

## Vorträge und Aufsätze

Arbeitsbereich Allgemeine Pädagogik

Institut für Erziehungs- und Bildungswissenschaft

Karl-Franzens-Universität Graz

Jg. 2021

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# Denkwerkstatt

## Allgemeine Pädagogik

Heft 24

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### Body education in the youth movement.



## **Body education in the youth movement**

### **Abstract**

This chapter investigates body education in the youth movement during the first half of the twentieth century. The body practices, mutual influences and various overlaps between the youth movement of the so-called '*Wandervögel*' (hiking birds) and other branches of the life reform movement are shown in detail, referring especially to the relationship between the youth culture and the body culture movement. Thereby the focus lies on less well-known groups such as the women's settlement of Loheland and the groupings around Charlie Strässer and Alfred Koch. In Loheland the holistic and integrative concept of life was in particular realised through gymnastics and dance, while Charlie Strässer and Alfred Koch established new body practices in the nudist culture. These various parties shared an orientation towards the individuality of persons and the individual body, with all its strengths and weaknesses. They all aimed to balance body and soul beyond the ideal beauty and health at that time: a well-trained and strengthened, youthful body. Through their education of the body they wanted to evolve the inner power of the individual to reach full self-development. The contribution of the youth culture to the concept of the much trumpeted 'New Human' progressive aspects in the spreading of a new body awareness is discussed in this chapter, as well as ambiguities and ambivalences, due to the fact that many *Wandervögel* chapters favoured a body ideal with gender-specific and race-biological implications.

Keywords: body education, youth movement, *Wandervögel*, Loheland, new body practices, nudist culture

## **Introduction**

The Youth Movement of the so-called '*Wandervögel*' (hiking birds), acknowledged for its reference to nature and health by the life reform movement, contributes significantly to the spreading of a new body awareness, to which properties such as 'un-estranged', 'original', 'natural', 'freed', 'beautiful' and 'healthy' are ascribed. This new approach to the body as a common central reference point for the members of the different directions of the life reform movement leads to a mutually beneficial spurring in fleshing out and propagating a new concept of being human.

This chapter investigates body practices in the youth culture in the first half of the twentieth century to show the contribution of young people to the conception of the much trumpeted 'New Human', thereby focusing on the overlaps and reciprocal influences between the Youth Movement and the body culture movement. Lesser known groups, such as the women's settlement of Loheland and the nudist culture around Charlie Strässer or Alfred Koch, are described in detail, as they practised forms of particularly inventive body education. Despite the progressive aspects in the new body awareness of some groups, the ambiguities concerning the physical education in the first half of the twentieth century should not be forgotten. Thus, ambivalences in relation to the new body consciousness and the concept of the 'New Human' are also discussed.

## **Self-education of the body as the basis of the life reform movement**

Underscoring naturalness and the return to nature, the life reformer emphasises the importance of the body, arguing that the body is being suppressed, forgotten, exanimated, emptied, weakened, deformed or even degenerated as a result of modern living conditions, such as factory or office work (Wedemeyer-Kolwe 2017, p. 93).

The life reform movement considers itself civilisation critical in its focus on enhancing and strictly regulating the body through various movement cultures such as gymnastics, dance, yoga or hiking, as well as through vegetarian nutrition, nudism and reformed clothes. In life reform circles, the body is perceived as a task: first, it needs forming to become healthy, strong and resilient to make way for the development of the inner abilities of the mind and soul. Therefore, body education (*Körperbildung*) is a fundamental principle of the life reform movement (Wedemeyer-Kolwe 2017, p. 94). Body education includes a new holistic view of body, mind and soul as a coherent entity, extending the objectives of body education from enhancing its physical functionality to a harmonious forming of the body (ibid., p. 97), and toward a newly established

focus on body awareness and feeling (de Ras 1986, p. 412). Consequently, various body practices do not only relate to physical performance and health, but also to aesthetic aspects, associating terms such as 'liberation', 'authenticity', 'individuality' and 'naturalness' to the body (Wedemeyer-Kolwe 2017, p. 94).

The education of the body starts with the self-reform and self-education of the individual and gives priority to different body practices in everyday culture (Wedemeyer-Kolwe 2006, p. 144; Wedemeyer-Kolwe 2017, p. 94). The natural and naturalistic lifestyle propagated by the life reform movement establishes the cultivation of the body as a principle to apply to everyday life, in which the human body becomes a meaningful entity (de Ras 1986, p. 412; Wedemeyer-Kolwe 2006, p. 138). It is not only a matter of basic self-reform through self-education, but also a vision of utopia highlighting the betterment and development of the entire society through body education.

