

Physical Education and Socialist Ideology in Hungary

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The concept of a physical culture is based on a number of theories.¹ Some of these ideas are traced back to Karl Marx, others have been elaborated since that time. Marx, in his treatise on polytechnic education, mentioned the need for "bodily education," both in the school curriculum and as a part of military training.² Though Marx and his close friend Friedrich Engels had little more to say about physical education, contemporary socialist educators consider the "education of the physical" to be of fundamental importance in the development of a socialist society and in the all-round, harmonious development of the new socialist man and woman. Socialism, it is argued, is to be a total way of life, encompassing not only economic or political advances, but also the transformation of the social and cultural world. Sport and physical education, as aspects of culture (hence physical culture) would also be transformed.

A great deal has changed since Marx wrote his 1866 treatise on polytechnic education. The most notable as far as physical culture is concerned are the increased amounts of both sedentary work, and leisure time. Perhaps what is important to us today is not so much the theoretical origin of socialist practice, but rather the aims and goals, the socialist developmental process itself, and the practical manifestations of these efforts to achieve a better way of life for all people. It must also be remembered that each nation within the socialist bloc is unique in its history and cultural traditions, and for this reason will necessarily use different means to achieve the ultimate end of a socialist society. In Hungary the political changes seemed to usher in scientific and technological transformations of the economic sphere, and ultimately cultural changes as well. These would radically alter the essence of education and would require the development of a physical culture for all ages.³

History demonstrates that mankind has engaged in forms of play, games and sports since the beginning of social life. Aside from the pleasurable moments provided by these activities they have also been utilized for military, political, ideological, educational and countless other instrumental functions. The significance of this popular cultural form, though, has received surprisingly little serious consideration.

Those who work most fully within the area of cultural studies, such as Britain's Paul Willis, believe that any social transformation will arise only from "reinterpretations, reformations of consciousness and fermentation from below around the most trivial, everyday and commonplace items."⁴ Socialist revolutionaries, similarly, have always regarded a cultural revolution as vital for the victory of socialism. In Hungary it was only "towards the end of the sixties that the recognition became general that the structure of socialist society in itself does not do away with social problems."⁵ Nor does a socialist culture spontaneously emerge with a change in the polity and productive relations.

It is not by accident that within the past two decades "cultural studies" in the west (such as Hall, Williams, Willis), and concern with a "cultural revolution,"⁶ particularly in Eastern Europe, (e.g., Bahro, Köpeczi, Sapora, Terényi) have come to the forefront. This upsurge of interest in the area of culture, and in particular, physical culture, is what I intend to discuss next.

Eastern European nations, perhaps more than other nation-states, have realized and harnessed the power and appeal of sport to promote the cause and creation of socialism. In Hungary this was a particularly attractive public forum because of the centuries of tradition related to Hungarian sport.⁷ In fact, Hungarian sport records are among the oldest to be found in Europe.⁸ But the institutionalized use of sport to promote socialism has its inherent contradictions. Much of Hungarian sport had been traditionally the domain of royalty, aristocracy and the bourgeois classes. The socialist revolution was to have dramatically altered the basis of privilege and physical culture was to be democratized. Despite the term's incorporation into the socialist vocabulary, however, sport has basically remained the domain of the "elite," albeit a re-defined elite.

The early years of socialism in Hungary (1945-48) encouraged the democratization of sport as the exclusive clubs and facilities

were taken over by the workers' movement. Despite serious political and economic setbacks, sport in Hungary managed to flourish internationally, nationally, and to a lesser extent, locally. Attempts were made to provide underprivileged groups: workers, women, students, peasants, with opportunities to participate. These initiatives were organized campaign-style and although they received much publicity, economic conditions restricted any large-scale reorganization.

By 1950, the initial enthusiasm of the people was waning. State control was strengthened, clubs were given more direct support, and at the same time were pressured to produce more world-class athletes, at the expense of the mass participation programs.⁹ The 1951 government organization of the OTSB (National Physical Education and Sport Council) united the political and professional leadership of physical education and sport in a single state apparatus, and thus solidified centralized state control.

The performance of athletes from socialist states at the 1952 Helsinki Olympics, where Hungary finished third, the Soviet Union, second, astounded the sports world. The Hungarian performances coupled with the phenomenal successes of the "Golden Team" in international soccer, encouraged Hungarian state authorities to further their investments in elite sport. The success of the Hungarian athletes was used to suggest, both internationally and internally, that socialist development was progressing at a smooth and steady rate.¹⁰ Since, at this time, physical culture was seen as synonymous with international sport the Hungarian successes obscured any need for a critical examination of the actual development of a total physical culture program.¹¹

Hindsight allows us to realize that although international sport, during this period, served the political ideology of the socialist government, it could hardly be called "physical culture" in the true sense of the term. Hungarians continue to be proud of their successful sports "ambassadors" but, notwithstanding this fact, the majority of the people still experienced physical culture only vicariously, from the spectator stands or through the mass media.

