

Gymnastics, Sport, and Society: Reversing Body Techniques and their Consequence for Health and Development

Celestin Mvutsebanka, Sylvie Hatungimana, Salvator Nahimana

Member of the University Research Laboratory in Physical and Sports Activities for Social Development and Health (LURADS).

DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2025.908000074>

Received: 17 July 2025; Accepted: 28 July 2025; Published: 28 August 2025

ABSTRACT

This theoretical paper analyses the evolution of physical activity from natural bodily techniques to modern sport within industrial societies, focusing on the reversal of body uses and its implications for health and development. Drawing from historical, sociological, and anthropological perspectives, it highlights the duality of work and leisure underlying gymnastic and sporting practices and interrogates their integration in traditional societies like Burundi. The paper concludes that bodily techniques' inversion requires a balanced, contextualized approach for sustainable development.

Keywords: physical education, sport sociology, bodily techniques, hypodynamia, development

INTRODUCTION

Initially, physical activity is the movement of a living being governed by the instinct for self-preservation under the conditions imposed by the environment (nature). At this level, the body essentially plays the role of "instrument of work and relationship" with other bodies (animate and inanimate) as well as with the gods. Documentary research, observation, and reflection reveal that the "work-leisure dualism" is the source and resource of "gymnastic and sporting activities."

This article aims to analyze the reversal of body techniques from subsistence to leisure activities and examine its social, health, and developmental implications in Burundi and beyond.

Physical Activity and Gymnastics in Dichotomous Societies Thanks to the privileges they enjoyed, members of the "upper" classes of dichotomous societies distanced themselves from bodily techniques as a subsistence-producing activity; they indulged in them once sublimated by the myth of total fulfillment away from labor (the aspiration to come closer to the "divine condition," to live in "paradisiacal leisure").

Historians of Physical Education and Sports like to cite the example of Greco-Roman civilization. In this civilization, free men felt the need and found reasons to give substance to the concept of "gymnastics" (gymnastics for military, educational and medical purpose). In the period when gymnastics was well coordinated with the ideal of practicing "Olympic" Competitions, gymnastic (and sporting) activity governed the existence of freemen at all stages of life, and even went so far as to express a very high religious sentiment. Having analyzed Greco-Roman gymnastics, let us now examine the transformations in industrial-urban societies.

Gymnastics, Physical Education and Sport in Industrial-Urban Civilization

The "Physical Activity and Sport" model in industrial-urban civilization is also centered on notions of work (or rather, the absence of primitive work) and the achievement of total fulfillment far from the constraints of labor. In fact, its ideologists endeavor to trace its origins back to ancient gymnastics. Baron Pierre de Coubertin's work to restore the Olympic Games is in the same vein.

The practice of "gymnastic and sporting activities" is a consciously formulated response to the concerns and aspirations of people who do not participate (directly and/or totally) in the labor process. Scientific and

technological progress, under the Western paradigm of development, has relieved humans of muscular effort in labor – a reality visible to all.

However, "specialist theorists and practitioners" subsequently questioned whether the absolute economy of muscular expenditure in work, this absence of muscular effort which tends to characterize modern society (and which seems to be one of the main objectives of technology) is a good for humanity. Jacques Ellul (1954, 398), in his book, *La technique ou l'enjeu du siècle*, is not convinced. An affirmative answer is given; but it must be qualified.

The "pole of life" is strengthened, but so is the "pole of death". In *Le sport dans la société. Entre raison(s) et passions(s)*, Michel Jamet (1991, 214) found the right words to express this nuance.

"With scientific and technological development, humans have acquired new mastery of their environment, of themselves, and of others (the pole of life). While at the same time creating new conditions for the broader destruction of this environment, of themselves, and of others (the pole of death)."

Development would come at the price of a whole set of physiological, psychological and sociological disadvantages. Technical liberation would result in a reduction in the individual's technical freedom. Development would subject the humans to a psychomotor regression. For the "harmony of being", "physical and sports activities" or a "balanced sport" (a special education for behavior specific to a new way of life) is essential; gymnastic and sports activity compensates for this defect, palliates the effects of this reduction. We need to compensate for this state of "hypodynamia", according to Berg's expression.

Guy Hermier and his colleagues (1976, 16-17) report in *Le sport en questions*. The responses of the communists that (...) the Soviet academician A. Berg has calculated that, while in the middle of the nineteenth century, 94% of all the energy produced and consumed on earth was obtained by the muscular force of human and domestic animals, today the latter no longer produces 1%. He concludes that "hypodynamia" is a reality in contemporary societies; in other words, there is motor insufficiency, which he rightly describes as "the disease of the century".