Those general visions of the life reform movement are shared by the members of the Youth Movement, which played a central role in developing and spreading the new conceptualisation of body awareness.

### **Body consciousness and practices in the Youth Movement**

Suffering from the common body hostility in particular, the young people rediscovered the body and attached a high value to it. Thus Andritzky (1989, p. 6) describes the Youth Movement as "a revolt of the body". At traditional schools, for example, a civilisation critical debate arose concerning bodily practices. The Youth Movement refused to accept the overtly intellectual and dry school atmosphere (de Ras 1986, p. 413), the drilling of mere knowledge, the overemphasis on intellectual knowledge and body discipline which forced pupils to sit in an unhealthy and unnatural sitting posture at their school desks (Wedemeyer-Kolwe 2017, p. 94). As a reaction to these practices, the artificial etiquette, the constricting clothing, the somatophobic attitudes and the hypocritical Wilhelminian society (Andritzky 1989, p. 4), as well as an attempt to escape from the discipline and corporal punishment at home and at school (Pretzel 2001, p. 77), the members of the Youth Movement went on hiking trips in their free time to be in nature, far away from the adult world. They wanted to live a new self-determined, healthy life in wild nature with an appropriate new body consciousness, awareness and feeling (Andritzky 1989, p. 4; Pretzel 2001, p. 77).

The Youth Movement started at the end of the nineteenth century, when informal peer groups of Steglitzer grammar school students went on nature trips in the country,

leaving the urban environment – in this case Berlin – behind to go on hikes to explore the rural and natural environment. In 1901, these students founded an association named '*Wandervögel – Ausschuss für Schülerfahrten*'. The hikes, or so-called rides, could be trips of several hours, days or even weeks, including accommodation in tents and barns (Mogge 2001, p. 10, 18). During the first half of the twentieth century, the Youth Movement, which initially consisted mainly of bourgeois male students, was growing fast and spreading across the entire German-speaking area, including also a small number of female youths. Overall, the number of members doubled from approximately 60,000 to approximately 110,000 between 1914 and 1925 (Mogge 2009, p. 18). Although there had been female groups since 1905 (Andresen 2011, p. 121), girls were still a very clear minority compared to the boys (Bruns 2008, p. 233; Mogge 2009, p. 18) and mixed gender groups existed only rudimentarily (Bruns 2008, p. 232; Pretzel 2001, p. 82). However, it should be noted that the effect of the *Wandervögel* exceeded the number of their members significantly (Dudek 2010, p. 369).

The *Wandervögel* Youths were not just hiking, their additional body practices played an important role in forming and spreading a new body consciousness, which was influenced by various already existing approaches to the body and underlying conceptions of being human. Various *Wandervögel* chapters removed specific body practices, and modified exercises from the traditional German gymnastics movement, sports movement and body culture movement (Wedemeyer-Kolwe 2006, p. 145).

At the very start of the *Wandervögel* Movement, their body practices, hiking aside, were especially influenced by the traditional German Gymnastics Association. They borrowed outdoors games, which could be played spontaneously and were therefore a preferred pastime during hiking breaks. These activities included scouting games, tag games or wrestling games. Because of their growing popularity, local groups organised meetings and camping trips dedicated to these games, which occasionally became more popular than the hiking activities (Wedemeyer-Kolwe 2006, p. 145). In some chapters and at some national meetings war games dominated (Seewann 1974, p. 79). These events promoted the training and demonstration of male-connnotated virtues and qualities, which in some groups went beyond qualities such as strength, courage, discipline and toughness, but aimed at suitability for military service and, on occasion, even emulated a playful persecution of Jews (Bruns 2008, p. 230).

Physical training and hardening practices, contributing to the aestheticisation of a strong athletic image of masculinity, were ultimately promoted through sports, which

were introduced to the Youth Movement in 1907. Athletics competitions in disciplines such as running, discus throwing, shot put, javelin throwing, long jump, high jump and games including football and rounders were held. Despite initial disputes about performance enhancement and the missing educational aspects of sports, regular sporting events took place at the federal meetings of the Wandervögel, albeit mostly without stopwatch and tape measure. Although movement and fun outdoor activity enjoyed greater popularity than fighting for points and goals, in many groups the focus was set on enhancing performance in order to win (Wedemeyer-Kolwe 2006, p. 149).

