

Work Your Body!

Sport used to be confined to the school playing field and the football stadium. Now it is all around us.

Everyone seems to be getting fit, working out, going for a run, or doing aerobics. This is the era of sport and fitness.

In his prize-winning article **Matt Seaton** gets inside the fitness revolution



The first *Marxism Today* 'New Times New Writing' competition was held at the end of 1989 in association with Serpent's Tail publishers. Our aim was to encourage new writers, under 25, to capture the changing events, moods and issues as we enter the 1990s. The judges, Sue Townsend, Stuart Hall, Martin Jacques and Marsha Rowe, awarded first prize to Matt Seaton for his piece 'Work Your Body!', printed here. The runners-up were David Hawkins, for his short story 'Emma', and FM Simpson with an article on the spirit of new times.

If the late 1960s and early 1970s were all about 'dropping out' and 'staying loose', then the late 1980s were about being 'leaner and tougher and more flexible'. These words come from a recent British Steel tv advert, in which a blue-collar worker works out in a designer weight-training room. The work he's doing in terms of personal fitness acts as a metaphor for the Thatcherite transformation of British Steel's competitiveness and profitability. This has been one of the recurring themes in Tory rhetoric, especially in Norman Tebbit's utterances about the 'permissive 60s': the 1960s and 1970s were responsible for an economic flabbiness and a moral decadence which has only been corrected by the rigorous exercise of market discipline.

Social Darwinism has returned to haunt us, as the 'survival of the fittest' has become the main imperative of economic and social life. The invisible hand of the market takes the weak and unfit players 'out of the game'. After 11 years on the substitutes' bench, 'socialism' is represented as a loser.

The explicit linking, by advertisers and politicians, of the twin notions of *economic* and *physical* competitiveness is not simply a clever play of words. It is the job of such people to identify and respond to popular moods and aspirations, and what they have latched on to is something which has actually happened in our everyday lives.

Amid all the changes to our society and economy associated with Thatcherism there has been an enormous growth in the time, energy and enthusiasm that ordinary people devote to physical fitness and health. Some of the traditional sports have been revitalised, but the exciting innovation is the multitude of new games and activities now available.

Always quick to capitalise, the people who make it their business to sell us the values and culture of what Raymond Williams called 'mobile privatisation' have stepped in with their version of what fitness is all about. According to them, the new physical culture is simply about beating the competition. By transposing the values of 'popular capitalism' on to the new popular culture of sport and fitness, they have created a powerful message, because everybody wants to be a winner. The message is all the more potent because it seems to be in tune with what people out there in the real world are actually doing - playing squash, going swimming, filling dance and aerobics classes, working out.

It becomes extremely difficult to sort out the elements of this coincidence between sport and society. The consumer boom of Thatcherism appears closely linked to the new physical culture: sports centres, a highly desirable investment for property developers, have mushroomed, while chains of shops like Olympus have cashed in heavily on the new demand for high-quality, attractive sportswear.

This retailing revolution has trans-

formed our city centres and our experience of being consumers. Recent years have seen a busy exchange between street fashion and sportswear - from the shiny tracksuits and Reebok training shoes of the hip-hop uniform, and the contour-hugging lycra of cycling chic, to the jogging pants and designer ski-wear of the home counties. Sportswear has been a very dynamic market, developing new materials and technologies and creating new consumers. In these respects it has been very much centre-stage in the advent of 'popular capitalism'.

It would be a mistake, however, to place too much emphasis on the retailing revolution alone, for it downplays the extent to which the new interest in physical culture is 'consumer-led', determined by people as agents not passive victims of marketing campaigns. It also leads to a false picture of the new physical culture and why it is different.

The new popular sports and their corresponding physical culture have not simply been launched at us by advertisers and retailers; there is an internal development, a history of sport and its institutions, which needs to be examined. Part of the explanation for our current obsession with working out and looking good must lie in the *relative* historical decline of the previously dominant sports. These sports belonged to the Fordist era of mass participation and collective association. Huge spectatorships - predominantly male and working-class in composition - were organised around team games, chiefly football. There were important regional differences, of course: cricket was a much more middle and upper-class game in southern England; rugby union was played mainly in grammar schools and public schools in England, but in Wales was a genuinely popular game, like rugby league is in northern England.

But the real point is that these 'mass' sports were the only games, to all intents and purposes, which were available to most people, in their schools and localities and on their radios and televisions. School was the most important locus of sport and physical exercise for the vast majority of the population, and for many - particularly women - sport finished when they left school. Most people's experience of sport, therefore, was compulsory and regimented.