Clearly, there continue to be problems in defining and achieving a socialist society and within that context, a socialist physical culture. This is not to imply that no progress has been made in the area of sport and physical education in Hungary.

Opportunities for participation, and access to an ever increasing number of facilities has improved steadily during the 20th century. At the same time, these advancements cannot be attributed solely to the socialist system. In fact, the gap between the theory and current practice of socialist physical culture is almost as wide today as it ever was. One has to question how much of the state's commitment to physical culture is primarily to provide an international sport showcase for political ideology, and how much is truly a commitment to the incorporation of the cultural revolution into the totality of socialist transformation.

While sports authorities continue to struggle with these contradictions, there have been significant improvements in the area of *physical education*. Education, and especially the process of teacher training, is given a place of primacy in the socialist system. It is argued that since attitudes and lifelong habits are developed during the formative years, any lifelong commitment to physical culture must be commenced during the school years.¹²

Thus, in January of 1980, at the Moscow Scientific Coordination Meetings, the socialist countries agreed to cooperate in the 1981-85 plan to research the area of "Physical Education and Sport in the Socialist Lifestyle."¹³ The first phase of this study was a comparative survey of "Coaches' and Physical Education Teachers' Training in Socialist Countries." The results of this study indicate a disproportionate emphasis on sports performance, even now, but indications from Hungary suggest that there is a growing concern for physical education and leisure time activities among Hungarians.¹⁴ Two examples will illustrate the increased interest in physical culture. The five-day work week was initiated in 1982 which provides the possibility of the leisure weekend, common to other industrialized countries. Second, physical education has been increased from two to three hours per week at the high school level. This in itself is not unique but the comprehensive nature of the program is matched by few nations. Hungarian students now receive physical education training from nursery schools to university and other post-secondary educational institutes. Moreover, participation is compulsory for all students, with special classes offered for the handicapped and the gifted.

There is an obviously growing, and more sophisticated awareness of the meaning and values of physical culture. This is

in evidence in the mass media, and has been confirmed by sociological surveys.¹⁵ But despite well-developed theories, and a clearer understanding of what physical culture means in socialist society, regular participation is not as good as the authorities would like.

The Hungarian College of Physical Education is a microcosm of the tensions and contradictions that exist between sport and recreation, participation and non-involvement. The institute is responsible for the training of the best qualified physical educators, coaches, and sports administrators in the country, and as such it plays an especially significant role in the development of Hungarian physical culture.

Some of the most fundamental tensions are best expressed in the following apparent dichotomies: the traditional and the progressive; the “theoreticians” and the “practitioners”; the goals of sport and physical education; and sport-for-all and high performance sport. Though these tensions are familiar to physical educators, coaches, and other sports leaders world-wide, they pose a particularly significant problem for the architects of a socialist physical culture. Physical culture in this context has to be related to the social totality philosophically, theoretically and practically.

Published material would suggest that there is a well-developed theoretical argument linking the various component parts of physical culture together. Moreover, elaborate studies like that of Földesi’s (1980) would suggest that the inseparable links had reached the general population as well.

My many conversations with, and observations of the physical educator at work in the college and in schools suggests, however, that there is a discrepancy between the written policies and the lived experience of the teacher/student. Many of the respondents felt that there was an overemphasis on elite sport at the expense of mass participation and that this imbalance should be redressed. There was a significant “generation gap” between the faculty and students, as well as a distinct polarization among the faculty who taught theoretical subjects and those who instructed sports and coaching. Almost without exception the “sports faculty” members expressed a deep commitment to the continued pursuit of sporting excellence (citing this pursuit as the ultimate aim of physical education), while other faculty members, and the majority of the students, stressed broader educational goals, such

as the aim of encouraging life-long mass participation. The students also complained of the high and often unrealistic expectations demanded of the applicants to the college, and of those subsequently accepted into the program. These were deemed to be generally unnecessary and inappropriate to the socialist ideals of physical culture. For their part, the older faculty (and many citizens, generally) still lament the decline of Hungarian sport and blame the lack of “discipline” in modern youth and the inadequate content of the physical education curricula in the schools.

A major curriculum review at the Hungarian College of Physical Education in 1978 has dramatically altered the direction which physical culture has and will take in future years. The rigorous, though revised, entrance exam remains, as does a reduced, but still demanding, skill component. The reforms also emphasized that sports excellence should be accompanied by more extra-curricular activities. Greater attention is to be paid to the creation and development of a physical education adapted to all of life’s stages. It was also noted that physical education as a school subject, and physical culture generally, are still underrated by most Hungarians. This, despite the fact that in 1945 the state officially granted equal status to physical education with all other subjects in the curriculum,¹⁶ and that the Hungarian College of Physical Education, elevated to university status in 1975, is internationally renowned.

