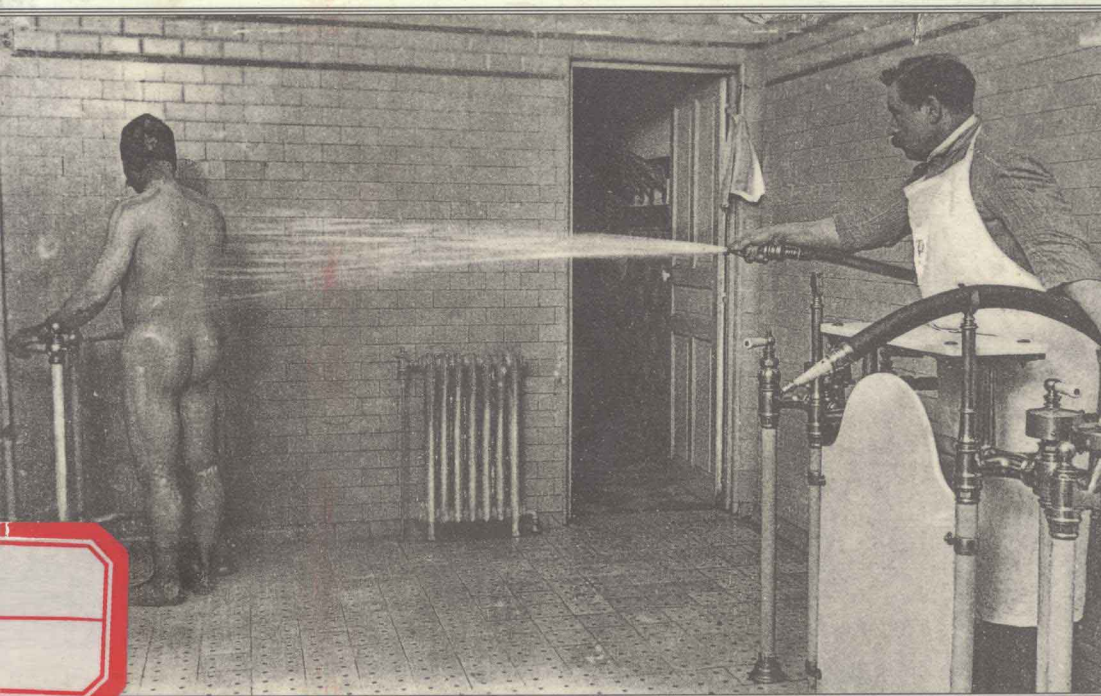
# LEISURE SETTINGS

*Bourgeois Culture,*

*Medicine,*

*and the Spa*

*in Modern France*



DOUGLAS PETER MACKAMAN

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DOUGLAS PETER MACKAMAN

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## *Introduction*

The French will not find it curious that a book about their social identity has been written with bathtubs and drinking fountains in the foreground. With a fevered anticipation for each summer's vacation, this people seems to believe that whatever France is, it is at least partly that because of rest cures and vacationing. Anything but trivial or adjunctive to social life, leisure and its modern manifestations all but embody France's claims of mastery in the category of *joie de vivre*. Spas and the curing one still does at them are of obvious importance to the contemporary scene. For even if there are fewer of them today than there were in the nineteenth century, French spas—some of which are still state owned and administered—are almost universally regarded as medically potent places.<sup>1</sup> Thus for an eager American to refer to Le Mont-Dore, Challes-les-Eaux, or some other national bath in a quick and chatty way is to set a conversational table for a banquet-length story about everyone's favorite uncle with a rheumatic hip.

