

Fritz Wildung, “Sport is the Will to Culture” (1926)

Abstract

This text appeared in the Social Democratic journal *Kulturwille*, which was published from 1924 until 1933 (at which point it was banned by the National Socialists). The journal covered topics relating to Social Democratic cultural work. The author of this text, Fritz Wildung (1872-1954), was a Social Democrat and sports official who was appointed secretary general of Berlin’s Central Commission for Sports and Hygiene [*Zentralkommission für Sport und Körperpflege*] in 1924. Wildung, who came from modest circumstances, had been an active member of gymnastics clubs [*Turnvereine*] and labor unions and had a strong interest in promoting physical exercise among workers. In Germany, the link between sports and politics dated back to the nineteenth century and made itself felt in the Weimar Republic as well, not least because sports organizations often had political affiliations. Wildung’s emphasis on sports as a means to achieve political self-determination and human dignity also reflect the era’s culture of the body [*Körperkultur*].

Source

Sport is the Will to Culture

There have been many attempts, until now all in vain, to supply a clear definition for the term *sport*. A leading bourgeois sports figure, Carl Diem, coined the phrase “Sport is battle!” But this formulation is very one-sided and applies only to actual competitions. Competition meanwhile is only one of sport’s methods, and definitely not the essential one. Sport in Germany is incidentally still too new and too little rooted in the character of the German people to make it possible to point to a definition that has grown organically from the German way of life. In any case, the opinion represented by Diem, among others, that a physical exercise is to be designated a sport only when it is carried out as a battle or competitive exercise, should be regarded as outmoded. The people speak of every seriously undertaken physical exercise as sport and it is incumbent upon the expert to accept this judgment.

It seems to us that one comes much closer to the essence of sport when it is derived from the natural human drive to play. We know the play drive of children and the extreme variety of ways it is expressed, but play is always an activity of people who are in the process of becoming whole. We do not know of games of a strictly physical or strictly mental sort in children, for to the child games represent a simultaneously physical, mental, and psychological occupation; work. People never lose this drive to play; it only changes its forms of expression with the growth of their physical and mental powers and the differentiation of their psychological life. Young men experience that pleasure through competition, whereas mature men find that same pleasure in creative desires, that is, in work. That is why adolescents favor athletic competition and games whereas the more mature man turns to the more contemplative forms of sport. Women of all ages are inclined much more than men to rhythmic exercises. The expressive forms assumed by the play drive are moreover definitively influenced by the role occupied by both young and mature people in the process of production. Normally the work performed by people is meant to satisfy their play drive at the highest level of its development. In work people find the purpose of their existence fulfilled; it is a means by which they express their creative, formative powers and a practice field for all of their aptitudes and talents. Therefore it represents play in the higher sense at the same time, and people derive from it the peace of mind that lends harmony to their lives. So it should be. But how diametrically opposed to this ideal is today’s wage labor for manual and mental workers! Only a very few people are able to select their life’s occupation according to their wishes, inclinations, and talents. How rarely are desire and inclination decisive in the selection of an apprenticeship. In the

majority of cases either accident or the desire for immediate earnings determines the trade to be pursued, and those so affected are weighed down with a poorly chosen occupation their whole lives. This is to say nothing of the host of those with no occupation at all, which, with the increasing division of labor, is growing daily.

Meanwhile the progression of the division of labor causes the labor process to become more monotonous, undifferentiated, and soulless for the majority of working people. The creative impulse is given scarcely any room for development, and the body becomes an automaton, whose movements are strictly prescribed by the particular nature of the work. We can scarcely speak of a gratification of the natural play drive, for the physical and psychological processes of work are obligatory and render the individualized self-cultivation of the worker impossible. To all of this is added the workers' miserable pay, the uninterrupted struggle for wages, and the low standard of living that stands in such blatant contradiction to the high level of mental development of today's workers. From this coincidence just briefly sketched here of physical and mental need on the part of the majority of people today arises the enormous degree of dissatisfaction and inner strife characteristic of our capitalist era. If this development is not stopped, it will doubtless lead to the decline of civilization.

What is the relationship between sport and these symptoms of decay in capitalist society? Does it signify a flight from a bleak reality into an illusory world, or is it a sign of self-assertion against the ominous decline of the race? It is both, and much more. Make no mistake: *panem et circenses* [bread and circuses] applies to our time as well. But the modern proletarian is not comparable to the lumpenproletarian of ancient Rome. He possesses the force of the self-conscious rebel who does not resign himself to his fate. He bursts his confines and seeks a way out. Sport is a rebellion against the threat of decay, an expression of the will to live. Young life does not want to be crushed on the treadmill of the economic system but strives to raise itself to higher forms. That is why it seeks the movement necessary to life and psychological balance in a kind of work that it recognizes as struggle and play and therefore a source of joy and well-being. Seen in this way sport is a playful form of work and thereby a necessary correlate of today's production processes. On the mental, physical, and psychological plane, it gives young people what contemporary work, thanks to its degeneration into modern slave labor, cannot: the movement vital to life! That is the deepest meaning of sport.

But—this is the question of concerned people—does it not also contain the danger of a turn away from the intellectual world and the idea of socialism? Yes and no! It depends on whether we place sport at the service of socialism by leading young people to recognize that sport is uncreative if it does not go hand-in-hand with the social struggle for improving the conditions against which it signifies a protest. Sport necessarily perishes when people lack time and nourishment to such a degree that engaging in it is impossible. A sick race cannot cultivate sport; it is forced to exhaust itself in its concern for healing its sores. We have to hammer into young people that production cannot be developed through a return to ancestral methods but that the division of labor must be further developed if an increase in production, which is a precondition of socialism, is to be achieved. This recognition then yields the practical lesson that salvation is only to be had from a considerable reduction in soulless labor and therefore a gain in leisure time sufficient for vital activities in all areas of life. Influenced by such thoughts, sport can become a powerful factor in favor of socialism, particularly in arousing parts of the population that we can reach only with great difficulty with our purely intellectual weapons.

I bring this discussion to a close with the affirmation that sport, in its best and strongest sense, is the will to culture. Let us see to it that the liberating act will be the product of this will.

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