In common with many other features of Fordist mass society, sport in schools was structured and disciplined like the factory, hierarchical and authoritarian. Team sports reproduced these patterns with internal hierarchies of rank - their captains, vice-captains, club secretaries and so on. They were also based on highly gendered divisions of activity: boys played football and cricket; girls played netball and hockey. The whole emphasis was on quantity not quality, on giving everybody a quota of exercise, with the minimum of choice and differentiation.

Dissatisfaction with this experience of



Cycling chic: New body-conscious street fashion

sport became a powerful stimulus for change: the demand for new activities and more choice ran parallel to the break-up of the old forms of consensus and collectivity in society at large. But there is another important strand in the decline, or rather displacement, of the old mass sports: they used to play an important symbolic role in our sense of national identity and prestige. The success of England in international competition was, and still is for some, a matter of great pride and significance.

The period in which these sports became mass pastimes and national games coincided with the last moments of imperial prowess. From an oppositional point of view, CLR James' passion for cricket was inspired by a sense of the sporting encounter as anti-colonial struggle. While in his later years he was able to enjoy the many routs endured by England at the hands of the West Indies, the symbolic place of cricket (and even more so football) in the scheme of popular English nationalism came under growing pressure.

Now confronted by ignominious defeat and failure in international competition, the hysteria of the chant 'Two World Wars and One World Cup' betrays this growing sense of being besieged. The fact that even the last 'win' in this case was over 20 years ago implies an unconscious recognition of the loss of England's leading role in international competition. In the case of football, many spectators and followers have been alienated by the way the game has become identified with a retrogressive and violent nationalism - a kind of 'Falklands factor' on the terraces.

The displacement of the old 'mass' sports cannot simply be attributed to the fact that England now loses more matches than it wins. More significantly, England has lost the power to determine *which* sports carry most kudos on the international stage. In the new global arena, cricket, for instance, is no longer the 'big match' but a private argument between a few members of the Commonwealth. Many of the old games which once represented the bulk of our sporting horizon have become parochial affairs which themselves have to compete with the attractions of other sports from other nations.

With a passing resemblance to the phenomenon of world music, we have entered the age of world sport. New sports arrive almost daily on our television screens (from volleyball and snooker to American football and Sumo wrestling) in a headlong rush to meet the new demand for variety. The expertise and style with which these are presented has revolutionised sports coverage. In every field, from graphics to the quality of commentary and the conduct of interviews, the old mainstream has had to improve its presentation immeasurably just to keep up. The newer, more dynamic sports have been at the leading edge of this development, and this in itself has helped to change the

image of sport, to make it 'sexy'.

The improved opportunities for participation afforded by the new sports have matched a popular will and motivation towards health and fitness. The gains are particularly significant for women: the desire for control over the body and the demand for physical self-definition have been consistent themes of feminist thinking, but these ideas have received a huge practical boost in popular appeal from the new physical culture. Aerobics has come a long way from physical jerks with the 'green goddess'. It is convenient because you can do it at home with Jane Fonda; or it's fun because you can do it at the sports centre with a group of other women. Women have also moved a long way from plain self-defence classes, with growing numbers taking up what were formally macho specialities - the martial arts. Documentaries have highlighted the history of women's sport, while a film like *Pumping Iron II - The Women* has empowered women to challenge the given gendered norms of size, shape, speed and strength for the female body.

The growing demand for choice and pluralism means that there are no new 'mass' collectivities to replace the old. The old football crowd does not suddenly turn up at the swimming pool or in the dance class. Many can still be found in the stands on a Saturday afternoon; but a lot of people also visit the sports centre on a Wednesday evening. If there is a new 'mass' experience, it is one of choice, differentiation and pluralism. Although they may not individually command the same numbers and loyalties of the old sports, the explosion of these new activities creates the opportunity for more active participation and greater self-expression. The mass spectacle of Fordism has been partially displaced by a 'flexible specialisation' in people's experience of sport.

This underlines perhaps the single most important feature of the new physical culture - its individualism. Where *team* sports have arrived or survived, they tend to be a spectator-oriented televisual experience (like ice hockey, basketball, or American football). The real area of growth - the point at which the new ethical imperative of fitness and competition enters our lives - has been the kinds of activity which are essentially self-centred and individualistic. Weight-training and swimming are the best examples, but running, cycling and even squash have elements of these new values. The individualism implicit in these new activities is in marked contrast to the 'teamwork' and collective organisation of the old 'mass' sports. It contains an element of narcissism, but it is also a positive, self-starting individualism concerned with physical fitness as health and well-being.