In their beloved vacations and in their still medically respected bathing places, the French see not just a contemporary importance but a significant history. What holidays are today, they clearly were not just a century ago, for although cherished relatives, broken-backed factory workers, and footsore functionaries are the denizens of most baths now, it was for the socially ambitious ranks of the bourgeoisie that the nineteenth century's thermal milieu was made. Surrounding the great and luxurious vacation sites of then, once opulent hotels and "palaces" with their decayed promenades but still panoramic vistas onto natural beauty stand today as abandoned, crumbling markers of what the "bourgeois century" built but could not sustain. Although the now quiet paths to and from these places might reveal that war and depression changed the nature of holiday life for the French, what the abandonment of these hulking edifices signals more dramatically is that there was very recently a society whose expectations, commitments, pleasures, and confidences differed

dramatically from the sensibilities of today. Into that world of mineral water cures, casinos, and pleasant excursions, a world which is now only a boarded-up grandeur, nearly a million people each year by 1900 went to spend their vacations. Why people went to spas, what they did while there, and how watering places both made and were made by the vacationing middle classes—these questions dangle in the air of so many dull towns where it once was so gay to go.

This book is about spas and the culture of being at them from the latter years of the Old Regime to the end of the nineteenth century. What I seek to explore is how spas helped France's emerging bourgeoisie create and refine an acceptable practice of leisure and pleasure on vacation. It is my largest argument that spas, because of how they would come to stand as architectural and administrative governors of proper leisure, constituted a discursive field where the emerging bourgeoisie would first move en masse to the peculiar rhythms of its rest. Until the last decade or so, research related to identity formation tended to focus on work and other “productive” aspects of experience. More recently, however, cultural critics and historians have turned from the study of labor to explore the complex sociological, economic, and cultural grids of everyday life. After the work of Michel de Certeau in particular, the subtle and quiet politics of opposition—produced by anyone's passage through the lived experience of an average day—have given an important scholarly imperative to the seemingly banal features of existence.<sup>2</sup> Similarly, the rise of “cultural history” since the 1980s has contributed to a now widespread belief that the history of seemingly simple or even silly things is serious indeed. Outstanding work on pet keeping, the politics of furniture, fashion, the history of odor, and so on has been invaluable in silencing the snickers one might have heard in the 1970s upon announcing to an audience of American scholars that the hour of the spa's history was almost at hand.<sup>3</sup>

My decision to study health resorts was driven in large part by an interest in the intersections of medicine and class identity in the nineteenth century. Reading the work of Michel Foucault and of French historians who were deeply influenced by his histories, especially Alain Corbin and Michelle Perrot, had prepared me to find in the spas both the proliferation of medical discourse in the 1800s and its hidden-hand mode of authorship.<sup>4</sup> Similarly, reading in this genre had schooled me to search for ways in which the body figured, historically, as an entity for scrutinization and as an organ—both physiological and metaphorical—where dominance, authority, and normalization would inevitably become governors. Even with this theoretical grounding, however, I was puzzled to find in

my early work on spas just how much medicine the French bourgeoisie took with it on vacation.

Enduring (or seeking) endless medical directives, adopting (whole- or half-heartedly) complicated regimes, and weathering (or enjoying) cures that seemed to be thinly disguised forms of punishment—this was how I found most French spa-goers spending their leisure, at least in the first five or six decades of the nineteenth century. Guidebooks from this period reveal that everyday life at the spas, notwithstanding the balls and social functions that were its pleased punctuations, was overwhelmingly a medical matter. Sick people were so present at Vichy in the 1830s that one promotional writer found it necessary to warn his readers that their spa vacations might feel from time to time like a hospitalization of sorts. For example, the author revealed that although most guests at Vichy's hotel tables enjoyed eating and talking, diners would invariably be joined by "a small number of individuals whose health does not permit them to engage in either of these functions." Weak and understandably sullen, these invalid guests, the author wished to warn his readers, could "indeed diminish the gaiety of the table."<sup>5</sup>

