From Dance under the Swastika to Movement Education: A Study of Embodied Culture

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By all accounts Rudolf von Laban, Germany’s most famous theorist of dance, led an extraordinary life, one intimately bound up with the political, social and cultural upheavals that formed the turbulent backdrop of modern Europe. Laban worked willingly with the Nazis as Germany’s dance master before incurring Goebbels’ displeasure on the eve of the Berlin Olympics. He later took refuge at Dartington Hall, a unique arts and educational community in south-western England. The Dartington progressive ethos and Laban’s emphasis upon dance as an educational force – including the cooption of his work by female physical educators – had a substantial, albeit temporary impact upon British primary schools. If embodied practices such as Laban’s modern dance are viewed as both symptomatic and constitutive of social relations, informative ways of experiencing and knowing the world, then tracing the context within which they were nurtured and their diffusion, along with the changes and re-inscriptions that occurred in this transmission, is a useful way to illuminate how ideologies become attached to bodily discourses.

Introduction

Different forms of dance and gymnastics can be seen as the result of cultural embodiment, just as cultural embodiment can be seen in the work of different choreographers (Smith 79). I draw here on the work of Marcel Mauss who was the first to explicate the cultural importance of what he called “techniques of the body,” that is, the ways in which, from society to society, people learn to use their bodies. It is generally in these ill-demarcated domains, argues Mauss, that the urgent problems lie, and this is where we have to penetrate. Pierre Bourdieu further developed these ideas with his attention to systems of predispositions that become inculcated in the body in everyday life along with the use of instruments or technologies such as school curricula (80-2). Michel Foucault, of course, by attending to the ways in which power relations shape the culture of the body through biopower and a wide range of disciplinary techniques has helped us to realize more fully how “subjects are gradually and materially constituted through a multiplicity of forces, energies and desires” (97). Issues of gender are integral to all these theories and to any examination of culture and embodied practices (Desmond 33).

In addition, William McNeill has demonstrated how group consolidation, through a variety of forms of movement, has operated throughout history by such means as systematic military drill, courtly dancing, mass cal-
listhenics, football rituals and so on. Hence, the notion that moving our muscles rhythmically and giving voice can consolidate group solidarity by altering human feelings is neither new nor surprising, especially in relation to sustaining a masculine aesthetic prone to fascist tendencies. In my recently co-edited anthology, *Physical Culture, Power and the Body*, Ian McDonald (well supported by Paul Gilroy’s arguments) illustrates the various ways in which the dominant culture of sport has propped up hegemonic masculinities, producing bodily dispositions and cultural traits that are prone to fascistic ideologies. Broadening sport to the larger domain of physical culture Hans Bonde, in his recent biography of Neils Bukh, the great Danish gymnastics educator, shows how Bukh became the face of Denmark at home and abroad during the 1930s by presenting his special version of the Western civilized body through demonstrations of rhythmic men’s gymnastics. Bukh, mesmerized by the Nazi view of the world, stood as the central designer of a masculine aesthetic for inter-war gymnastics culture. His aim was to form, choreograph and stage young people’s bodies to access political power, and he was enormously successful. His dynamic primitive gymnastics, with its muscular contact between men, revolutionized men’s movement, contact, mass unity and the expression of male passion. The German Nazis enthusiastically used Bukh’s gymnastics (from their racially-bonded neighbouring country Denmark) as an element in the building up of a Germanic physical culture in Germany – helping develop a new habitus for German youth.

**Rudolf von Laban**

The German Nazis, however, were equally enamoured of the very different embodied practices of Rudolf von Laban – Germany’s most famous theorist of modern expressive dance (*Ausdruckstanz*). Laban, one of the major representatives of the new and more creative directions being taken by dance and physical culture during the first decades of the twentieth century, helped orchestrate the notion that the German dance movement was the true art of dance and not merely rational physical drill, gymnastics or old-fashioned ballet. His idea was to substitute the artificial nature of theatrical dance with more liberating community dance forms where the individual could integrate into and learn how to operate within a group. His grandiose schemes for dance and spectacle “dressed up in the mystifying language of race, instinct, cult, bonding, hierarchy, subordination and self abnegation” caught the attention of Goebbels’ Ministry for Enlightenment and Propaganda leading to Laban’s position as director of the German Dance Stage (*Deutsche Tanzbühne*) (Karina and Kant 101). This effectively placed him in charge of dance and movement throughout Germany and allowed him to elaborate his notion that modern dance could be a vehicle for conveying important ideas through choreographed public festivals and movement choirs which also became