Grégory Quin

British bodies between extraversion and conservatism: representations and movements during a broad first half of the twentieth century

Abstract: Can the body history of the Great Britain help us to understand the Brexit? If the question is very ambitious and goes far beyond the contents of this contribution, our ambition is to understand how several socio-political and more cultural and economics processes influenced the construction of representations of a 'national' body in the late nineteenth century and until the 1950s. Great Britain being the 'homeland' of the modern sports and those practices being there codified and developed within the Public Schools, is something that historiography already clearly emphasised since almost half a century and several seminal works from Norbert Elias, Eric Dunning, or later Richard Holt and Matthew Taylor. Modern sports' bodies are about unlimited progress and speediness, in a world framed by the processes of colonisation and of the rise of capitalism. Thus, it is important to notice that sports are not a passive consequence of the rise of capitalism and liberalism, they contribute to fuel and structure the landscape of the new societies, not only putting some stadiums at the margins of the cities but also writing in the bodies, representations and behaviours some characteristics of this progress. It is then even more 'efficient' as a way to diffuse and promote some views, as it has the appearance of being a simple game. Here, our ambition is to highlight several moments, relevant to understand not only sports history in Great Britain in the first half of the twentieth century, but also some more deep representations that creates, continually updates and binds a 'British collective mind' together though bodies between expansion and conservatism.

Keywords: body history, modern sport, British bodies, expansion, conservatism

Introduction

As Christiane Eisenberg writes in her seminal article: 'In Victorian England athleticism was (. . .) regarded as a way to provide for the "healthy mind in a healthy body" as well as for character formation. (. . .) it not only promised to educate the young generation of Englishmen and -women, but also to "civilise" the populations of the colonies. Besides, championships, cup finals, the Olympic Games and other "invented traditions" could foster nationalism and increase the glory of the Empire' (Eisenberg 1990, p. 276).

In an era of Brexit, and beyond everything that has already been said, written, thought and exaggerated based on an almost blind and by far too contemporary analysis, there might be in this process of moving backwards from a European integration something that relies on body representation and can be rooted in a broad interpretation of a 'national body history'. Great Britain being the 'homeland' of modern sports and those practices being codified and developed within *Public Schools* (which are confusingly, in fact, private schools), is something that historiography has already clearly emphasised since almost half a century and in several seminal works from Norbert Elias, Eric Dunning, Allen Guttmann, James Mangan and Tony Mason (Guttmann 1978; Mason 1980, 1989; Mangan 1981; Elias/Dunning, 1986) or later Richard Holt, Tony Collins or Matthew Taylor (Holt 1989, 1990; Collins 1998; Taylor 2005, 2016).

Based on those works, more or less defining a 'Leicester school' in sport history, one can emphasise that modern sports' bodies are clearly about 'expansion', about '*citius*, *altius*, *fortius*', about always performing better or performing even better than others. Modern sports bodies are about unlimited progress and about increased speed (Studeny 1995), also supporting the imperialist process. At the same time, as already shown in several studies, the emergence of sports has then a lot to do with the rise of a capitalist society (Vamplew 1988; Taylor 2005). Thus, it is important to notice that sports are not a passive consequence of the rise of capitalism and liberalism; they fuel and structure the landscape of the new societies, not only putting some stadiums at the peripheries of cities but also building up the bodies, defining long-lasting representations and behaviours. Sport is then even more 'efficient' as a way of disseminating and promoting certain views, as it has the appearance of being a simple game, with no political, economic or social implications.

Thus, those elements allow us to think about a specific moment of history, between the first diffusion of modern sports across Europe in the late nineteenth century and up to the 1950s, when a more powerful globalisation of sport started, after London hosted in 1948 what someone once called the 'Austerity Olympics' (Hampton 2012), and also beyond the Empire slowly falling apart. Through this contribution, our aim is to highlight several moments to help us to understand not only sports history in Great Britain in the first half of the twentieth century, but also some more deep representations that create, continually update and bind a 'British collective mind' together through bodies between expansion and conservatism.

1870 – drill for kids, like everywhere in Europe

The 1870 Education Act was the first step to introducing compulsory and free education in England (Mitch 2019), also known as the Forster's Education Act, and marked the introduction of a mandatory drill in the English curricula for primary schools (Penn 1999). This process was very similar to what happened almost at the same time in other European countries; Switzerland renewed its constitution in 1874, introducing compulsory, free and secular primary education, and France in 1880 took the same decision, with both countries also introducing 'mandatory military-oriented gymnastics' as one pillar of this new system (Arnaud 1991; Girardin 2018).