But medicine at Vichy or elsewhere in the decades prior to midcentury was more about a routine and a regimen than it was the variously high or low percentage of desperately sick guests one would encounter during an average day. Life on vacation in this era was ordered according to the dictates of medical curing, as even socially oriented guides to the spas did not fail to note. Very early morning hours were the rule at most baths; commonly, "by 6 or 7, virtually all visitors [were] awake and getting on with the day."<sup>6</sup> Getting on with the day, even for many vacationers who had no health complaints, meant obeying the orders of a doctor. At Vichy, Aix-les-Bains, and most other spas, daily curing began with the drinking of mineral water. This serious business, guidebooks revealed, caused patients to "dispatch quickly and without pretensions with the morning toilette," just as it demanded a curtailment of sociability. "When one meets acquaintances, one greets them but speaks very little," one writer noted in characterizing water drinking at a spa, because "everyone's attention is directed toward the two mineral water sources."<sup>7</sup> Following an hour or so of water drinking, most curists went on to prescribed baths, rest periods, and epochs of exercise. Even social functions and evening meals assumed medical importance in this era, as doctors made it a rule of law at most spas that everyone who bathed in mineral waters had to seek a physician's counsel and establish at least some kind of a curative regimen.

For Foucault, the dispersal of medicine's social authority in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was chartable without explicitly invoking the category of class. To consider medicalization and the spa, however, is necessarily to investigate how doctors and doctoring were symbiotically related to the formation of bourgeois identity. Although medicine was omnipresent at the spas, its popularity as an experience of leisure was not constant. The historiography on modern medicine, in France and elsewhere, had led me to expect that medicine's peak as a factor in spa culture and bourgeois leisure would have occurred somewhere in the Belle Époque. By then, the professionalization of medicine was an accomplished fact, just as medicine's spread as a social authority had achieved vast dimensions. Yet in the decades prior to the Great War, what one sees at the spas is not only a less obvious medical presence than was the case earlier in the century, but, moreover, a diminished percentage of people taking the waters. Framing an explanation to account for why medicine at the spas seemingly saw a significant "fall" in the very period when the medicalization of society and culture was reaching such a pervasive extent became a problem I grappled with in my investigations of leisure and bourgeois identity formation.

In exploring the shifting fortunes of hydrotherapeutic medicine, I felt initially that doctors had simply sought to achieve too much control over the spas and their patients. Cures had taken an unduly sharp turn toward pain, I thought. And bourgeois tourists who had typically also agreed to be curists did so no longer when bathing seemed to approximate torture. That explanation for the ebbing of hydrotherapy's hold over the vacation was but partly successful, however, because cures had always been demanding. Similarly, the fact that hydrotherapy persisted as a leisure pursuit for a not insignificant segment of the spa population—a great many of whom doctored even though they were quite fully in the pink—meant that cures must not have more or less suddenly been seen as onerous or unbearable. If cures had simply become too intrusive and doctors too lordly and demanding, then it would have been odd for bathing to persist as a practice of leisure, which, by all accounts, it did.

An alternative argument presented itself on the question of pleasure. Might it have been that pain and discomfort did not increase inside the spas, but, instead, that pleasure and fun found greater privilege in the social spaces and cultural practices beyond the baths? With the improvement and expansion programs almost all the spas pursued during the Second Empire, the place of pleasure on vacation clearly came to be underscored around midcentury. New casinos, larger hotels, lavish promenades,

public parks, and expanded shopping districts were but the main civic commitments to a pleasant life in public that most French watering places made after the midcentury mark. This explanation of medicine's partial removal from the repertoire of bourgeois leisure practice, however, was unsatisfactory on purely chronological grounds. The perceptible drift of vacationers away from hydrotherapy began around 1850, but the pleasures of spa culture were in full swing long before that date. Fun had never not been featured at the nineteenth-century watering places. If civic improvements highlighted pleasure in the latter half of the century, those changes increased fun but did not invent it.

My conclusion is that medicine never disappeared from spa culture in the nineteenth century, just as I contend that pleasure was always there. The great decades for spa medicalization were the three that came after the fall of the first Bonaparte. That the period 1815 to 1850 was also the indisputable era when France's bourgeoisie saw its social, political, economic, and cultural ascension is no mere coincidence. Indeed, I argue that in the bourgeoisie's making of an identity, it calibrated at the spas a way to do leisure that no other environment would have so easily accepted. Webbed together with overarching concepts like rationality, anticlericalism, respectability, and science, which together stood for something like an emerging bourgeois worldview, medicalization was an effective and appealing mode of order at the spas precisely because spa-goers knew it in other guises, understood it, and welcomed it.

