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— Gabriella Seveso

# Ambiguities and Contradictions Surrounding the Body and Education: Thoughts inspired by S. Polenghi, A. Németh, T. Kasper (eds.). Education and the Body in Europe (1900–1950). Movements, Public Health, Pedagogical Rules and Cultural Ideas.

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The theme of education and the body, while undeniably important, has only gained the attention of historiographers during the past couple of decades. Yet a thoughtful examination of this subject is beyond due. My exploration of it here is grounded in a recent volume edited by S. Polenghi,

A. Németh and T. Kasper, entitled “Education and the Body in Europe (1900–1950). Movements, Public Health, Pedagogical Rules, and Cultural Ideas”. This book draws together the research of seventeen scholars from fourteen different European countries, thus offering an invaluable broad perspective. It primarily explores the early twentieth century, a period marked by numerous programs (and tensions) involving the education of the body; these initiatives were not necessarily cohesive,

but they were of great significance. The volume not only illustrates the importance of this historical period but also points up its inherent ambiguities and contradictions (as exemplified in the essays by Trattner or Skiera, who openly address the ambiguities of some of the practices or representations they scrutinize). In sum, the work is a valuable tool for exploring heuristic tensions in the history of education, as reflected across the essays it collects.

### 1.

A first recurring theme in the volume is the link between the aesthetic and ethical dimensions of the body, a connection that also comes into play in perceptions and representation of the body, as well as in bodily practices. This key motif has been borrowed – indeed overtly so – from ancient culture and has distinctively informed our own cultural history. The Greek expression *kalòs kai agathòs* pointed up the intrinsic relationship between external beauty and inner harmony, where the latter reflected virtue and *areté* or excellence of character. This concept, which is well entrenched in our own cultural tradition, appears again and again throughout the book. For example, Polenghi – in her essay – examines the correlation between order, bodily hygiene and moral values, while Kasper initially focuses on the enduring tendency – within people’s everyday representations and perceptions – to associate disabilities or physical limitations with delinquency or criminality (p. 201). At the same time, Kasper also describes a case study that departed from this preconception by offering tailored activities for children with disabilities, such that these children were no longer viewed as deviant but rather as individuals with unique and specific needs.

On the other hand, Attali and Fortune – in their essay on the foundations of physical education in France – clearly demonstrate the persistence of the association between bodily aesthetics and ethics. In brief, they provide unmistakable evidence of how moralistic control was exercised by intervening on the body (p. 138).

Trattner’s exploration of the *Jugendbewegung* movement is equally intriguing. It sheds light on the potential dangers associated with intensifying the ethical-aesthetic relationship, dangers that can result

in the perilous aestheticization of educational approaches related to the body. This can lead to a distortion of the Greek concept of *kalòs kai agathòs*, which originally advocated for the harmonious development of each individual's physical potential as a means of nurturing inner virtue.

The core heuristic theme of the ethical dimension/aesthetic dimension relationship is also reflected in the connection between the body and the inner world, encompassing the soul and mind. In this regard, Van Ruyskensvelde and Verstraete offer a thought-provoking exploration, centred on the theme of discipline and the emotions. They first outline the increasing scope for more in-depth analysis of this topic in the context of historical reconstructions, going on to investigate the evolution of residential services for children in Belgium. This is the history of a gradual, arduous and not always straightforward shift from physical discipline reliant on punitive measures to discipline centred on managing the emotions with the explicit aim of enhancing self-mastery (p. 230).

## 2.

Another central heuristic that permeates this collection of essays and opens intriguing avenues of thought concerns the body and its limits, and therefore the concept of transcendence in all its manifestations. Here again, we are bound to acknowledge the influence passed down to us from the culture of the ancients, which prominently featured the notion of overcoming physical constraints, both as a wellspring of personal growth and as a potential pitfall.

The essays that explicitly engage with this theme include Trattner's examination of the *Wandervogel* movements, which introduced considerable tension and ambiguity around the concept of discipline, variously understood as a means of control or as a vehicle for pushing beyond limits. This semantic theme comes even more strongly to the fore in Quin's essay about the body and sports movements in Great Britain. This author reminds us that modern sports emphasize the expansion of the body, linking this to the contemporaneous context of British imperialism. Here again we encounter the peril of idealizing notions of supremacy and overachievement. Conversely, the impetus



to surpass limits can also represent a highly formative component of educational practices.

The dimension of beyondness may also be expressed as transcendence. More specifically, education involving the body and the senses can represent a call to cultivate the imagination, creativity and spiritual transcendence. For example, Skiera explores the parallels and connections between *Lebensreform* and the New School movement (p. 39). The theme resurfaces in the essay by Balogh and Németh, who home in on *Lebensreform* in relation to movement, the liberation of the body via art and dance, and the associated striving to attain a state of transcendence and ulteriority, aspects that are further and vividly explored by the authors in their case study on the Monte Verità Summer School.

At times, the aspiration to transcend takes tangible form in the natural environment, symbolizing a return to a state of primal purity that inherently offers the potential for bodily rejuvenation and the renewal of soul and spirit. This notion is apparent in the essay by Balogh and Németh, as well as in Trattner's treatment of the *Jugendbewegung* movement and its practices, including light baths, outdoor living, and non-sexualized nudity

### 3.

These heuristic themes are not only developed in relation to the individual but also in relation to the community, which is sometimes viewed as an isolated entity distinct from society and, in other instances, as society itself or even as a given nation. Notably, many of the essays in the volume draw parallels between the individual body and the body of the nation. Attali and Fortune explore this topic in the context of France, while Torreadella-Flix dwells on a dramatic manifestation of it in Spain, which saw the pursuit of an idealized "non-degenerate race". Polenghi analyses discursive practices that link the health of the individual body and personal hygiene to the health of the nation's body and the physical and moral hygiene of the entire population. This theme recurs in Hofmann's essay on the ideal and normal/abnormal bodies of children in Switzerland. The continuous drawing of parallels between the bodies of individuals and the body of the nation also

took place in Italy, as elucidated by Alfieri in his account of the history of physical education in Italy during the fascist era.

