

## 175 - PHYSICAL EDUCATION AS AN INSTRUMENT TO CONTROL BODIES

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The 1930s in Brazil saw evidence of a eugenic policy resulting from the interests of conservative groups and the government, whose purpose, under the influence of Nazi-Fascism and the shield of national unity, was the generation of a homogeneous race of Brazilian people by excluding all those considered undesirable, such as blacks, Jews and Japanese descendants. The German type was exalted and believed to be the ideal model for human beings.

The importance assigned to race issues was so great that special events were created in the Brazilian national calendar, such as the "Race Day" (October 12th) and the "Race Parade" (during the "Motherland Week", when the country's independence was celebrated). On those occasions, huge celebrations were held in sports stadiums, and there were school parades, gymnastic presentations, "human pyramids", choral singing, bands, and contests, events to celebrate discipline and health extensively.

The "Race Day" was celebrated in civic and sports events, during which the participation of schools, children and women was fundamental, in addition to the participation of the men from the Army School of Physical Education, the Police Department, the Conscript Divisions, etc.

At the time of one of these celebrations in Rio de Janeiro, in October 1939, the *Revista de Educação Física* ["Physical Education Journal"] reported that: "Thousands of comely, disciplined young people paraded, full of their greatest hopes. Thousands of hearts irradiate patriotism and joy." And continued: "Our readers should appreciate the features illustrated on these pages, where comely, strong and joyful young women and men fill the city streets as representatives of our racial standard." (*Revista de Educação Física*, Oct. 1939)

The photos the Race Parade were published to try to inculcate the idea of a regime that produced well-proportioned people, which would confirm the existence of a well-built race. Students, riding bicycles, proved to be healthy; young men in the Special Police wore sleeveless t-shirts to display their perfect physique.

The importance of women in the refinement of race was a fundamental issue: it would be useless to have only men that were "healthy" and "comely", because women were responsible for the generation of "virile men", that is, healthy individuals that were eugenically compatible with what the government wanted. By exercising physically, women would prepare their bodies to generate healthy citizens that would assure the future of the country.

The emphasis set on the importance of females to maintain family health and the health of future generations was strongly inspired on Nazi Germany, where women were considered to be the "guardians of the Aryan race". Women should be confined to the home, submit to their husbands, never participate in politics; their role did not go beyond preparing for maternity, and they would only attain dignity through procreation and the teaching of the country's fundamental values to their families. (LENHARO, 1990, p.69, 70)

According to some intellectuals at the time, such as Fernando de Azevedo, Brazil was a country going through a time of "plasticity and elasticity" because it still did not have a defined racial type. Therefore, the "new man", bound to emerge in the future, was "soft and flexible clay not yet capable of folding and adapting under physical pressure, against which his past cannot provide sufficient support." (AZEVEDO, 1960, p.140). In this sense, physical education was an instrument to perfect the "Brazilian race", which was still inexistent.

From an anthropological and ethnological perspective, Brazilians were seen as too complex a people, which made unification impossible. Ascending from a race in formation, Brazilian people were the result of three antagonistic racial groups: blacks, indigenous peoples, and whites. The Estado Novo was believed to represent the ideal time to shape the future Brazilian race. The regime would ensure that no two antagonistic racial types would thrive, because if they did, national unity would not be achieved. (*Bases Científicas da Educação Física*, 1944, p.64)

The President Getúlio Vargas (1938) raised the racial issue in many of his speeches. According to him, "a prompt solution to the problem of race fortification shall not be delayed, to ensure that the new generations are prepared culturally and eugenically." (VARGAS, 1938, p.55)

He also said that:

The celebrations of Motherland Week and Race Day should be, from now on, an unequivocal demonstration of our efforts to raise the cultural and eugenic levels of our youth, the source of reinvigoration of national energies and the safe pledge of progress for the Motherland. (VARGAS, 1938.p.56)

In addition to the race celebrations, the Brazilian government created the Eugenics Competition, to be held every year in São Paulo. And during the so called "Children's Week", two competitions, the Vigor of Children and the Vigor of School-aged Children, took place. Their features to promote race purity and the idea of selectivity were very clear, as the competition names suggested.

