

EDUCATION AND THE BODY IN EUROPE (1900-1950). MOVEMENTS, PUBLIC HEALTH, PEDAGOGICAL RULES AND CULTURAL IDEAS

By SIMONETTA POLENGHI, ANDRÁS NÉMETH AND TOMÁŠ KASPER (eds.). Berlin [etc]: Peter Lang, 2021, 266 pp. ISBN: 9783631835647

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Long neglected in the education literature as a discrete topic of inquiry (the term was not listed in any of the main European encyclopaedic dictionaries of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, from the *Diccionario de educación y métodos de enseñanza* by the Spanish educationalist Mariano Carderera to the imposing *Encyklopädie des gesammten Erziehungs- und Unterrichtswesens* by the German scholar Karl Adolph Schmid, through the famous *Dictionnaire de pédagogie et d'instruction primaire* by Ferdinand Buisson, and the later *Dizionario illustrato di pedagogia* edited by Antonio Martinazzoli and Luigi Credaro), the body has been an ambiguous presence in the field of education for centuries: sometimes treated as an object, but more frequently as an instrument, and almost never as an aim of specific interventions.

It is thus not surprising, as clearly set out by the editors of this volume – which brings multiple novel perspectives to the international literature on the theme – that the first scholars to investigate the “multifaceted and complex” (p. 7) nature of the body were sociologists, beginning with Norbert Elias and his long-term analysis of the civilizing of Western society. While the thinking of Michel Foucault stands out within following scholarship, and indeed is adopted as an interpretive key in several of the essays in this collection, we should not overlook the contributions of Thorstein Veblen regarding the consumerist dimension of

the body and the “theory of the leisure class”, Marcel Mauss concerning the body as a social construct, and Pierre Bourdieu with respect to the notion of habitus – first proposed by Mauss – as an expression of a given somatic culture. The constructs of vulgarity and good manners, alienation, marginalization and respectability, moderation and debauchery, discipline, rigour, and freedom are all mediated and communicated by the body, as pointed up by early studies on the topic, beginning in the first half of the twentieth century (in parallel with the developments covered in this book). The significant changes observed over time in “human attitudes towards the body” (p. 7) were thus followed by its “rediscovery” – or perhaps it would be more appropriate to say its redefinition – in the 1980s and 1990s, within a broader cultural history in which the so-called corporeal or body turn has intertwined with other “turns” (material, visual, emotional...), and all that these entail in terms of behaviours, practices, and feelings.

Against this heuristic backdrop, the editors of the volume – Simonetta Polenghi, András Németh, and Tomáš Kasper – situate a recent but important tradition within history of education: a tradition that, in dialogue with general history and to a lesser extent with educational science (but also anthropology, psychology, art...), pointed up the unitary nature of all educational phenomena (as simultaneously involving the body, the mind, and the will), while also examining the spaces and materials that offered a medium for formative and transformative processes, whether overt or latent. This has resulted in a broader focus that is not confined to schools, the main locus of inquiry to date, but also comprehends the many settings of non-formal and informal education where the body has played and continues to play a leading role, whether as a tool of freedom or, conversely, as a tool of repression.

And indeed, the period under study in the volume – specifically the half-century spanning the Belle Époque and the years immediately following World War II – was characterized precisely by the emergence, alongside the persistence of “strong normalizing powers” (the “straightening” of bodies pointed out in the now classic writings of the Foucauldian Georges Vigarello), of “new trends in medicine, art, literature, and education in favor of naturalness and freedom that paved the way for the cultural and sexual revolutions of the 1970s” (p. 12). One symbolic change among many, akin to the refusal and gradual abandonment of

swaddling clothes for new-born children in the late 1700s, was the rejection of the corset, in the name of a new ideal of the female body, now to be unfettered from the – metaphorical more so than material – ties imposed by society.

Hence, in addition to the material body, this book offers an account of the body as metaphor, or more specifically as a tool for constructing and interpreting the world, as recently proposed by Mona Gleason in *Paedagogica Historica* (“Metaphor, materiality, and method: the central role of embodiment in the history of education”, 54, 1-2, 2018: 4-19). Each of the fourteen essays, which have been authored by seventeen scholars from twelve universities in ten European countries, addresses this duality in relation to a respective national context, ranging from Great Britain to France and Belgium, from Germany to Hungary and the Czech Republic, and from Austria to Switzerland, Italy and Spain.

The first section of the volume revolves around the concept of *Lebensreform* or life reform, a nineteenth-century cultural current originally descended from vegetarianism that soon extended its focus beyond dietary issues, and whose recent ramifications extend into the subculture of today’s new age movement. Ehrenhard Skiera (Europa-Universität Flensburg, Eötvös Loránd Tudományegyetem – ELTE, Budapest) reconstructs the “motive spectrum” (p. 27) of *Lebensreform* in relation to the concept of “new man” being advocated at the same time by the *éducation nouvelle* current. The eloquent image of the “body of the future” (p. 27), which bears a relationship to the project nature of education, here foreshadows the generalized, albeit variously interpreted, “critical attitude to the political, institutional power of the period as well as to its cultural trends and conventions” (p. 43) described by Janka Balogh and András Németh (Eötvös Loránd Tudományegyetem – ELTE, Budapest) in the following essay about the reformed perspective on the body in dance. Of particular note here is the thinking of Hungarian dancer and choreographer Rudolf Laban, who proposed that the body is liberated by means of a detailed analysis of its movements, which in turn reflect the intrinsic harmony of the universe. This view resonates with Maria Montessori’s well-known theory that there can be no freedom without self-control, such that movement education is integral to helping the child develop forms of self-discipline.