Parallel to the German gymnastics and sports movements, the emerging so-called *Körperkultur-Bewegung* (body culture movement) had a huge influence on the Youth Movement concerning a new concept of body consciousness. Differing from the traditional gymnastics and sports movement, the body culture movement is commonly referred to as an alternative movement culture (Wedemeyer-Kolwe 2006, p. 144). Aesthetic, health and physical functions aside, the body culture movement associates the body with terms such as 'wholeness', 'individuality' and 'identity' (Wedemeyer-Kolwe 2017, p. 123). The understanding of the body was occasionally guided by transcendence and Far Eastern doctrines (Wedemeyer-Kolwe 2006, p. 144, 151). Physical practices of the body culture movement were, for instance, new forms of gymnastics, including Far Eastern body exercises such as yoga or meditation, expressive dance and nudism (Wedemeyer-Kolwe 2017, p. 111).

The influences of the dance and new gymnastics movement loosened the ideal of a steel body within the Youth Movement (Linse 1986, p. 400). Due to the inclusion of these new practices and a loosened body image ideal, girls of the Youth Movement were especially fascinated by the body culture movement (de Ras 1986, p. 413). Consequently, body-practical and personal reciprocities and correlations between the Youth Movement and the body culture movement will be highlighted in regard to the women's settlement of Loheland and the naturism movement.

### **Gymnastics and dance – the women's settlement of Loheland**

In Loheland different socio-cultural branches and practices were combined. The women of Loheland were not just influenced by the spirit of the Youth Movement, but also by anthroposophical and reform pedagogical ideas. Initially, Loheland was a gymnastics school for women started in 1912 by Louise Langaard and Hedwig von Rohden. In 1919, however, both women co-founded a self-sustained settlement with

former students on a mountain in the German Rhön in Hesse named *Herzberg* (Christinck/Spieker 2011, p. 169). The settlement, consisting of farming and horticulture for self-supply, also encompassed businesses devoted to different crafts, such as textile manufacturing or photography, and a distinctive educational institute focused on teaching a newly self-developed form of gymnastics. Some of the members of the Loheland community were internationally well-established expressive dancers and thus received considerable public attention (ibid., p. 170).

The most obvious overlap between Loheland and the Youth Movement results from the fact that one of the founders and some students were active in the Youth Movement as well. Additionally, eighty Wandervögel followed a call for help to build up the settlement. Although some members of Loheland dissociated themselves from the Youth Movement, considering it only as a transition period (Christinck/Spieker 2011, p. 179), there are clear content-related overlaps and points of reference in relation to the priority of movement, the importance of the community for personal development and the education of a new body awareness, as well as the aspiration of a comprehensive social reform through self-reform.

For the Wandervögel and the members of Loheland, movement is central, as physical movement is associated with mental mobility. The Youth Movement and the new gymnastics and dance movement regarded physical mobility as the basis for holistic and extensive personal development, in which the community plays a crucial role. Both Wandervögel and Loheland members linked self-discovery processes and social recognition within the group with intensive body experiences. The reform efforts of both groups aimed at a new social order through self-reform in a community in close communion with nature and liberated from conventional bourgeois rituals. In essence, both groups wanted to be freed from immobility as the consequence, for example, of the constricting clothes (such as corsets) and social norms at that time (Christinck/Spieker 2011, p. 173).

Many girls of the Youth Movement felt attracted to Loheland, not only because Loheland's body education corresponded to the ideals of the Youth Movement, but also because life at the settlement was a further step on the way to self- and society reform. The simple life the Wandervögel experienced on their trips to the country was actually lived in Loheland, achieved by the liberation from bourgeois conventions and an artistically formed life close to nature (Christinck/Spieker 2011, p. 173). The gymnastics developed by Langaard and von Rhoden represents an individual human development

which opened new perspectives and spheres of activities to women and girls (ibid., p. 170). The training and strengthening of the female body through gymnastics and dance should have a liberating effect on the body and self-image, and beyond that, it should strengthen women's individuality and willpower (ibid., p. 173).

Gymnastics and dance represented the basis of education and community for the women of Loheland (Christinck/Spieker 2011, p. 174), assuming that the intended personal development always takes place in accordance with the community as part of the social entity (ibid., p. 180). The women of Loheland combined gymnastics exercises with social competences like the development of the ability and vigilance to adapt individually to movement and change as well as to take space and tasks within a group. By doing this, they line up with the branch of the life reform movement which propagated a new body consciousness, the individuality of the dancer and an altered image of girls and women since the end of the nineteenth century (ibid., p. 174).

