

THE MODERN AND THE EVERYDAY Leisure-Culture during Les Trente Glorieuses

Following the Second World War there are two priorities in France: the reignition of the economy, drastically weakened by the war, and the reconstruction of the ravaged cities, in which new housing for the hundreds of thousands of homeless people was a first priority. Holidays and leisure activities represented only a limited portion of the everyday lives of the populace, and for the French state it was also a sector for which government investments were not the order of the day. Yet in a span of barely twenty years France would build a tourist empire comprising vacation villages, camping grounds, hotel chains and other holiday facilities. Sprawling seaside resorts and ski resorts rose literally out of thin air, in the context of which projects such as La Grande Motte and Les Arcs would become icons of a capitalist leisure cult à la Française.

This article examines what role French culture played in the emergence of this specific form of tourism and how the people contributed by participating actively and forming the crux of these *machines à récréer*.

The Invention of Holidays

Although the working population since 1936, the first year in which the Front Populaire was in power, had been given twelve paid vacation days, tourism had remained an activity reserved for a small elite of the most well-to-do classes.¹ The reason why a mass exodus to the mountains and coast failed to materialise in spite of the hard-won congés payés was obvious. The holiday facilities, geared toward families of well-heeled foreign and domestic tourists, were wholly unsuited to hosting large groups. For the working class these hotels or pensions were also financially out of reach – two weeks' holiday for an average family could easily cost a full month's salary.² In *Les Vacances de Monsieur Hulot* (1953) Jacques Tati paints a clear picture of the manner in

which the better classes spent their holidays around 1950 – a picture that draws much from the nineteenth-century model. Monsieur Hulot appears as a discordant note in a dignified family pension for seaside holiday-makers who spend their vacations playing cards, having tea and playing tennis on an Atlantic coast beach. The same intimate atmosphere of privileged leisure was also reflected in the summer sections of *Paris Match* or *Elle*. Readers got tips on the new summer fashions in Cannes or the best places to stay in Deauville or La Baule. Holidays in this context fulfilled a social function, in which the emphasis was on the fashionable aspects and the contact with '*le beau monde*', which played a more important role than the proximity of sun, sea or beach. This social aspect was to remain an important factor in how the French experienced their holidays.

Modernity and Consumerism

The extreme housing shortage following the Second World War formed the most significant braking factor on economic expansion. When the Marshall Plan made it possible for the French state to make massive investments in housing construction and national industry, of which automobile manufacture formed the greater part, this investment was matched by an explosive economic development and a dramatic rise in people's purchasing power.³ This economic progress led to rising mass consumption, of which leisure and mass tourism formed a significant component.

At that moment France was at a social watershed, and transformed itself at break-neck speed from a rural Catholic country to an industrialised welfare state. In contrast to the United States, where modernisation was part of a gradual process that began in the early twentieth century, in France modernisation rolled across the land like a tidal wave starting in the 1950s.⁴

This new modernity, characterised by a new form of domesticity, mobility and

¹ Prior to this only government functionaries, military personnel and mine workers had had a right to (paid) holidays. Now the workers were included as well. In Jean Fourastié, *Les trente glorieuses ou la Révolution invisible de 1946 à 1975*, Paris 1979.

² Joffre Dumazedier, *Vers une civilisation du loisir?*, Paris 1972.

³ 1950-1958: Rise of the GNP by 41%. An average salary rose by 40% and continued to rise until the end of the 1960s, in *L'empire des signes – L'autre ville*, Paris 2000.

⁴ Kristin Ross, *Fast Cars, Clean Bodies. Decolonization and the Reordering of French Culture*, Cambridge (Mass.) 1995, p. 15-16.

¹ Voordien hadden alleen ambtenaren, militairen en mijnwerkers recht op vakantie, nu echter ook arbeiders. In: Jean Fourastié, *Les trente glorieuses ou la Révolution invisible de 1946 à 1975*, Parijs 1979.

² Joffre Dumazedier, *Vers une civilisation du loisir?*, Parijs 1972.

³ 1950-1958: stijging van het BNP met 41%. Een gemiddeld salaris steeg met 40% en zou blijven stijgen tot eind jaren zestig, in: *L'empire des signes – L'autre ville*, Parijs 2000.