The search for racial purity for the Brazilian man led professionals in the area of Physical Education to believe that it was fundamental to prepare a "national method of physical education", which would pool together the guiding principles of a nationalization campaign to promote national unity by means of the development of a national mentality.

Physical education, responsible for the development of a "strong race" and for the "regeneration of race" was an "instrument of ethnic and social transformation" whose aim was to "conduct the inventory of individual strengths and defects, so that the totality of the former could be put into use and that the effects of the latter could be neutralized." (AZEVEDO, 1960, p.38)

The government was expected to have a program to spread and rationalize the practice of gymnastics all over the country in an effort to perfect race and to promote fraternization. In this sense, sports events were designed to build a collective identity for Brazilian people, an identity that would hold the notion of homogeneity. During these events, the idea of race homogeneity was reinforced together with the idea of development of nationalist feelings.

Physical education was seen as a "national defense" issue, and an "educational factor that is indispensable for the regeneration of races and the esthetic transformation of individuals." However, while the opinions in favor of racial homogeneity for the Brazilian people were prominent and followed the ideal model of the Aryan type, divergent voices were also heard at that time,

which did not believe that the miscegenation of Brazilian people would be deleterious. Some authors valued miscegenation and did not agree with the idea that it was a negative factor and a way to produce degenerate individuals. Among them was Gilberto Freire, who, in his book *Casa Grande e Senzala*, (translated into English as *Masters and Slaves*), written in 1933, did not see miscegenation as a problem and questioned the existence of superior and inferior races. For that author, the three major groups responsible for the settlement of Brazil, that is, blacks, indigenous peoples and Portuguese, contributed to the formation of a Brazilian people psychologically.

On the other hand, Pedro Calmon stated that: "we are, in the whole world, the people that needs physical education the most, because we do not have any ethnic cohesion, any defined type, nor a stable anthropology; Brazilian people are 'mixed rather than uniform, nervous rather than muscular, agile rather than strong'." According to him, the race being formed in Brazil "baffles the wise and their calculations, disorients theories and their dogmas, ruins preconceptions and their presumptuous laws." (CALMON, 1938, p.40)

The author associated the eugenic issue with physical education:

The national melting pot gave rise to the substantial energy of the hard peoples in the heterogeneous and varied Brazilian population. Athletic appearance, solid bulkiness, clear spirits, the physique and courage of heroes. Lapouge and Gobineau would retreat, astounded; they who invented the myth of the inferiority of subraces of transient hues. Faced with the tanned and robust Northeastern youth, the herculean and healthy man from the coast, our Southerners who, in the crossing of immigrant currents did not lose, in appearance or psychology, any of the noble traits of their Caucasian origins. But we do not intend to confide the chances of a future Brazil to the random education of individuals. We aspire to the permanence of the characteristics of the Brazilian man. We want him to be hard, vivacious, resistant and disciplined. (CALMON, 1938, p.1)

As we can see, there were divergent opinions about the "ideal type" of Brazilians. And, in several moments, the civic and sports celebrations included space for "exhibition", that is, men, women and children paraded for the leader, saluted the Motherland and her heroes, became actors with previously defined roles and separated into hierarchic categories defined by the authoritarian State.

Those parades were demonstrations of healthy bodies, and their exemplarity of the "selected race" of the regime emerged: the young man and the healthy worker, the disciplined athlete, the model woman prepared for maternity, the well-nourished child paraded. Therefore, the parades may be said to have the character of an "exhibition fair", in which the State advertised the signs of physical and moral models at which the society should aim.

As in the contemporary fiction of Aldous Huxley (2000), the regime created models for the different activities, classical and efficient models for the performance of rational tasks and the maintenance of the hierarchy and the State that controlled society and the eugenic model.