In summary, it can be said that the Loheland settlement, influenced by the spirit of the youth culture in regard to its body concept and educational task, was committed to a holistic and integrative concept of life (Christinck/Spieker 2011, p. 172). In their settlement they realised elements which were also propagated by the Wandervögel Movement, such as self-reform through the education of the body, an independent and autonomous culture, as well as living close to nature.

### **Naturism and youth culture**

The considerable ideological overlap between nudism and the Youth Movement is founded on the common core assumption that being naked is the true, natural human state (Wedemeyer-Kolwe 2017, p. 99). This view caused many body practices of the life reform movement to correspond with those of the nudist movement. These practices were frequently a nude execution of conventional sport disciplines, such as the use of barbells or swimming, or body culture practices such as gymnastics, free dance or Far Eastern body exercises (ibid., p. 98).

In some Wandervögel chapters nudism had a great appeal (Andresen 2011, p. 124). Thus, Linse notes (1986, p. 399) that the Wandervögel Movement itself became the most significant 'light- and air movement'. Besides nudity, they borrowed other cultural ideals from the nudist movement and dragged them out into the open, into nature and into the world, away from dedicated sanatoriums for light- and airbaths (ibid.). Practically, the nudism of the Wandervögel is expressed in naked sports activities like

swimming or nude gymnastics, for instance at the Motzener Lake near Berlin. There, Charly Strässer, a former Wandervögel, physiotherapist and dance instructor, founded Birkenheide between 1923 and 1924, a public nudist camp, where apart from water sports and athletics gymnastics was also exercised (Andritzky 1989, p. 5; Wedemeyer-Kolwe 2006, p. 28). Birkenheide became a meeting place for non-dogmatic former and active members of the Wandervögel Movement. There they could be undisturbed, naked and without the need of any ideological justification (Andritzky 1989, p. 5; Wedemeyer-Kolwe 2015, p. 28). Simultaneously, naked gymnastics lessons were held by the socialist Alfred Koch in his so-called 'body schools' (*Körperschulen*); there, girls and boys, women and men, and especially female and male workers were encouraged to learn to view the naked body as something natural and self-evident. Nude swimming and nude gymnastic exercises were to lead to the respect of the bodies of others. Alfred Koch was not only revolutionary in this regard, but also because of the sexual education he provided, where he informed others about contraception and homosexuality, as well (Reuter 1986, p. 410). Koch wanted to free the individual body. He invented his school of gymnastics to balance body and soul and not for forming beautiful bodies or for corresponding to any ideals of beauty, forcing the gymnastic teacher to always orientate toward each participant's individual body, thereby anticipating elements of the latter schools of body therapy with his gymnastic system. He emphasised the recognition of individual characteristics and not reciprocal comparisons (Andritzky 1989, p. 57).

But these innovative approaches to the body which we find with Strässer or Koch were highly exceptional at that time (Andritzky 1989, p. 5; Reuter 1986, p. 411). Most nudist groups followed a doctrine of beauty of the naked body, with the underlying idea that discipline and hard work were the key to a trained and well-shaped body for everybody – except for those perceived as racially unpure. As the aesthetic ideal was a strong, youthful body, training it was paramount. Older, invalid or sick individuals were as unwelcome as those showing a large abdomen and buttocks. In addition, many within the nudist movement justified nudism with racial biological arguments from its beginning (Reuter 1986, p. 408), as leaders of the nudist movement – like Richard Ungewitter – declared it the goal to cultivate beautiful, healthy and racially pure humans (Puschner 2017, p. 77), because only a healthy body would be able to host a healthy mind (Reuter 1986, p. 410). Health was equated with purity – meaning racial biological aspects on the one hand and sexual aspects on the other. Nudity was not to

be associated with sexuality or carnal desire (Linse 1989, p. 37), thus demanding strictest self-discipline during un-clothed interaction with each other or when in sight of other naked people, while nude bathing, for example (ibid., p. 20). In the light of Wilhelminian society and its prevailing conventions, the nudist movement was unquestionably revolutionary. But ultimately, instead of freeing the body, the nudist culture imposed a new set of regulations for propriety and chastity, including an ambitious self-education programme on it (Andresen 2011, p. 125).

