**Physical Culture**

**Summary**

The obsession with physical culture apparent throughout the tense and formative modernist movement extended well beyond sport, games, and purposive exercise through gymnastics, body building, and posture exercises to a wide range of holistic health practices and a variety of dance and expressive activities disseminated across the globe. Scholars have shown how an extended community of North American and European actors, dancers, physical educators, and physical culture teachers at the turn of the twentieth century created a spectrum of ‘body cultures’ that responded and contributed to social modernity and artistic modernism**.** These occurred within multiple contexts, including theatre, dance, fashion, medicine, labour, sport, and exercise and collectively crafted and visualized a ‘modern’ body, ready for work, play, and self-expression.

**European Systems of Gymnastics**

Physical culture came into the lexicon of the English-speaking world at a time when European systems of gymnastics such as those of Per Henrik Ling and Friedrich Ludwig Jahn were making a profound impact on education and the military. Jahn, who invented the system of *Turnen* or German gymnastics in the early nineteenth century, saw movement as critical to the making of German manhood with the aim of unifying and strengthening the nation. Developed around the same time, Ling’s Swedish gymnastics, also oriented toward national revitalization, was a carefully organized system of therapeutic exercises to maintain posture and functional health. Both systems and their derivatives found their way through Europe to America and indeed globally to be incorporated into male and female school physical education curricula and college physical training schemes in a variety of ways. Competition between these gymnastic approaches was often intense, although *Turnen* clubs and organizations became especially popular in North American towns with German immigrant populations.

**The Rise of Modern Sport**

In Great Britain it was the rise of modern sport and regulated games as they evolved in exclusive boys’ schools such as Rugby and Eton in the latter decades of the nineteenth century that came to stress character over discipline, and team or individual over abstract collectivities. Through the rough and tumble of team games, the public schoolboy was expected to learn the basic tools of imperial command: initiative, self-reliance, loyalty and obedience.[[1]](#endnote-1) Such views concerning training articulated a new model of manhood—what scholars have called ‘muscular Christianity’—that stressed action over reflection and the body as a tool for social progress and moral uplift. When exported elsewhere these views stimulated the development of character- building sports and ideals of ‘healthy’ vigorous activity. In North America, concerned about the perceived dangers of neurasthenia and effeminacy in a rapidly modernizing world, President Theodore Roosevelt called upon men to adopt a strenuous and outdoor life.[[2]](#endnote-2) Charles W. Eliot, President of Harvard, reported in 1905 that as a result of sport and physical culture the ideal student had been transformed from a stooping weak and sickly youth into a robust and healthy one.[[3]](#endnote-3) Growing interest in playgrounds, parks, recreational pursuits, and camping along with the YMCA and the Boy Scouts all supported the heightened importance of brawn over brain, being over becoming.

**Physical Culture and Bodybuilding**

These institutional developments were accompanied by a popular physical culture and bodybuilding movement that became synonymous with Eugen Sandow, the most famous strongman, performer, health advisor, and publisher at the turn of the twentieth century. By the time the first Modern Olympiad was held in 1896, the obsessive belief that the body could be shaped, formed, cultivated, and improved with the help of scientifically-approved training systems had been firmly established, turning physical strength into a desirable commodity for European and American publics. Sandow’s *Strength and How to Obtain It* (1897) marked the zenith of a fitness craze that built upon widespread anxieties about the degenerative effects of modernization, a renewed fascination with ancient Greek body aesthetics and new media such as advertising and photography. Bernarr Macfadden followed Sandow in blending muscular showmanship and popular health advice into a potent mix through his magazine *Physical Culture.* As the flamboyant and self-proclaimed ‘father of physical culture,’ Macfadden grafted an enormously successful publishing career upon earlier success as a strength performer.[[4]](#endnote-4)

**The New Woman and Female Physical Education**

The newly visible male body that invaded the beach, the gymnasium, the sports field, the cinema, and the parade ground responded to a range of cultural imperatives from mass consumerism to a new economy of gender. Just as modernity produced new images of the masculine body through physical culture pursuits, it also betrayed an anxiety for losing the ability to maintain perfectly policed boundaries between the sexes. In France, the poet Charles Baudelaire had drawn attention to the grand pageant of modern masculinity and femininity through his French *flaneur* and interest in the growing urban crowd.[[5]](#endnote-5) His references to rapid urbanization and the rituals of public life reflected the changing status of women and new representations of the physically active feminine body. On the one hand, female acrobats and weight lifters could be seen performing in the fairgrounds and circuses, which multiplied in the modern city. At the same time, women were increasingly seeking new rights and freedoms through participation in systems of health-promoting activities and exercise, outdoor recreation such as bicycling and swimming, and a growing range of sports like tennis and hockey. Macfadden’s interest in sex and the well-built female body, ubiquitously displayed in his mass circulated *Physical Culture* magazines, may have alarmed anti-pornography crusaders, but it also helped support the new model of able-bodied womanhood that was emerging in the early twentieth century – a ‘new woman’ who had a robust figure, exercised outdoors, and exuded health.[[6]](#endnote-6) In England, for example, Madame Bergman-Ősterberg, a Swede trained in Lingian gymnastics, upheld the power of this model of womanhood by founding a tight network of female physical education training schools which had a huge influence upon girls’ education and physical culture for well over half a century.[[7]](#endnote-7) Her activities promised a more liberated, active notion of femininity, albeit one pervaded by a moral consciousness and legitimated by eugenic theories that portrayed a healthy female body as more functional for national well-being.[[8]](#endnote-8)