#### MILITARY EDUCATION AND PHYSICAL EDUCATION

During civic and sports celebrations promoted by the Vargas regime, an element that attracted attention was the quest for order and discipline, and the military model obviously guided the organization of these events.

Vargas emphasized the importance assigned to the Army in discipline matters. He considered military service as an indispensable learning opportunity for the Brazilian youth.

Large numbers of young men will walk around its garrisons and barracks (quarters) during conscription; they will learn how to live better, follow the rules of hygiene and the healthy habits of discipline, and will learn, at the same time, to love the Motherland and to consider themselves, for the rest of their lives, an active part of her moral unity. (VARGAS, 1942, p.88)

And he ended with: "the great national virtue should be the military virtue of discipline." (VARGAS, 1938, p.54). The Armed Forces had their own educational project, whose pedagogy was focused on the inculcation of the principles of discipline, obedience, organization, hierarchy, and respect to order and to institutions. (SCHWARTZMAN, 1984, p.67)

The Army might express these ideals in the parades of the "Motherland Week", because those events were thoroughly planned: no one would step out of turn, the hierarchy was ensured by the order of presentations.

According to Lenharo (1986), this "proposal of collective taming of bodies and comprehensive organization of society" identifies with the military organization. And "expectations are subtly communicated that the Army would be granted the mission to create the Brazilian man, to guide him and fully govern him." (LENHARO, 1986, p.80)

The practice of physical education should also be taken into considered in the analysis of sports events. Although not initiated in the Vargas government, this practice gained, at that time, greater importance, because it was seen as one of the factors responsible for the improvement of the physical and moral qualities of all men.

In Brazil, the 1937 Constitution made the practice of physical culture mandatory in all schools and educational institutions.

Therefore, physical education was a very useful instrument in the "domestication" and "taming" of the masses that was intended by Vargas government to gain the limitless support of the population. In this sense, we should call attention to the fact that the first Physical Education School in Brazil was created by the Army, an institution in which one of the ideological pillars is discipline.

According to Abgar Renault (1939),

It was by the initiative of the Army that the first Physical Education School was established, and the National School of Physical Education and Sports, recently opened by the Education and Health Ministry, followed its model. The living forces of the Brazilian nation have at last found adequate instruments for their formation, their discipline and their guidance through the course that will lead to the creation of solid physical and moral values. (RENAULT, 1939.p.1)

In the book *Bases Científicas da Educação Física* ["Scientific Bases of Physical education"] (no author. 1944, p. 43), we find reference to the fact that "the aim, after all, should be the development and general education of individuals through healthy and interesting physical activity by means of which they will attain the best of their physical and mental capacity and will learn to use all their qualities intelligently and cooperatively as good citizens, even when under the most violent emotional distress."

Lenharo (1986) analyses the issue of moralization through physical exercise, and states that in the 1930s the government realizes that the only way to transform society is through their bodies. A large number of specialized journals are launched at that time, and the attention of professionals and institutions is drawn to matters of health, hygiene, and physical education.

The author further says that "a sense of social awareness is applied to physical improvement; the new hygiene of the body makes individuals responsible, so that they will become aware of a collective well-being. The participation that results from

sports practice and this collective dimension pushed towards the formation of new 'social conductors', prepared to cooperate with the community." (LENHARO, 1986, p.78)

The support that Vargas granted to Physical Education and sports in general was, doubtless, its positive aspect. We cannot, however, fail to disentail this support from the attempt to achieve political manipulation. Sports were instruments of easy social repercussion, because widely practiced and popular. Sports idols, disciplined and obedient, also served as examples for the masses.

Any sports competitions would be likely to become a political rally to support the regime, as was in fact the case in several occasion in Brazilian history. It was easier to draw the attention of the masses by using some popular appeal, such as sports, than to summon them for a political rally whose purpose it to support the regime. The Vargas propaganda incorporated this understanding, which explains its interest in the mechanisms of control of the bodies.