The extent to which medicine was bound to the bourgeoisie and the French state in the administration of public health structures, the legal system, and in other contexts of nineteenth-century social life has been well documented by social historians and cultural critics.<sup>8</sup> But the complete and comfortable lodging of medicalization within a locale like the bourgeois spa is no plain matter, that is until one sees leisure as a problem instead of as an ahistorical given. In all of its variations and unscripted possibilities, leisure was associated both with great promise and with potential pitfalls. Popular leisure, with its festive excesses and carnal components, presented one largely unappealing model for bourgeois commentators to observe. Aristocratic cultural sensibilities were somewhat more satisfactory, with visiting, promenading, dancing, reading, and the annual pleasures of the social season constituting respectable ways of spending free time, but courtly uses of leisure had frivolous and sexual aspects that hardly conformed well with the rising bourgeoisie's notions of productivity and respectability. Similarly, although leisure of the everyday was a solvable problem very early on, as Carol Harrison's work on scientific

societies and betterment clubs from the Restoration and July Monarchy reveals, the matter was less easily addressed when the quantity of leisure was increased to three weeks' duration.<sup>9</sup>

Spa medicine became the bourgeoisie's way to reconcile a productive ethos to the fact that consuming an extended holiday was a socially advantageous course of action. Medicine in this scheme did what it always endeavored to do as science's hand on the formation of a modern society. It debunked mystery. It surveyed so much chaos and offered an authoritative will toward order and wellness. To the partly cocky, partly timid, somewhat risen, and somewhat nascent social group that was the French bourgeoisie, spa medicine offered precise prescriptions according to which leisure was to be practiced. Thus medicine let the bourgeoisie have its rest, all the while making that rest impermeable to waste, indecency, excess, sloth, and the other social attributes the still forming bourgeoisie took to be antithetical to the dual guises of productivity and respectability. As I endeavor to explore within this book, the more "set" that bourgeois identity became, the less need spa vacationers seemed to have for the strict dictates of mineral water curing. Moreover, as the middle class came increasingly to join the bourgeoisie at France's spas in the later decades of the century, these new tourists and curists would seek holiday versions of the pleasures and public life that they enjoyed in Paris and elsewhere.<sup>10</sup> Daily routines at most spas reflected the rise of pleasure as early morning cures gave way to excursion travel, concerts, and the frenetic activity of social intercourse.<sup>11</sup>

Alain Corbin's masterful history of the beaches of England and France as leisure settings, entitled *Le territoire du vide: L'Occident et le désir du rivage, 1750–1840*, has stimulated much of my thinking for this project, just as it has pushed me to ask questions of agency and historical causality that Corbin at least partly avoids.<sup>12</sup> The project of his book, which is both extraordinarily broad and minutely detailed, is to chart the ways in which cultural sensibilities regarding the seaside changed in the century after 1750. Corbin reveals how seaside settings, a maligned place in the minds of most eighteenth-century contemporaries, emerged in the nineteenth century as objects of great desire. Imagining a locale like Margate or Dieppe no longer meant that one conceived of danger, indecency, or the attending uncertainties of life among the peoples of a poorly defined border region. Rather, one now understood the seaside as a territory whose vast vistas and geographical precariousness inspired romantic reflection and the muses of art.

As Corbin states it, the new image of the European beach as a decent

and worthy place to think about and even visit was in large part due to its first having been recast as a culturally safe environment. Doctors and medical authority, Corbin convincingly argues, were among the chief architects of beach “safety.” The medical codification and administration of sea bathing, for example, was effected in both England and France around the middle of the eighteenth century. Beyond rationalizing salt water hydrotherapy, making bathing a medical act signaled to observers near and far that a measure of scientific authority had been installed at the shore. Now, because of sea-bathing cures, people not only had reasons to go to a beach but also a variety of very specific things to do there.