However, despite having some shared military-oriented objectives, the 'fear' in England was not the same as in Switzerland or France. The nation was not 'at risk' in the same way as Switzerland and France could be, facing the aggressive policy of Prussia directly on their borders, specifically after Prussia defeated the Austro-Hungarian Empire in 1866 in Sadowa and besieged Paris after beating the French Army in Sedan in September 1870. Although the Prussian soldiers' strength relied on their body – trained following the method founded by Ludwig Jahn in the very first year of the nineteenth century – it was also a matter of technology and tactics at a time when new weapons were clearly minimising the direct importance of body strength, apart from the capacity to hold heavy rifles.

It was drill for children, then, but this went also far beyond some narrow military ambitions, in the knowledge that the body was not only a tool for future wars, but also important to support the rise of the industrial revolution, and the need for manpower in ever bigger factories, and also to serve the imperial cause very broadly. As emphasised by Alan Penn, 'under the terms of the Act, the curriculum of the elementary schools was destined to serve the twin criteria of social utility and cheapness of operation' (Penn 1999, p. 11), in a country that was not organised in the same centralised way as France or even Switzerland.

The 'body' promoted through this new primary 'school' is clearly a male body, and it has to reach some pretty 'conservative' qualities of bravery, courage, honour and strength, as the students of the Public Schools could add self-determination, fair-play and creativity to their education driven through modern sports (Mason 1980; Holt 1989).

Turning 1900 and healing bodies with gymnastics and movement

The decades before the First World War were decisive in Europe – or more broadly in the Western World – for the institutionalisation of modern medicine and the development of new reflections around the use of new 'treatments' to face several new 'pathologies' (Monet 2009; Quin 2020). On the one hand, pathologies became more defined for physicians in their ongoing research into medical taxonomy and, on the other hand, the new paths of urbanisation were fuelling new reflections about hygiene and social welfare. Of course, those trends were affecting the way the body was perceived by people themselves, but they were also participating in the social construction of a new modern body, where being sick was something reversible.

Although historical research into gymnastics in Great Britain remained very poor (Galligan 1999), England was also participating in the international cultural transfer dynamic affecting physical and sporting activities at the end of the nineteenth century, so not only exporting modern sports, but also being exposed to some 'continental' influences, like Swedish gymnastics (Quin 2017). It is precisely through the first ambassadors of this Scandinavian gymnastics – which includes movements but also manual therapies – that innovations in the use of physical activities arose, but they remained somehow hidden or confined in several selective neighbourhoods.

The 1890s were critical for the emergence of a more systematic use of these new tools, following a kind of scandal after the publication of an editorial in the *British Medical Journal* condemning several 'immoral massage establishments' (Nicholls/Cheek 2006). This fear from prostitution-like practices, at a time when modernity was somehow challenging the national body, gave 'physiotherapy' an opportunity to build itself as an institution. A couple of months after the editorial, a Society of Trained Masseuses was created and started to both train and regulate what was happening in massage and other 'Swedish gymnastics-oriented practices', eventually starting to be used in several hospitals in London, such as the National Hospital for the Relief and Cure of the Paralysed and Epileptic as well as at teaching hospitals like St Bartholomew's, St Mary's, or St Thomas', where specific departments were built (Quin 2017). At St Thomas', a 'Department of Physical Exercises' had existed since 1898, and offered a combination of massage and physical exercises especially for outpatients suffering from lateral curvature of the spine (Quin 2009), who were treated in a new room which could be fitted out as a small gymnasium under the supervision of skilled instructor. It is therefore interesting to highlight that the now 'Incorporated' Society of Trained

Masseuses organised classes in Swedish gymnastics from July 1900 and soon even established examinations in 'Swedish Remedial Exercise'.

At the same time, Swedish gymnastics also reached the school system, where it was newly recognised and used more officially as an educational aim, for instance within the London School Board.

A sporting and healthy body for everyone?

In between mandatory drill at primary schools, modern sports in Public Schools and Swedish gymnastics in hospitals, the First World War is often presented as the moment when sports could finally anchor themselves on the continent, helped by the large number of British soldiers who went to France, and who could then show the game to the many French soldiers with whom they were sharing trenches. Some legendary tales, such as the famous 'Christmas football game' between French and German soldiers in December 1914, probably even happened during the war, but this only highlight the fact that sports can be seen as 'universal' at some point, capable of shaping bodies – even from two countries at war – in order to let them play together. Still, in the aftermath of the war, England had ten times more footballers – taking here the worst scenario – than France, with more than 350,000 players being active England at all levels (Fishwick 1993; Dietschy 2007), and a clear process of democratisation was ongoing around sports such as football.