The regeneration of the individual – via corporeal education practices – as part of the regeneration of the community is a key concept that prompts reflection on the interplay between civilization, progress, education, the body and bodies. Many of the essays document a critical stance on the part of certain twentieth-century movements, which portrayed progress as a process involving the alienation and oppression of bodies. In these cases, education was framed as a means of liberation from the constraints imposed by the customs, attire, and polluted air of urban settings. Conversely, in other cases, the contemplation of progress and bodily education prompted action to improve living spaces and the environment. This implied that progress was perceived and represented as heightened awareness of humans' connection with the environment, which hence demanded greater responsibility and care.

The inextricable link between education of the body and economic, social and political frameworks becomes increasingly evident across the different essays, each with its own unique focus. Those that explicitly present this connection as an interpretive perspective include: Quin's essay on British sports, which highlights the close correlation between the evolution of sport, imperialism, expansionist thinking, and the dimension of risk in physical activities; Alfieri's piece about changing state curricula as an analytical key to understanding corporeal education in Italian schools; or Mattioni's examination of less official yet equally influential documents such as fairy tales, proverbs, magazines and newspaper columns. Together, these authors bring to light the profound and multifaceted relationship between bodily education and the broader economic, social and political context.

#### 4.

Another of this volume's heuristic keys concerns how the body is perceived in relation to space, and how this is reflected in representations of the body and bodily practices. This raises important questions that will surely be the object of future historiographical inquiry. Interestingly, some of the essays in this volume describe how physical

education prompted criticism of educational institutions themselves as unhealthy and oppressive environments. For instance, consider Hofmann's piece on the Swiss context, which highlights the tension between Landerziehungsheime (boarding schools informed by a New School perspective) and conventional schools (p. 223). Similarly, Van Ruyskensvelde and Verstraete point up the parallels between the evolution of disciplinary practices and architectural changes in Belgian reformatories: the division of these buildings into pavilions reflected shifting perceptions and representations of children and the human body.

On this theme, Alfieri emphasizes the importance, in the education of bodies, of the relationship between the school spaces originally designated for physical education and non-school spaces, which gradually took precedence under fascism (p. 154). School spaces as privileged sites for the education of bodies also feature in the essay by Polenghi, who describes a school system with a mandate to sanitise individuals, families and even the nation itself.

## 5.

This discussion leads to us to further reflect, following Michel Foucault, on the dynamics of power over the human body. Indeed, the first block of essays in this volume illustrate how certain movements sought to free the body from coercive forces, be they societal or economic.

However, a particularly intriguing aspect of this theme emerges in the essay by Polenghi, who recalls that during the period under study, the realm of body education and hygiene practices gradually transitioned from being predominantly associated with female authority to falling increasingly under male control. The care of children and matters of hygiene ceased to be the exclusive purview ("power") and thus area of expertise ("knowledge") of mothers and women, instead becoming a source of power and knowledge for men. This shift raises complex and contradictory questions regarding the role of mothers (p. 191), who were sometimes seen as helpers and potential interlocuters, but in other cases, excluded from child healthcare practices and the discourse surrounding them.

The same theme features prominently in the essay by Kasper, who examines the power dynamics between pedagogy and medicine, especially within the context of practices targeting children with disabilities. Kasper's analysis of the Jedlička Institute highlights a noteworthy decision by its founder to appoint a teacher, rather than a doctor, as its leader, thus illustrating its emphasis on pedagogy; an emphasis that is by no means a given within our cultural tradition (p. 199).

## 6.

An additional key theme explored in this volume is that of gender differences, which manifested in a non-linear and somewhat contradictory manner during the period under consideration but are nevertheless of great interest.

On the one hand, some of the essays point up the emancipatory side to early twentieth-century bodily education movements. For example, Balogh and Nemeth discuss how the *Lebensreform* introduced new ideal standards for the body, setting out to liberate women from corsets and other kinds of restrictive clothing, and proposing a feasible alternative model (p. 46).

In a similar vein, Szente and Nemeth – in their piece on changes in the education of women's bodies in early twentieth-century Hungary – reveal a focus on bodily movement and attire, as evidenced in captivating and informative illustrated sources. These sources reflect a shift in gender models and a process of female emancipation that occurred extremely rapidly in some respects.

Conversely, bodily education initiatives described in other essays fostered traditionally masculine values such as strength, courage, discipline and resilience. This would later feed into superhuman ideologies, as in the case of the *Jugendbewegung*. Still other essays document how physical education or healthcare education served to reinforce traditional gender roles. For example, Mattioni proposes that an ideal of modesty and mediocrity was promoted to young women, via the popular magazines of the era among other channels, as the embodiment of the traditional model of femininity.

**7.**

In conclusion, this comprehensive volume, which is overflowing with insightful heuristic perspectives, offers a crucial historical account of great urgency and salience for today's world. Indeed, our contemporary era is characterized by unrealistic representations of the body rather than ideals, an excessive emphasis on aesthetics that has disrupted the ethical-aesthetic balance, and the tendency to deny physical limitations in the unbridled pursuit of performance.