ON MONTE VERITÀ: MYTH AND MODERNITY
IN THE LEBENSREFORM MOVEMENT

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The dynamics of European culture around 1900, and the delight this culture took in experimenting, have fascinated many. Sigmund Freud and Max Weber, for instance, identified, among the main trends of their times, the discontent with civilisation and the impending threat of the iron cage of bureaucracy, respectively. There was also an increasing bourgeois attraction towards socialism, anarchism and the so-called petites religions.\(^1\) Both men and women cultivated a wide range of interests in ethical, feminist, mystical, and spiritualist ideas and practices. There was also a new fascination: the culture of one’s own body. Max Weber dubbed this diversity a ‘Warenhaus für Weltanschauungen’. It appears reasonable to relate these phenomena to the development of a bourgeois culture that was still struggling with its own boundaries, anxieties and identity.\(^2\)

It is no coincidence that recent historiography has dubbed the period around 1900 ‘the age of nervousness’ or ‘a quest for purity’.\(^3\) The emphasis placed by society, the state and individuals on physical education led to more intensive and more varied forms of exercise. These new forms also represented new ideals. They were practised in a social context by groups of middle-class academics, civil servants, technicians and self-employed professionals. In nineteenth-century Germany, men’s and women’s Turnvereine had fostered a practice of physical education focusing on order and discipline. In Britain, on the other hand, the invention of sports had initiated a corporal culture of achievement and competition.

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Culture of the Body

From the 1880s onward, a third form of physical exercise also caused a sensation. Within the existing broad romantic mainstream of ‘Back to Nature’, a new body culture movement developed, often known under its German name Lebensreform. It became popular among and was supported by well-educated, often young people, mainly in the German-speaking countries, but also in Britain and the Netherlands. Through their many clubs and journals, these ‘life reformers’ propagated a new, natural and individual corporality. This new way of life was supposed to result in a reform of society as a whole. The movement had unambiguous religious traits: the human body itself was referred to as a sacred temple. Great value was also attached to contemplation, meditation and spirituality. The focus was not on sporting achievement as such, but rather on ascetic bodily practices that might set one free from the nervous, everyday routines of bourgeois society: practices such as vegetarianism, abstention from tobacco and alcohol, nude sunbathing, hydrotherapy, yoga, walking and free expressive dance.

There is an extensive literature on this Lebensreform movement. It is often seen in a broader perspective as a conglomerate of movements. The Garden City movement, land reform, colony life and teetotalling, all have been perceived as undercurrents found in it, while vegetarianism, natural medicine, nudism, Reform food, Reform stores, and Reform dressing were at its core. Authors differ considerably in their views on the relationship between Lebensreform and Modernity. Was it a movement of this-worldly salvation to compensate for individual, personal as well as social deficits? Or was Lebensreform essentially a nostalgic and escapist reaction to an increasing distance from nature, coupled with the ongoing disintegration of life spheres, caused by technology and bureaucracy? By the same token, Lebensreform may also be viewed as a move-

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5 W.R. Krabbe, Gesellschaftsveränderung durch Lebensreform (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1974).