

Marx, Lenin and Physical Culture by: James Riordan University of Bradford, England

Much is made in communist literature on physical culture of the debt owed to Marx, Engels and Lenin. Since all three wrote virtually nothing directly on the subject, this may sound a strange debt; it is, however, the implications of their teaching that are generally referred to. This article attempts to examine sport in the light of Marxist-Leninist writing and Soviet interpretations of it.

(a) *Marxist philosophy*

At the time Marx was writing, metaphysics was in the grip of a dualism that separated mind from matter and, under the influence of Christian theology, often exaggerated a distinction into an antagonism; in such a world-view, body and soul were seen as warring parties with the body cast as the villain of the piece. Marx rejected the dualist philosophy and stressed that not only was there an intimate relationship between matter and mind, but that the former largely determined the latter. In his view, political and social institutions and the ideas, images and ideologies through which people understand the world in which they live, their place within it and themselves — all these ultimately derived from the 'economic base' of society — the class relations into which men had to enter with one another in order to produce: "In the social production which people carry on they enter into definite relations that are indispensable and independent of their wills: these relations of production correspond to a definite stage of development of their material powers of production. The sum total of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society — the real foundation, on which rise legal and political superstructures and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness. The mode of production in material life determines the general character of the social, political and spiritual processes of life. It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but, on the contrary, their social existence that determines their consciousness."¹

This fundamental Marxist tenet contains certain implications for recreation :

¹Marx, K., *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, Chicago, 1904, pp. 11-12.

(i) Since the human psychosomatic organism develops and changes under the influence of external conditions including the social environment, subjection to physical exercise not only develops that part of the body to which it is directed, but also has an effect on the body as a whole — on the personality. A strong bond exists between social and individual development and between the physical and mental development of the individual. Societies are likely to seek to shape this development.

(ii) In liberal capitalist society, whose prevailing ideology is that of ‘independent’ decision-making and ‘free’ contracting between ‘equal’ social atoms, sport has normally been regarded as the concern only of the individual, a feature of life unconnected with classes and social values, with economics and society’s mode of production; little attention has been paid to it as a social phenomenon. To the Marxist, however, sport is part of the social superstructure and therefore strongly influenced by the prevailing relations of production — not something ‘in itself’ and so divorced from politics; a society’s pattern of sport will ultimately depend on the specifics of that society’s socio-economic foundation, its class relationships. Moreover, says Marx, “with a change in the economic foundation, the entire immense superstructure is more or less rapidly transformed”²: the nature of sport can therefore be expected by the Marxist to alter with any change to a new socioeconomic formation.

(iii) The acceptance of a dualist metaphysic, a sharp separation of body and mind, had often led to a concern with things of the mind at the expense of bodily activities. Marx emphasized that practical activities have a decisive impact on all human development in the broadest sense. None more so than work, through which people could change themselves as well as Nature: “Labour is, in the first place, a process in which both man and Nature participate, and in which man of his own accord starts, regulates, and controls the material reactions between himself and Nature. He opposes himself to Nature as one of her own forces, setting in motion arms and legs, head and hands, the natural forces of his body, in order to appropriate Nature’s productions in a form adapted to his own wants. By thus acting on the external world and changing it, he at the same time changes his. own nature.”³

² *Ibid.*, p. 13.

³ Marx, K., *Capital*, F.L.P.H., Moscow, 1961, vol. I, p. 177.

This proposition implies a strong link between work and such other bodily activities as physical exercise and games-playing. It has led some Marxist historians to seek the *origin* of games and sports in practices in primitive society leading to the improvement of physical dexterity and utilitarian skills vital to working and hunting. In this, they refer to Engels, who wrote “The use of various forms of weapons in work and military activity among primitive peoples developed their mental and physical abilities.”⁴

(b) *Recreation and education*

From his studies of early bourgeois society, Marx came to the conclusion that production was actually inhibited by, *inter alia*, the denial to the workers of time for recreation which would help restore their energy for production and make it more efficient. Marx was concerned with civil society’s need for workers to obtain more free time — not only for pure leisure but also for recuperating their strength and applying themselves more vigorously to productive work after reasonable rest and recreation. What he saw as the sheer wasteful inefficiency of the capitalist production of his day in neglecting the recreative functions of play agitated him: “The capitalist mode of production (because it absorbs surplus labour) produces . . . not only the deterioration of human labour-power by robbing it of its normal, moral and physical, conditions of development and function. It produces also the premature exhaustion and death of this labour-power itself.”⁵ In another place, he writes that “from the point of view of the direct process of production, this saving (of working time — JR) may be considered as the production of *basic capital*; man himself is that basic capital.”⁶ Physically-fit and mentally-alert workers are better able to cope with new industrial skills and increasingly complex technology and to have higher productivity by showing less absenteeism and greater activity on the job.