Corbin’s work is a history of what the French call *mentalités*. Thus he explores, in addition to the rise of medical authority at the seaside, the shifting place of the beach in the cultural calculus of those who imagined it. As medicine made beaches seem safe and worthy of consideration, Corbin argues that respectability too came to inform people’s visions of the seashore. Medical bathing, after all, hardly made nymphs of its practitioners. On the contrary, as Corbin explains, sea bathing was an administered experience in which pain and discomfort were sometimes quite pronounced. At the same time, bathing of this sort was made as morally decent as possible. Even where there were no local ordinances ensuring that male bathers wore clothing of some kind, a peculiar sort of “bathing machine” was used to uphold a measure of modesty. Carried to an appropriate depth in an enclosed cart with enormous wheels, bathers were released from these machines through trap doors—their bobbing heads being all that curious onlookers could see.

As a more or less strictly cultural study, Corbin’s work lacks the valuable institutional history that local studies of French leisure locales provide. Indeed, the book’s deep bow to Michel Foucault leaves the issue of human agency in the construction of the beach more or less unexplored. This is obviously not to suggest that Corbin fails to show his readers a host of discourses implicated in the rise of beaches. But beyond beach doctors, who obviously had a vested interest in the improved fortunes of their locales—yet about whose motives in this regard Corbin has little to say—the author is not much interested in the economic and developmental history of beaches as leisure sites. Entrepreneurs and speculators hardly figure at all in the analysis, and neither, of course, do their variously successful and unsuccessful efforts to exploit and otherwise trade upon the vogue of beach-going.

For the English case, Corbin might have hastily ignored this aspect of the seaside’s story because others have already given it a credible tell-



ing.<sup>13</sup> The same cannot be said, however, for France. Nor can it be said that such a history would not reveal a great deal about the collective cultural sensibilities of those historical actors who interpreted and internalized the new meanings of the beach. On the contrary, the endless promotional writings that beach developers produced in support of their hotels and casinos must surely constitute a valuable optic on the means by which beaches were invented, popularized, and made profitable.

In planning my book, I decided to look closely at a limited number of French spas and draw out whatever implications and generalizations I could for the thermal milieu and bourgeois vacationing generally. While I found this less-than-scientific methodology to have certain perils, I did my utmost to check my “data” and “findings” against different types of spas in different regions. Thus I devote a great deal of my analysis in chapter 2 to a comparative discussion of spa development in three municipalities, each in a different *département* and each boasting a very different kind of thermal establishment. But rather than doing all of my research and writing around such a comparison, which would have greatly limited the intellectual range of my analysis for the simple reason that spas shared too much of a common history to make their inevitable differences the centerpiece of a book, I opted to make tactical use of comparisons while creating an essentially composite portrait of my subject.

Before sketching the narrative and analytical contours of the book’s five chapters, I would like to offer a working definition of the term “vacation leisure,” which figures prominently in my discussion. Vacation leisure denotes a category of leisure that differs in my estimation from other forms of free time. Mainly, I make this distinction on temporal grounds. Leisure of the everyday, quite simply, has always been organized and passed in relatively brief bursts. One is away from one’s place of work and the direct demands of that place, so one does what one will. Historically, the range of options available to those in the possession of everyday leisure has varied a great deal.<sup>14</sup> Principally, it has been class, gender, and race that have imposed the greater limitations on the practice of everyday leisure. Yet this leisure, whether spent in a café, garden, museum, or bedroom, has still maintained a direct relationship to everyday life that a vacation lacks, for vacation leisure has ultimately been a matter of some duration, best measured in increments of whole days if not always entire weeks.

My use of the term vacation leisure implies important spatial and geographical elements too.<sup>15</sup> Simply passing days or weeks in one’s home, regardless of the ways in which one fills this leisure, has not historically