The theme of *Lebensreform* is again central to Agnes Trattner's (Karl-Franzens-Universität Graz) essay on bodily cultural practices among German-speaking youth at the turn of the twentieth century (gymnastics, dance, yoga, hiking, vegetarianism, nudism...), while Dorina Szente and András Németh (Eötvös Loránd Tudományegyetem – ELTE, Budapest) examine unprecedented changes in the image of the female body in Hungary, where the earlier-referenced banishment of the corset went hand in hand with short haircuts, new sports outlets, and a more refined diet for women. Ilaria Mattioni (Università di Torino), on the other hand, explores the relations between the body, fashion, and female education in Italy, drawing on fairy tales, etiquette manuals, novels, and women's magazines, especially Catholic ones, to illustrate the moral preconceptions then binding the "fairer sex", especially with respect to the care and display of the body.

The second section of the volume focuses on the domain of physical education and sport, including in relation to the possible definition of "national bodies", that is to say, local, ideologically determined variants of the metaphorical body that is the main theme of the book. Thus, Grégory Quin (Université de Lausanne) draws connections between the notion of a "British body" (p. 109) and the capitalist-bourgeois values of progress, unlimited speed, and primacy that were channelled through English sports during the decades under study. Meanwhile, Michaël Atali and Yohann Fortune (Université de Rennes 2) see actions designed to "control, analyse and straighten" (p. 121) as the hallmark of the scientific and rational approach to the body that dominated in the France of Demeny, Tissié, and Hébert. A further essay authored by Quin with Christelle Hayoz (Haute École pédagogique Fribourg) describes the construction of physical education as a school subject in Switzerland, homing in on the linguistic and cultural differences that, undermining the scope for developing a single federal model, caused variability in emphasis between the educational dimension (as in the French-speaking cantons: *éducation physique*) and the operational one (see the German-speaking cantons' *Bewegung und Sport* and its primary focus on the development of physical and sporting prowess). Next, Paolo Alfieri (Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore, Milano) tracks the evolution of physical education as a school subject in Italian elementary schools, from the highly disciplined tradition of the 1800s to the aftermath of the fascist era, when for

the first time “a more subjective view of the body” (p. 159) was formulated and advanced from among the ruins of the totalitarian regime. Finally, Xavier Torredadella Flix (Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona) explicitly draws on a Foucauldian perspective in exploring the concept of “manl[iness]” (p. 164) that characterized the regeneratively-oriented “Hispanic mental framework” (p. 163) surrounding physical education.

The third and concluding part of the volume completes the discussion by zooming in on the concepts of “emotions, hygiene and (ab)normality”, each of which, in a different way, introduces us to a more modern vision of pedagogy. Indeed, by the late 1800s, hygiene education in Italy was already being pursued with regenerative aims, the focus of the first essay in the section by Simonetta Polenghi (Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore, Milano). Just as the war being waged on illiteracy during the same period saw schooling associated with respectability, so the battle of the hygienists linked physical cleanliness with moral purity. It is no coincidence that Paolo Mantegazza, a positivist doctor and science populariser, defined education and hygiene as “Siamese twins” (p. 189); nor that schoolteachers from the turn of the century through the post-WWII years were constantly instructed to look after their pupils’ physical cleanliness in order to bring out their “innocent and clean heart[s]” (p. 190). Again, as we were consistently taught by Foucault, it is control over bodies – required to be neat, efficient, disciplined, punished... – that dictates the microphysics of power marking the history of modern man. And indeed, in the 1800s and 1900s, schools headed the charge to construct a new society across the whole of Europe. This mandate, which not only involved schools in nation-building efforts throughout the “long nineteenth century”, but “consecrated”, so to speak, their educational programmes (some years ago, in specific reference to physical education, I discussed the “phenomenology of schoolization”: Matteo Morandi, “Snodi identitari di una materia scolastica”, in Id. (ed.), *Corpo, educazione fisica, sport. Questioni pedagogiche*, Milano: FrancoAngeli, 2016, 57), also features in the essay by Michèle Hofmann (Universität Zürich), who, returning to the Swiss context, distinguishes between the “ideal” bodies of the reform movements and “normal” (i.e., regulated, made to conform) bodies in public schools.

Tomáš Kasper (Technická Univerzita v Liberci, Univerzita Karlova v Praha) revisits the image of a “symbiosis” (p. 220) between the physical,

mental, and moral life in his reconstruction of education programmes for children with disabilities in Bohemia, later to become part of Czechoslovakia, over the period under study. In light of the preceding content, we can only read as rhetorical the question put to us by the author: Did the care provided to children with disabilities, in this country as elsewhere, contemplate “just’ the way of physical recovery” (p. 213)?

Nevertheless, Sarah Van Ruyskensvelde and Pieter Verstraete (Katholieke Universiteit Leuven) offer a counterexample to the “pedagogy of the rod”, discussing residential care for minors in Belgium in the period spanning the 1910s and 1930s. In this case, the logic of rigor and moralization was replaced by a true journey of “emotionalization”, a more refined strategy that was based on careful but unobtrusive observation of the children with a view to helping them to develop self-control.

This case study, like those presented earlier in the book, poses the reader with numerous questions regarding the legacy of the past and possible future developments of this story, in the playing out of tensions between conservation and progress, between freedom and discipline, and between self-control and other-control of bodies and more, during the pivotal period that was the first half of the twentieth century. At the same time, the key role of the body in education calls for a redefinition (in historical and not only theoretical terms) of pedagogy itself, which must surely concern itself with souls, hearts, and intellects, but also with muscles, corsets, desks, and nutrition, and even with noses, as Maria Montessori was pleased to demonstrate in a famous lesson of hers. Amongst many other insights, this book shows us that while we are behind on this task of redefining education, recent lines of inquiry are fortunately beginning to fill the gap.

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