Hypodynamia can lead to "early neurasthenia, cardiovascular diseases, in other words, premature decay of the body."

These characteristics of human labor and modern living conditions "give rise to the need for various physical activities (...)" to compensate and balance.

It is this "balanced sport," this game-sport, ultimately close to the "gymnastics of the freemen of Antiquity and the nobles of feudal Europe," which tends to become more democratic and complex as technological progress frees more and more workers -even if we observe that seriously practiced "sport" is falling back into the restrictive routine of work-labor.

In any case, the study of the evolution of physical activity over the ages shows that, with technological progress, movement -caught up, today, in the whirlwind of sportivization- is becoming artificial and simulated. We hesitate between the terms "simulated" and "transfigured." The latter is suggested by Jacques Defrance (1993, 73). He uses it in his book *Sociologies du sport*.

Sport is "transfigured work whose properties are to compensate for the effects of ordinary (alienated) work." With "non-working time" becoming more and more widespread, this simulacrum is becoming more democratic and more serious. With work no longer a central concept, there is consequently a shift of interest toward the "non-working time activities"; "sport" which is "the abstract materialization of bodily performance (J. M. Brohm, 1976, 75) can then take on its full importance.

Like some "sport sociologists", we believe that physical and sports activities, "as a whole, are gradually emerging from the confused and complex chaos of natural gestures to form a coherent and codified corpus, a true culture". So writes (R. Bobin, 1967, 1233). In *Sociologie politique du sport*, Jean-Marie Brohm (1976, 35) also speaks of it in the same way.

It is easy to see that the practice of "physical and sports activities" increases when the minimum time required for optimal subsistence production decreases; and it increases as "non-working time" increases. Borrowing the expression of Luc Boltanski (1971, 223), we can say that, ultimately, the practice of sport constitutes "a good indicator of the inversion of the social uses of the body". The more techniques of the body lose their character as "techniques of production" as a result of technological progress, the more their playful development becomes clearer, more widespread and generalized.

The "Sports" Phenomenon and the "Olympic Movement" in Underdeveloped Countries Driven by the general movement of "Westernization development of the world", the "gymnastic and sporting activities" model is gaining ground in all societies, even in those -such as Burundi-where subsistence production remains a major concern for almost all members of the community, more than 80% of the population (RGPH, 2024).

Therefore, the main question is: "What about the integration of "physical and sport" in a "society with a very strong traditional base," such as Burundi?" We have said that there are "two Burundi," or rather, that Burundian society presents a dual face: that of the "modern" sector and that of the "peasants who have remained impervious" to what is "the evolution of others" (Raymond Rozier, 1971, 443).

The truth is that the two Burundi interpenetrate and "inter-influence" each other. The integration process should not be seen as an overcoming, as a dismantling, or pure and simple substitution of all the traditional data; rather, it follows a logic of interweaving and combining the two states ("the traditional" and "the modern"). For example: children of peasant families, as a result of the colonial impact and precisely of school education, evolve and move into the so-called "modern" system. Another example: there are some traces of "attributes of modernity" in the most remote parts of the country. Furthermore, these "Westernized" people, in turn, display "developmentalist" intentions for the whole country.

The combinations and interweaving of the two states give rise to reappropriations of the new and reinterpretations, diversions and bypasses; if we want to develop investigative instruments for a realistic - and not utopian - reflection on the "integration" and promotion of bodily activities in harmony with the society's development dynamics, it is necessary to grasp all the logics involved. At the base of these phenomena lie many motivations and resistances which, once understood, could help to cushion the clashes that occur when the local and the global meet, the traditional and the modern meet. It is only once we have detected these logics and understood these new strategies leading to "informality" that we can formulate concrete proposals and be concerned with the rela "Good" for everyone. These intertwined realities of tradition and modernity highlight the challenges and opportunities in integrating physical and sports activities into development strategies.

CONCLUSION

The integral development of man is surely the result, the consequence of constant, daily activity. Among the "uncivilized," in "less developed" countries, this practice is unsystematic; it results from the natural life that populations are forced to lead. It consists only of more or less varied combinations of all kinds of forced and instrumental behaviors—in short, work determined by the need for self-preservation.

The "civilized" or "privileged" being, since he is not forced to practice the various kinds of natural exercises, is condemned to remain weak if he does not exercise daily. The free men of Antiquity and the nobles of the Middle Ages understood this. Here, we also have the "credo" of physical educators and athletes in industrial and post-industrial societies.

