

# Medicine in History and Society

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Although I identify myself primarily as a cultural and gender historian, I have been struck by how helpful it is to see the emergence of the body culture around physical fitness in relation to developments within the world of medicine. I am currently writing a book manuscript on 'Re-making the male body: masculinity and the uses of physical culture in inter-war France', in which I explore male physical culture – a general term which encompasses all forms of sport, gymnastics, body building and other kinds of physical exercise – both as a set of practices and as a field of ideas.

Physicians were heavily represented among the Third Republican political elite that took considerable interest in the physical training of males in both schools and the army. A significant number of the physical culturist intelligentsia were also physicians, selling themselves in a 'medical marketplace' through get-fit guides, the merchandising of exercise equipment and private gymnasias, and they appealed to a public increasingly interested in 'natural' remedies for health complaints. Furthermore, like their colleagues in the medical mainstream, the inter-war physical culturists turned away from 'empirical' medicine and materialist science in an effort to treat the 'whole man'. They also effectively popularised the kind of eugenicist thought and fears of biological degeneration that were prevalent in the French Faculties of Medicine. The project traces the shared patterns of thinking expressed across a seemingly disparate set of voices – state and municipal authorities; physical culturists, the sports intelligentsia and sports practitioners; and radical political actors – in which the physical training of men offered a salve to France's real and imagined woes. At stake for these commentators was not only the improved health of the individual but the greater vitality of the nation, whether by a strengthening of the armed forces, the productive work force or – for a great many – the 'breeding stock of the race'. My reading in the literature on the socio-cultural history of medicine in other places – Germany, Australia, the UK and USA in particular – suggests that such developments were genuinely trans-national.

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