The cultural ideal of desexualisation was especially impactful on the Youth Movement, which started to promote a sexphobic approach to the body and elevated sexual prudery idealistically. In this context, Linse refers to an anti-sexual reorganisation of the body (Linse 1986, p. 399), which showed success among the Wandervögel Movement, who replaced sex and sexuality with comradeship (ibid.). Natural comradesly identity, as defined by the Wandervögel, was an asexual one. In most Wandervögel chapters nudism had only a positive connotation when its sexphobic aspect was overemphasised (Andresen 2011, p. 125).

### **Ambiguities in the new body consciousness**

Loheland offered girls and women new gender roles and thus new perspectives of the female lifestyle. Charlie Strässer and Alfred Koch developed initial approaches to a liberation of the body without feeding off the ideal of a young steel body or touching upon racist ideology. The members of Loheland and the circles around Strässer and Koch focussed on the individual person with all its strengths and weaknesses and concentrated on the support to evolve the whole inner power of the individual through the education of the body with gymnastics, dance and nudity. They saw body education as the key to reach full self-development.

The body education of the Youth Movement only partly relied on this specific and progressive body approach. The variety of concepts concerning the body-oriented 'New Human' was reflected in the heterogeneity of the Wandervögel chapters. The chapters ranged from liberal, socialist and anarchistic settings rejecting physical performance and comparison and thus also sports competitions with measuring tape and stopwatch, but found their opposition in groups like the *Deutsche Freischar*, for example, which attached high importance to measuring body performances or the *Adler und Falken* (Eagles and Hawks), who cultivated toughening practices for the purpose of defending

the nation in terms of the antisemitic German Gymnastics Association (Wedemeyer-Kolwe 2006, p. 152).

Although many members of the Youth Movement did not present themselves as political (Seewann 1974, p. 81), they justified their hiking trips from a culturally critical perspective. As a protest movement against civilisation, they wanted return to (their own) nature and naturalness through hiking and other body practices. They saw themselves as a movement of moral and cultural renewal opposing the spiritually overburdened and physically neglected old world with the idea of societal improvement through physical self-education (Pretzel 2001, p. 72; Troschke 2001, p. 121; Wedemeyer-Kolwe 2006, p. 139). The Youth Movement made a decisive contribution to developing and spreading a new body-consciousness, which culminated in the construct of the 'New Human', including self-responsibility for one's own health as well as for that of the entire society. From 1920 onwards, the preferred role model for many of the Youth Movement members was the able-bodied, toughened and sportive young man who loves nature and his home country. Thus, practices of physical strengthening, asceticism and toughening increased. Consequently, the fun and leisure aspect of hiking trips fell behind and the propagated personal responsibility in terms of health, self-improvement and the new body-consciousness led to body education based on self-discipline. Especially for this propagation, the Wandervögel Movement received public acceptance and recognition (Pretzel 2001, p. 84). In many chapters of the Wandervögel the imperative of self-responsibility for health, infused with national and racial biological implications, grew dominant. Thus, many members of the Wandervögel joined the Hitler Youth (HJ) enthusiastically soon after its inception (Seewann 1974, p. 87; Klönne 1986, p. 311).

In light of the ban of all Youth groups except for the HJ and the forced membership of all non-Jewish teenagers, it should be expressively stated that in an attempt to resist the National Socialist regime, local, dissident Youth chapters emerged from previous Wandervögel, such as the *Edelweißpiraten* (Pirates of Edelweiss) or the *Kittelbachpiraten* (Pirates of Kittelbach), for instance. Amongst others, these groups engaged actively in the resistance and fought against the National Socialist regime (Stambolis 2011, p. 293; Lange 2015). It should also be mentioned that the approaches to the body of other groups of young people, including the young adults at Loheland, and those surrounding Strässer or Koch, were inconsistent with the ideology of the Nazi regime.

In summary the body education of the youth culture confirms the necessity of open-minded and cosmopolitan-oriented conditions for a free and equal development of individuals, implying the downplaying of traditional gender roles, whereas nationalist and racist conditions promote an elitist consciousness, which leads to a heroic self-enhancement confirming and justifying traditional gender roles.

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## **Impressum**

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Erstveröffentlichung in:

im Böder/Paul Eisewicht/Günter Mey/Nicolle Pfaff (Hrsg.): Stilbildungen und Zugehörigkeit. Materialität und Medialität in Jugendszenen. Wiesbaden: Springer 2019, S. 115-131.

Bildhinweis:

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