In Brazil, physical Education was based on military ideals, and the celebratory sports events thereby originated showed the concerns of the regime in controlling the bodies and minds of citizens. For the regime, the improvement of the physical and moral qualities of its citizens would transform the society.

### FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

During the Vargas regime, civic and sports celebrations were promoted with the aim to organize exhibits of the collective society and to mobilize and indoctrinate the masses. Those events were the major build blocks of images of the Vargas ideology as the most accomplished expression of a happy society. Joy, euphoria, harmony were associated with the notions of homogeneity, obedience, integration, which were the basic components of the totalitarianism that predominated at that time.

The purpose of training bodies and minds of citizens, as well as of social control, was to gain limitless support for the regime, which explains the huge investments made in propaganda. Propaganda, however, was not omnipotent: there were numerous forms of resistance to repression, hidden by euphoria in the celebrations and by the image of a happy and harmonious society. Reality might have been masked by theatricality, but society was complex and permeated by conflicts. History did not stop acting under the mask of harmony and unity.

Conformism was reinforced by physical and civic education, which, shielded by the discourse of health, hygiene and formation of an ideal Brazilian race, excluded all and any citizen who did not fit into the ideals proposed by the regime. By the use of this force, the Vargas government was able to expand the idea of eugenics and, at the same time, sculpt the young bodies to attain the desired physique.

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### THE PHYSICAL EDUCATION AS INSTRUMENT OF CONTROL OF THE BODY

#### ABSTRACT:

This article is a reflexion regarding the role of physical education during the governance of Getulio vargas in Brazil. This activity was used as an instrument of control of the body, as well as a way to structure them, with the intention to reach physical perfection based in the racial purity principles. The government used public commemorative events for the application of these control mechanisms, lessening the population's resistance to their ideals and developing the support of the population.

**KEY WORDS:** Physical Education, body, Getulio Vargas

### L'ÉDUCATION PHYSIQUE COMME UN INSTRUMENT DE CONTRÔLE DES CORPS

#### RÉSUMÉ:

Cet article est une réflexion à propos du rôle exercé par l'éducation physique pendant le gouvernement de Getúlio Vargas au Brésil. Cet activité a été utilisée comme un instrument de contrôle des corps ainsi qu'une forme de les structurer, avec l'objectif d'atteindre la perfection physique basée sur les principes aryens. Le gouvernement a profité des moments festifs pour l'application de ces mécanismes de contrôle e de cette façon, diminuer la résistance de la population à ses idéaux et et obtenir l'appui de la population.

**MOTS-CLÉ:** Éducation Physique, Corps, Getulio Vargas

### LA EDUCACIÓN FÍSICA COMO INSTRUMENTO DEL CONTROL DEL CUERPO

#### RESUMEN:

Este artículo es una reflexión a respecto del papel ejercido por la educación física durante el gobierno de Getulio Vargas en Brasil. Esa actividad fue utilizada como un instrumento de control de los cuerpos, bien como una forma de estructurarlos con el intuito de alcanzar la perfección física basada en los principios arios. El gobierno se valió de momentos festivos para la aplicación de esos mecanismos de control, disminuyendo, así, la resistencia por parte de la población a sus ideales y generando el apoyo de la población.

**PALABRAS-CLAVE:** Educación Física, Cuerpo, Getulio Vargas.

### A EDUCAÇÃO FÍSICA COMO INSTRUMENTO DE CONTROLE DO CORPO

#### RESUMO:

Este artigo é uma reflexão a respeito do papel exercido pela educação física durante o governo de Getulio Vargas no Brasil. Essa atividade foi utilizada como um instrumento de controle dos corpos, bem como uma forma de estruturá-los, com o intuito de atingir a perfeição física baseada nos princípios arianos. O governo valeu-se de momentos festivos para a aplicação desses mecanismos de controle, diminuindo, assim, a resistência por parte da população aos seus ideais e gerando o apoio da população.

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** Educação Física, Corpo, Getulio Vargas

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