The fact that the "civilized" or "privileged" lead an unnatural life raises concerns. Modern society replaces arms with tools. Machines reduce arm exercises to little; work becomes fragmented, simple, or nonexistent. Legs have been relieved of their function by vehicles of all kinds. Land, sea, and air transport are experiencing a great boom. That is not all. From a dietary point of view, one could not remain sober for long in a society of overabundance and consumption. The "civilized" or "privileged" man risks living in the "anti-sport" fashion (F.F.E.P.G.V, 1975).

The integral development of man is surely the result, the consequence of constant, daily activity. Among the

"uncivilized," in "less developed" countries, this practice is unsystematic; it results from the natural life that populations are forced to lead. It consists only of more or less varied combinations of all kinds of forced and instrumental behaviors—in short, work determined by the need for self-preservation.

The "civilized" or "privileged" being, since he is not forced to practice the various kinds of natural exercises, is condemned to remain weak if he does not exercise daily. The free men of Antiquity and the nobles of the Middle Ages understood this. Here, we also have the "credo" of physical educators and athletes in industrial and post-industrial societies.

The fact that the "civilized" or "privileged" lead an unnatural life raises concerns. Modern society replaces arms with tools. Machines reduce arm exercises to little; work becomes fragmented, simple, or nonexistent. Legs have been relieved of their function by vehicles of all kinds. Land, sea, and air transport are experiencing a great boom. That is not all. From a dietary point of view, one could not remain sober for long in a society of overabundance and consumption. The "civilized" or "privileged" man risks living in the "anti-sport" fashion (F.F.E.P.G.V, 1975).

The human being has managed to organize themselves in such a way that he lacks nothing without necessarily having to work. But this has not been total happiness. Far from it!

The "work-leisure dualism" is the source and resource of "gymnastic and sports activities."

"If you don't cultivate your own field, cultivate your body," without having to go back to full labor.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

1. ALBERTINI, E. (1970). *Peuples et civilisations - IV. L'empire romain*. Paris, Presses Universitaires de France
2. AYMAR, A. et AUBOYER, J. (1967). *L'Orient et la Grèce antique*. 6ème Edition, Paris, PUF
3. BAILLETTE, F. et BROHM, J.-M. (1994). *Traité critique de l'Education Physique et Sportive à l'usage de toutes générations*. Montpellier, Quel Corps ?, 1994.
4. BOBIN, R. (1967). *L'athlétisme*. CAILLOIS, R. (Sous la dir. de) *Jeux et sports*, Paris, Gallimard (Encyclopédie de la Pléiade 23), pp.1233-1250
5. BOLTANSKI, L. (1971) « Les usages sociaux du corps ». *Annales Economies Sociétés Civilisations*, janvier-février 1971, pp.223-225.
6. BOUET, M. (1968). *Signification du sport*. Paris, Editions Universitaires
7. BRIL, B. (1991). *Techniques du corps*. IZARD, M. (sous le dir. de). *Dictionnaire de l'Ethnologie et de l'Anthropologie*. Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, pp.177-178
8. BRISSON, J-F (1965). *Sport qui sauve, Sport qui tue*. Paris, Fayard
9. BROHM, J.-M. (1976). *sociologies' politique du sport*. Préface de Roger Bambuck. Nancy, Presses Universitaires de Nancy
10. CAILLOIS, R. (Sous la dir. de) (1967). *Jeux et sports*. Paris, Gallimard (Encyclopédie de la Pléiade 23)
11. COUBERTIN, (baron de) P. (1922). *La pédagogie du sport*. Paris, J. Vrin
12. DEFRANCE, J. (1993). *Sociologie du sport*. Paris, La Découverte
13. DE GENST, H (1947). *Histoire de l'Education Physique*. Temps anciens et Moyen-Age. Bruxelles, De Boeck
14. DUDAL, J., RAMEAU, R. SAINT PERON, JC. (1971). *Sport facile*. Paris, Edicef
15. DUMAZEDIER, J. (1970). *Vers une civilisation du loisir ?* Paris, Seuil
16. ELLUL, J. (1954), *La technique ou l'Enjeu du siècle*. Paris, Armand Colin
17. FAILLIOT, P. & P. (1992). *Dicosport 92 : Le Dictionnaire des Sports*. Paris, DPS
18. GILLET, B. (1960). *Histoire du sport*. Paris, Presses Universitaires de France
19. HEBERT, G. (1947). *L'éducation physique ou l'entraînement complet par la méthode Naturelle*. Historique documentaire. Paris, Librairie Vuibert
20. HERMIER, G., PASSEVANT, R. et ZELBERMANN. (1976). *Le sport en question. Les réponses des communistes*. Paris, Editions Sociales