To combat this indifference to physical culture students and teachers suggest that a daily physical education program with: an emphasis on the enjoyment of a variety of physical activities, and, the knowledge of the individual health and social benefits, would go a long way to improving the status of physical culture.

Not only does there appear to be a change of attitude among the students with regard to the philosophy of physical culture but also in the types of positions they accept following graduation. As little as ten years ago, the majority of students graduating from the Hungarian College of Physical Education were seeking and finding coaching positions with one of the many prestigious sports clubs. Coaches were (and still are) granted a higher social status and receive more pay than the school teacher. Today, despite the continuing discrepancies, the trend has shown a gradual reversal. The majority of the students (86.5 percent of 4th year students in 1983) indicated that pedagogy as opposed to sports training was

among the most important subjects at the College as far as their professional training was concerned. They continue to find the practical requirements unnecessarily high and time-consuming, and desire an increased time-allotment to practise teaching, both to their peers and in actual schools.

This is not to imply that the coaching profession has been abandoned. Many students still engage in coaching upon graduating but more frequently this is a secondary occupation. What students are saying, in essence, is that physical education, and *not* sport, should be the foundation stone of a socialist physical culture.

There are important lessons to be learned from the ongoing Hungarian experience to develop socialist physical culture. Hungary is a powerful sports nation which has achieved tremendous international success. Olympic gold medals, however, do not make a nation of participants. The observations which faculty, teachers, but most particularly, the students, shared with me suggest that gradual, almost indiscernible changes are occurring in physical culture. No longer is it synonymous with international sports victories. It is much more than that. There is a serious and conscious attempt to realize the importance of sport-for-all programs and general leisure practices.¹⁷ Change brings with it both contradictions and tensions, and, as Marx suggested in the *Theses on Feuerbach*, "it is men (and women) who change circumstances and...the educator himself needs educating." How much the circumstances will change, how far the educator will permit re-education remains to be seen. One thing is certain though, and I again quote Paul Willis:

Culture is not artifice and manners, the preserve of Sunday best, rainy afternoons and concert halls. It is the very material of our daily lives, the bricks and mortar of our most commonplace understandings, feelings and responses. We rely on cultural patterns and symbols for the minute, and unconscious, social reflexes that make us social and collective beings: we are therefore most *deeply* embedded in our culture when we are at our most natural and spontaneous: if you like at our most workaday. As soon as we think, as soon as we see life as parts in a play, we are in a very important sense, already, one step away from our real and living culture.¹⁸

NOTES

1. The term "physical culture" used in Hungary, and socialist countries generally, is understood to include the whole range of physical activities such as physical education, both in the general sense: *testnevelés*, and as part of the school curriculum: *testnevelés*; recreational and competitive mass sport, elite sport, and the general maintenance of physical health.
2. Castles, S. and Wustenberg, W. *The Education of the Future; An Introduction to the Theory and Practice of Socialist Education* (London: Pluto Press, 1979) :38-9.
3. Terényi, I. "A mai testkultúra fejlődésének tendenciái," *A sport és testnevelés időszzerű kérdései*, 23 (Budapest: Sport, 1980) :31-2.
4. Willis, P. *Profane Culture* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978) :7.
5. Boldizsár, I., ed., "Metaphor and Reality," *The New Hungarian Quarterly*, Vol. XXIII, No. 86 (Summer 1982) :4.
6. The term was not invented by Mao Tse-Tung, as is sometimes presumed. It appears to have been first used by Lenin in 1923; but the concept of cultural revolution is implicit in the whole of Marxist thought. (Castles & Wustenberg, p. 202)
7. Vető, J., ed., *Sports in Hungary* (Budapest: Corvina Press, 1965).
8. Földes, E., Kun, L., and Kutassi, L. *A magyar testnevelés és sport története*. Testnevelési Főiskolai Tankönyv (Budapest: Sport, 1982) :9.
9. A similar pressure is now being exerted on sports clubs, universities and voluntary sports associations in Canada.
10. Földes *et al.*, p. 422.
11. Schiller, J. "A sportszociológia aktualitása," *Testnevelés és Sporttudomány*, 1 (Budapest, 1980) :16.
12. Schiller, p. 13.
13. Schiller, p. 17.
14. Central Committee of the Czechoslovak Union of Physical Education, *Coaches and Physical Education Teachers Training in Socialist Countries* (A collection of studies in the International Scientific Cooperation) Prague, 1980.
15. Földesi, T. and Földesi, T. "Expectations Related to Physical Culture in Hungary," *International Review of Sport Sociology*, 3, No. 16 (Warsaw, 1981) :45.
16. Kerestes, A. "Physical Education and Sport in Hungary," Masters Thesis (University of Alberta, 1967) :16.
17. Zsiday, I., "Sports for Everyone," *Hungarian Digest*, 5 (Budapest, 1982) :117.
18. Willis, *Profane Culture*, op. cit.