In the last decades of the nineteenth century, one can say that not everyone could play sport and not everyone could be involved with sport, but this changed around the time of the First World War, as municipalities were starting to build some new infrastructures (swimming pools, gym halls, etc.) and especially when football clubs were also building stadiums for their thousands of spectators, interested in the new professional football game (Taylor 2005). From the 1920s, huge changes were then also introduced with the full support of the State – even if sport was seen as a private issue – when the Public Health Act of 1925 'stressed the need to reserve land for recreation (. . .) [followed by the foundation of] the National Playing Fields Association (. . .) to support the cause of public playgrounds for the people of England and Wales' (Bolz 2012).

Thus, not everyone was playing the same game in the interwar period; following some early divisions in the field of sport, the social prevalence of certain groups around certain sports continued, and we might better speak of a differential democratisation, which shaped several bodies (McIntosh 1960). Football was clearly becoming a mass phenomenon in the 1930s, but other sports such

as cricket or tennis continued to provide a space for a kind of social distinction where social privileges and/or boundaries remained the norm.

In the meantime, and even if the process was not something that would last, women's sports saw their first real developments during the First World War, especially in football, where the female body could also achieve some 'sporting standards' and be powerful. While women had to start working in munitions factories and other industrial sectors, they could also join some football fixtures after working hours, eventually putting together teams that played against each other and organising tours across the country and even in France. Then in 1921, the Football Association banned the practice for women with immediate effect. Was it because of fear of gender liberation (Bland 2013) or more traditionally because of some ideas about a female 'eternally wounded body' and its effect on the 'national fitness' (Vertinsky 1994)? The consequence was a ban on women's football that would last until the early 1970s and a continued valorisation of the male body as the model for society as a whole (Tosh 2005).

Interestingly, as emphasised by Daphné Bolz (2014), even when during the interwar period questions about the fitness of the British population were again raised and seemed to worry the governments, and even though the possibility of finding solutions overseas was discussed – especially as fascist States were seen as models for the way they militarily trained their youth – it never really happened and even the strong German influence could not root itself in any lasting way in British society (Eisenberg 2007). Even after the establishment of a National Fitness Council, through the Physical Training and Recreation Act of March 1937, the '"new ideal of physical fitness" was usually not defined in the many British pamphlets or memorandums issued at that time. The ideological discourses that invaded the public space in Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany were not present in Britain. Building facilities was the main means of improving something that was called "physical fitness" and required the support of all' (Bolz 2003, 2012).

All-around the world . . . from Ski slopes to oceans and summits

As already quoted in our introduction, in Great Britain sport was 'regarded as a way to provide for the "healthy mind in a healthy body" as well as for character formation' (Eisenberg 1990, p. 276), and it was a key part of the education of a British elite which would dedicate its destiny to the conquest of the world, beyond oceans and summits. As the British Empire was reaching a territorial peak in the early 1920s, fears were growing about the capacity of the metropole to

maintain its entirety, especially after the First World War which clearly reshuffled the cards in the geopolitical deck. Still, the British cultural influence was rising, especially through physical activities and thanks to the commitment of several pioneers: Edward Whymper, Albert Mummery and George Mallory, but also Arnold Lunn – and his father Henry – and Thomas Cook, who were incarnations of the British spirit from that time, promoting mountaineering, climbing, sailing, skiing and more broadly 'tourism', as characteristic of Britishness.

The mountaineer George Mallory (1886–1924) was probably in his time, an incarnation of what the 'elite British body' should be, described in the book *A Room with a View* by E.M. Forster as 'a healthy, muscular Fabian with a taste for the outdoors and nude bathing' (Thompson 2010). Similarly, Anker and Roberts quoted one partner of Mallory claiming that he had 'not so much of physical strength as of suppleness and balance; so rhythmical and harmonious was his progress in any steep place, that his movements appeared almost serpentine in their smoothness' (Anker/Roberts 1991, p. 46).

All those activities were the new paths of the 'expansionist' British mentalities; they were also spaces where 'risk' was important, a risk that could go as far as death, such as that of Mallory himself in his attempt to reach the summit of Everest in 1924. Thus, beyond the risk itself, mountaineering demonstrated probably better than any other discipline the tension between conservatism and a genuine expansionist will. For the British, mountaineering was about the body and only about the body, and they fought strongly to keep new techniques (such as crampons, oxygen supply, etc.) being introduced by other countries out of the climbing world. As emphasised by the historian Delphine Moraldo, 'in mountaineering as in other sports, the aim is to guarantee uncertainty as to the outcome of the game by refusing to use additional aids' (2016, p. 23). Technical innovations are seen as 'unsporting', 'unBritish' and 'unfair', and members of the British Alpine Club tried to preserve the ethic of their activity.