Modern industry, however, objectively requires more than physically-fit workers ; it needs versatile, fully-developed individuals, healthy in body and in mind. In the education system of the future, therefore, citizens were to be given, Marx advised, the opportunity for balanced all-round education, in which physical education was to be an integral part; the system would

⁴Engels, P., *The Origin of the Family, Personal Property and the State*, F.L.P.H., Moscow, 1958, p. 28.

⁵Marx, K., *Capitol*, p. 265.

⁶*Ibid.*, p. 332.

consist of three elements combining training of the mind with training of the body:

“First, mental education.

Second, bodily education, such as is given in schools of gymnastics, and by military exercises.

Third, technical training, which acquaints the pupil with the basic principles of all processes of production and, simultaneously, gives him the habit of handling elementary instruments of all trades.”⁷

In the English Factory Acts, Marx had seen the germs of the prototypes of such a system in which mental and physical education would be combined with manual labour to improve social production and to produce all-round individuals: From the Factory system budded, as Robert Owen has shown in detail, the germ of the education of the future, an education that will, in the case of every child over a given age, combine productive labour with instruction and gymnastics, not only as one of the methods of adding to the efficiency of production, but as the only method of producing fully-developed human beings.”⁸

Whether games-playing contained its own justification within itself or whether its value was to be sought in ulterior ends was not a question specifically raised by Marx. The Marxist vision of the future, however, does seem to imply that work and physical recreation will merge, or that work will be elevated to the plane of recreation by the removal of the yokes of specialisation and compulsion. But Marx evidently did not envisage recreation under communism as simply games — rather as a fusion of work-like activities with play. In this, he affirmed a principal criterion of playful activities, namely, that they are freely chosen and are pursued for their inherent pleasure rather than for practical results.

To sum up, Marx provided few clear-cut guidelines on physical culture. On the one hand, he stressed the interdependence of work and physical recreation and, on the other, he saw the playful use of energy as contributing to the enrichment of the personality, or self-realisation. But, as C. Wright Mills once

⁷Marx, K., “Instructions for the Delegates of the Provisional General Council. The Different Questions,” in K. Marx and F. Engels, *Selected Works*, Progress Publishers, Moscow, 1969, Vol. II, p. 81.

⁸Marx, K., *Capital*, pp. 483-4.

⁹This view was later held by Trotsky who maintained that “The longing for amusement, distraction, sight-seeing and laughter is the most legitimate desire of human nature. We are able, and indeed obliged, to give the satisfaction of this desire a higher artistic quality, at the same time making amusement a weapon of collective education, *freed from the guardianship of the pedagogue and the tiresome habit of moralising*” (my italics — JR) (See Trotsky, L., *Problems of Everyday Life*, Monad Press, New York, 1973, p. 32).

pointed out, “There is no one Marx. The various presentations of his work which we can construct from his books, pamphlets, articles, letters, written at different times in his own development, depend upon our point of interest, and we may not take any one of them to be The Real Marx.”¹⁰ The same might be said of Lenin. That is not to say, of course, that there is no consistency in the writings of Marx or Lenin, no *Marxism* or *Leninism*.

(c) *Leninism*

If Marx made scant direct reference to sport, Lenin was scarcely more prolific on the subject — despite the sixty volumes of his writings in the latest Soviet edition. Unlike Marx, who personally abhorred any physical exercises”, Lenin was, moreover, an active practitioner of physical fitness and sport in his own life. As one observer has put it “Of all the prominent Russian revolutionaries, he was the keenest sportsman. From boyhood he had been fond of shooting and skating. Always a great walker, he became a keen mountaineer, a lively cyclist, and an impatient fisherman.”¹² Particularly during his periods of imprisonment and exile, he valued fitness as a stimulant to mental alertness. While in a St. Petersburg prison, he wrote that he did “gymnastics with great pleasure and value every day” (Lenin’s emphasis).¹³ In a letter from Munich to his sister, then in prison in Russia, he urged her “to do gymnastics and have a good rub-down every day. It is absolutely essential when you are alone . . . force yourself to do several dozen exercises (without stopping). That is very important.”¹⁴ Of his personal preferences, his wife recalled that he enjoyed ice-skating, shooting, hiking, the Russian folk game of *gorodki* and cycling — even to the extent of ordering bicycles for his wife and himself from Berlin through the Russian Sports Society *Nadezhda* (Hope) in 1910.¹⁵ His favourite pastime — like that of several other émigré Russian intellectuals — was chess, which he played regularly (many games by correspondence with Lunacharsky (later to become the first Commissar of Enlightenment — as the education ministry was named) and the writer

¹⁰Wright Mills, C., *The Marxists*, Pelican, London, 1962, p. 42.

¹¹Kapp, Y., Eleanor Marx, Lawrence and Wishart, London, 1972, Vol. I, p. 193; the only game Marx seemed to enjoy was chess (p. 26); Engels, on the other hand, was “an enthusiastic rider to hounds a mighty walker and a deep drinker” (*Ibid.*, p. 108).