The narcissism of the new physical culture is highly visible in the contemporary cult of the body. The desirability

of the 'body beautiful' has assailed us from every direction: the erotic art photography of Bruce Weber's pictures of Olympic swimmers once represented a radical aesthetic departure, but these images are now endlessly reproduced in glossy magazines, on billboards and in tv adverts.

As a result of the huge demand, the weight-training room has now become a mandatory feature of all the old municipal sports centres as well as the numerous private gymnasium clubs which have sprouted up everywhere. The floor-to-ceiling mirror, the *sine qua non* of the weights room (and indeed the dance studio), underlines the fact that there is no stigma attached to looking at yourself while you work out. In fact, self-regard is an essential feature of the new physical culture, because 'looking good is feeling good'.

Nobody (except possibly Nigel Lawson) has wanted to look like the bloated plutocrat of Georg Grosz's 1920s' cartoons, even in our age of grotesque, market-dominated greed. In fact Arnold Schwarzenegger in an Armani suit or Florence Griffith-Joyner (Flo Jo) in her designer running gear provide more accurate role models. Perhaps because of its link to a meritocratic individualism, the quest for the body beautiful still fills some with a hostility to the 'body fascism' of all this physical exercise. They claim to see the spectre of a noxious eugenicism lurking in this cult of the body - an unholy blend of the Nazi slogans, 'work makes free' and 'joy through health'. But the mass solutions of fascism bear no relation to the high individualism of the cult of the body in the post-Thatcherite 90s.

Far from being the cultivation of a master race, the current cult of the body is the apotheosis of the individualism and consumerism implied by the phrase 'mobile privatisation': nowadays people spend time and money not simply on clothes but on their actual physical appearance. They invest in 'redeveloping' their physique. As *Guardian* sports writer Matthew Engel has sardonically pointed out, in the 60s and 70s young people used to take drugs for recreation and fun, but now they take them to enhance their bodies' performance (and therefore, in some cases, to increase their earning potential). It is a safe bet that there are more steroid-takers than cocaine users in the USA. For many, the time, money and intensity that now go into physical fitness and exercise is quite out of proportion to any health benefit that accrues. The downside of this physical culture is a new kind of fetishism of fitness, a reification of the body.

But this aspect of the new physical culture's individualism should not obscure its genuinely progressive features. People are motivated to get fit by a renewed sense of personal responsibility. They are informed by a growing awareness of the health risks of a

sedentary lifestyle, and a desire to exercise control over their own health in a preventive way. This could also be interpreted as an unwillingness to be forced by poor health into a debilitating state of dependency on the health care provided by the welfare state, adding a whole new meaning to the notion of privatising health care. Instead of privatisation meaning an attack on collective values, it has the potential to mean a radically new sense of *social* responsibility - uncharacteristically rooted in individualism.

Many of those who are now improving their sense of well-being and health through fitness are people for whom sport was simply not available before. The sense in which the new sports of 'mobile privatisation' make space for new physical actors, new communities of people who take pleasure in working out, indicates that there is a profoundly progressive side to these developments. Despite the explicit individualism contained in the DIY fitness ethic, these new sporting activities exhibit a strongly *social* inclination. It has proved possible to mobilise these individuals as really large collectivities (in their tens of thousands) for good causes, in the form of fun runs, swimathons and sponsored rides.

Simply because its growth has coincided with a period of economic individualism and intensely meritocratic mobility, some seem tempted to write off the new physical culture as an unwelcome creation of the now-tarnished ideology of popular capitalism. But those who are keen to keep politics out of sport will be delighted to discover how difficult it is to make sport, whose institutions and subcultures are so firmly rooted in civil society, serve such a nakedly political end as promoting Thatcherism. We shouldn't believe the hype: an unstable collection of words and ideas about 'competitiveness' and fitness was opportunistically cemented into a crude message about *economic* values by people with an interest in marketing a particular lifestyle option or in selling a particular set of political affiliations.

The new physical culture of fitness needs to be detached from this arbitrary co-option into the narrative of 'popular capitalism'. Its degree of pluralism and 'flexible specialisation' should in fact be in tune with a 90s' individualism which is concerned with a new vision of personal and social responsibility. Placing a firm emphasis on the value of control, self-determination and autonomy, the physical culture of the 90s will no longer be about 'being tough enough to beat the rest', but about the fulfilment of a diversity of private needs and pleasures in a socially organised and enabling environment. Far from being irreversibly shackled to the one-dimensional perspective of neo-liberal values, the new physical culture is about health, fun, pleasure and wider participation - a new horizon of choice and opportunity. •

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