21. HOURDIN, G. (1961). Une civilisation des loisirs. Paris, Calmann Lévy
22. HUIZINGA, J. (1991). Homo ludens. Essai sur la fonction sociale du jeu. Traduit du néerlandais par Cécile Sérésia. Paris, Gallimard
23. JAMET, M. (1991). Le sport dans la société. Entre raison(s) et passions(s). Paris, Logiques sociales / L'Harmattan
24. LE BOULCH, J. (1977). Vers une science du mouvement. Paris, Editions Sociales Françaises
25. LE BOULCH, J. (1977). Face au sport. Paris, Editions Sociales Françaises
26. MAGNANE, G. (1967). Situation du sport dans la société contemporaine. CAILLOIS, R. (Sous la dir. de) (1967), Jeux et sports. Paris, Gallimard (Encyclopédie de la Pléiade 23), pp.1666-1679
27. MARROU, H.-I. (1970). Histoire de l'éducation dans l'Antiquité. Paris, Editions du Seuil
28. NAHIMANA, S. (2024). Sport, Santé et Société : L'inversion des Usages des techniques du corps et ses conséquences. Chisinau, Editions Universitaires Européennes
29. NAHIMANA, S. (1999). Techniques du corps et développement. La pratique et les représentations du sport au Burundi. Thèse pour le Doctorat de l'Université Victor Segalen de Bordeaux 2, Mention : Ethnologie, option Anthropologie sociale et culturelle, Présentée et soutenue publiquement le 19 septembre 1997. Diffusion : Lille, Presses Universitaires du Septentrion, (Thèse à la carte)
30. NYENIMIGABO, J.-J., HARERIMANA, T. et NAHIMANA S. (2007). Le sport et l'éducation physique au Burundi. Forum national du 24 au 26 avril 2006 à Gitega. Paris : L'Harmattan.
31. REPUBLIQUE DU BURUNDI, CABINET DU PRESIDENT (2019). Loi n°1/27 du 30 novembre 2019 portant Révision de la Loi n° 1/26 du 30 novembre 2009 portant Réorganisation et promotion des Activités physiques et sportives au Burundi. Bulletin Officiel du Burundi - BOB N°11, Quater 1/2019
32. REPUBLIQUE DU BURUNDI, CABINET DU PRESIDENT (2023). La Politique Nationale de Développement du Burundi 2018-2027 révisé. Gitega, Présidence de la République
33. REPUBLIQUE DU BURUNDI, CABINET DU PRESIDENT (2023). Vision Burundi pays émergent en 2040 et pays développé en 2060. Gitega, Gitega, Présidence de la République
34. REPUBLIQUE DU BURUNDI, MACEAJSC (23 décembre 2023). Politique sectorielle et la stratégie de sa mise en œuvre (2023-2027). Gitega, MACEAJSC
35. RODEGEM, F.M. (1970). Dictionnaire Rundi-Français. Tervuren, MRAC
36. ROSTOW, W.W. (1963). Les étapes de la croissance économique. Traduit de l'américain par M.-J. du Rouret. Paris, Seuil
37. ROUSSEAU, J.-J. (1966). Emile ou de l'éducation. Paris, Garnier-Flammarion
38. ROZIER, R. (1971). Ethnologie des Barundi. Thèse de Doctored d'Etat, Université de Bordeaux III, Lettres
39. SUE, R. (1983). Le loisir. Paris, Presses Universitaires de France. 2ème Edition, 1980, (Collection Que Sais-Je ? n°1871
40. THIBAUT, J. (1975). Du dandysme au sport. H.I.S.P.A. Document du 4ème Séminaire International de l'H.I.S.P.A. Louvain 1-5 avril 1975. L'histoire, l'évolution, et la diffusion des sports et jeux dans les civilisations. Katholike Universiteit Leuven, Ed. D. Mayer & R. Renson, pp. XXXIII/1-XXXIII/9
41. THOMAS, R. (sous la dir. de) (1980). Sport et sciences 1980. Paris, Vigot
42. ULMANN, J. (1989). De la gymnastique aux sports modernes. Histoire des doctrines de l'Education Physique Troisième édition revue et augmentée d'un essai Que faut-il entendre par Education physique. Paris, Librairie Philosophique J. Vrin, 1989
43. UNESCO (1978). La Charte Internationale de l'Education Physique, de activates Physique et du Sport. Paris, Unesco
44. VEBLEIN, T. (1989). Théorie de la classe de loisir. Traduit de l'anglais par Louis Evrard. Precedes de Avez-vous lu Veblein ? par Raymond Aron Paris, Librairie Philosophique J. Vrin
45. VIMARD, R. (1944). Le sport... vieux comme le monde. Paris, Paul Dupont
46. WALLON, H. (1991). L'évolution psychologique de l'enfant. Paris, Armand Colin.