**The New Kinaesthetic and Expressive Movement**

Gymnastics, however, were not only purposive; they could also be expressive and the early decades of the twentieth century saw a nudging aside of Ling’s remedial gymnastics in a search for real expression in movement that Hillel Schwarz has called ‘the new kinesthetic’.[[9]](#endnote-9) At the heart of this new enthusiasm for expression through gesture, modern dance, and rhythmic movement were the ideas of François Delsarte, Émile Jaques-Dalcroze, Rudolf Laban, among others, ideas that reached into physical education and expressive dance and gymnastic practices in varied and lasting ways on both sides of the Atlantic. Dance and movement reformers opened new artistic paths, especially for women by facilitating bold, new, and reorganized forms of physical expression.[[10]](#endnote-10) Intertwined with numerous life reforms focused upon fashion, beauty, personal hygiene, diet, and new forms of recreation, these new practices of self were widely celebrated as emblems of modernity. The new modern woman increasingly sought out dance and expressive activities, sporting opportunities, wore practical (and fashionable) clothing, and demanded access to clubs, leisure pursuits, and public spaces.

**Globalization—the Case of Modern Yoga**

Although critical discourses around modernism have tended to focus on the European and American scene, interest in and knowledge about physical culture practices were circulating globally by the turn of the twentieth century through colonial struggles against imperial administrators and nationalist discourses as well as through the rise and expansion of new technologies and commodity culture. The map of domination of the world’s spaces changed out of all recognition between 1850 and 1914 such that yoga, for example, could begin to develop into India’s first global brand of physical culture while simultaneously adapting many features to shifting local conditions.[[11]](#endnote-11) The incorporation of western gymnastic practices into Hatha yoga during the time of colonial rule in India was facilitated by the extensive spread of British sporting forms and influences. Scientific racism and imperial ambitions became hitched to the carts of sport and exercise advocates, missionaries and bodybuilders, while nationalists in Bengal mirrored the physical culture practices of their masters and tied nationalist activity to the currency of physical exercise and bodily empowerment. Stimulated by Swami Vivekananda, known as the father of modern yoga, who made a great impression during his travels to the West from 1893, yoga was reshaped into something rather different from its classical Hindu approaches. Modern postural yoga, just as sport, gymnastics, and other forms of physical culture, was increasingly viewed in the West as helping to train the body and inspire self-control and character building which might fight off the effects of stress caused by a rapidly modernizing society.[[12]](#endnote-12)

**The Dark Side of Modernist Obsessions with Physical Culture**

One can see how the extraordinary modernist preoccupation with physical culture which developed in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries had global tentacles of commodification: its institutionalization in schools, gymnastic, dance, and fitness organizations—together with an unparalleled interest in sport, recreation, and the built body—contributed to self-realization and new freedoms as well as fostering nationalist objectives and military preparedness. Walter Benjamin wrote that ‘each epoch dreams the one to follow,’ for there was also a dark side of modernist physicality.[[13]](#endnote-13) The worship of the body as well as unlimited creativity both had the potential to lend themselves to facile exploitation by racist supremacy theories and fascist views. From this perspective, Harold Segel contends that the holocaust in its way can be understood as the last stage, the extreme fulfillment of the modernist obsession with physicality.[[14]](#endnote-14)

**Legacy**

Physical culture movements and the global reach of somatic practices have long and storied histories such that any history of physical culture cannot simply be tied to the governance of bodies in modern western states. The study of physical culture has multiple lines of descent including the myriad genealogies of physical cultural practices across the globe and their uptake in a wide variety of arenas. Movement across disciplinary boundaries is now also an expectation for modernist studies and this is particularly the case with the study of physical culture within the newly constituted academic sub-discipline of ‘physical cultural studies’ focused on the dynamism, fluidity and transnational complexity of contemporary physical cultures.

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