In skiing, the same kind of processes were at stake, such as what remains probably the first attempt in history to organise a 'downhill' competition in 1911 in Crans Montana, Switzerland. Arnold Lunn established there the very first 'Kandahar race', 'where the aim was to be the first to reach the bottom of the valley, having like alpinists the choice to the line' (Holt 1992). Although Great Britain had neither slopes nor snow – expect in regions of Scotland – it still played a key role in the transformation of skiing into a sport, into what Lunn described as 'ski-running' as opposed to 'skiing' which involved 'ski-jumping, ski-mountaineering and langlauf racing' (Lunn 1930, vii). While the utilitarian use of skis had been dominant in Scandinavia since the early nineteenth century, defining a model of bodily experience such as that of Fridtjof Nansen exploring

and crossing Greenland, a more 'sporty' version of 'cross-country skiing' existed already, and competitions were organised as of the last years of the nineteenth century (Meinander/Mangan 1998). Nevertheless, the revolution introduced by Lunn in 'downhill skiing', introducing downhill and slalom, was also a 'body revolution' and it corresponded to the transfer of an 'ethic of sport' to the practice of skiing, with a mix of risk, rules, speed, courage, uncertainty and fair-play (Holt 1992). Lunn is very explicit in his 1930 *The Complete Ski-Runner*: 'The fear of speed is the main difficulty in skiing and the best way to conquer this fear is to race. (. . .) Straight racing tests courage (. . .), but courage is a matter of emotion rather than reason' (Lunn 1930, p. 171–172). Finally, recognised by the Fédération Internationale de Ski at the end of the 1920s, the new modalities of skiing were about to make 'Alpine skiing' the dominant winter sport (Tissot 2017), shaping the profile of tourism all over the world and leaving a huge British footprint in mountains.

In the meantime, it is also important to emphasise that Arnold Lunn was the son of Henry Simpson Lunn, an active promoter of tourism, especially between England and the Swiss Alps, and also had links with student organisations in London and arranged their trips to see mountains. Being also involved in the world of mountaineering, as a member of the Alpine Club, Arnold Lunn is an interesting example of the several contradictions affecting British attitudes at that time, being at the same time part of an international elite, promoting skiing all over Switzerland and Europe, willing to facilitate mobility over national borders, but also suspected of having some very conservative political views, especially in his support of authoritarian regimes such as the Nationalists during the Spanish Civil War and Mussolini in Italy.

Opening – the Second World War and after: threat and enhancement for the national body

As mentioned by Matthew Taylor in several publications (2015, 2016), British sports during the Second World War has never received that much interest from sport historians, even though it was a moment of great importance regarding the institutionalisation of sport and in terms of the new commitment of the State to the development of infrastructures for sport and leisure, as seen previously. 'Mass-Observation found in December 1940 that recreation was considered the fifth most significant factor in "keeping up one's spirits" among men (behind "friends", "health", "work" and "sleep")' (Taylor 2016, p. 317) As pastimes, sports played a crucial role in maintaining the morale of the population, but participation was also encouraged broadly. For both its officials and for some national

politicians, football was to play a key role in British society as a source of morale, a structure of continuity and as a means of keeping the population fit and healthy. Despite some restrictions in the possibility of attending football matches, 'images of the people at play were important in projecting the idea of a unified national community' (Taylor 2016, p. 337).

That said, in the meantime, the Second World War was also a tangible bodily experience for the whole population in the United Kingdom, in between bombings by the German air force – and not only in London – and food rationing, leading to a discontinuous confinement. Interestingly, this short overview of a history of British bodies shows how it is possible to understand that the British 'national body' is situated somewhere between extraversion and conservatism. Although the two words are not opposites in their primary sense, they describe the paradox of the British situation, being an island geographically separated from the rest of Europe (and the World), and a pioneer for many steps in our industrial modernity, but also being a key actor in the process of globalisation at several levels from economy to culture, and politics to sports.

After the 1948 Olympic Games in London, where a post-war climate of rationing and shortage was still in the air, the successful ascension of Everest by Edmund Hillary in May 1953 can be seen as a turning point, having one 'British' body as first to reach – with Tenzing Norgay – the highest point on earth, even if – to be precise – Hillary was a New Zealander part of a British expedition. Nevertheless, the world was then already changing under the rule of the Cold War, having Soviet and US bodies as new models, creating hopes and fears through localised conflicts. After the war, new configurations on the international scene created new geopolitical balances, Europe became a new horizon (Tomlinson/Young/Holt 2011) and the Empire was no longer the only frame on which to project British mentalities and bodies around the world.

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