¹²Lockhart, R. B., *Giants Cast Long Shadows*, Putnam, London, 1960, p. 134.

¹³Lenin, V. I., *Polnoye sobranie sachenii*, Vol. LV, Moscow, 1968, p. 72.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, p. 73.

¹⁵Ranch-Bruylwch, V., *Nash Ilyich: vospominaniya*, Detgiz, Moscow, 1956, p. 22.

Maxim Gorky). On his return to Russia in 1917 after an exile of twelve years, however, his wife reports that “Vladimir Ilyich had to give up chess, his favourite game, because it involved too much of his time.”¹⁶ He did, nonetheless, become honorary president of the Moscow Chess Society in November, 1922.

Lenin’s sporting activity may seem to have little relevance to an understanding of sport in the Soviet Union. One must bear in mind, however, the Soviet establishment’s cult of Lenin and penchant for looking to Lenin’s personal example when seeking to justify current policies. Official advocacy of daily exercises and such pursuits as chess can thus call on Lenin’s own preferences. The desire to promote certain forms of recreation has certainly resulted in the highlighting of individual aspects of Lenin’s habits and mode of life.

What are clearly more important are his writings on the subject of sport and physical education. Like Marx, Lenin’s educational philosophy favoured a combination of the training of the mind and body: “It is impossible to visualise the ideal of a future society without a combination of instruction and productive labour, nor can productive labour without parallel instruction and physical education be put on a plane required by the modern level of technology and the state of scientific knowledge.”¹⁷ In his article “Karl Marx”, he refers to Marx’s appraisal of Robert Owen’s school in Lanarkshire — which combined mental and physical education with manual work — as the germ of the education of the future.¹⁸ This model even found some reflection in the decree “On Compulsory Instruction in the Military Art,” passed in the crisis months of 1918, which brought into being the military-sports organisation Vseobuch (which took charge of all sports organisation between 1917 and 1921). Its chairman, Nikolai Podvoisky, later described the decree as “combining gymnastics and all forms of physical development and training with general and military training in our country. By this decree, physical culture was introduced into the working people’s common education system, their training for defending their country and for highly-productive and varied work.”¹⁹ He went on to stress Lenin’s contribution to the decree: “Vladimir Ilyich often stressed, and the decree

¹⁶Krupskaya, N. K., *Vospominaniya o V.I. Lenine*, Vol. I, Politizdat, Moscow, 1968, p. 242.

¹⁷Lenin, V. I., *Polnoye sobranie sochinenii*, Vol. II, p. 485.

¹⁸Lenin, V. I., *Izbrannyye proizvedeniya v 3-kh tomakh*, Vol. I, p. 53.

¹⁹Podvoisky, N. I., “Lenin i fizicheskoye vospitanie,” in *Krasny sport*, 1948, No. 4 (831) (21st January). pp. 3-4.

established, the correct view of the physical education of the masses as a means of obtaining the harmonious all-round development of the individual.”²⁰

Lenin, therefore, derived from and shared with Marx the notion of potential fully-developed individuals, of men and women who could not attain the full measure of their latent abilities under capitalism. “It is necessary to develop people’s capabilities, to uncover their talents which are an untapped source in the people and which capitalism has repressed, crushed, stifled in their thousands and millions.”²¹ Under socialism and complete communism, however, everyone would have a chance to choose the physical activity they wanted to pursue and to attain complete self-realisation. It would “not merely satisfy the needs of its members, but ensure *complete* welfare and free *all-round* development of *all* members of society.”²²

Influenced by his own experience of physical and mental training during periods of privation and confronted by the practical problems of power, Lenin added an emphasis on character-training that was absent in Marx. He recognised the effects that sport might have, for instance, upon the development of qualities of character valuable to individuals and society, upon the social behaviour of citizens and upon the promotion of health. In his comments on the advocates of ‘free love’ and on Leftism in the cultural revolution, Lenin took a position on the moral effects of sport which was not far removed from that of English ‘muscular Christians’ like Dr. Arnold of Rugby and the novelists, Thomas Hughes and Charles Kingsley: “Young people especially need to have a zest for living and be in good spirits. Healthy sport — gymnastics, swimming, hiking, all manner of physical exercise — should be combined as much as possible with a variety of intellectual interests, study, analysis and investigation . . . That will give young people more than extraneous theories and discussions about sex . . . Healthy bodies, healthy minds!”²³ Sport would also safeguard clean-limbed youngsters from such vices as drunkenness and smoking — as the decree “On Curbing Tobacco-Smoking” was intended to do in 1919. When asked how young people should spend their spare time, Lenin once replied: “Young men and women of the Soviet land should live life beautifully and to the full

²⁰ *Idem.*

²¹ Lenin, V. I., *Polnoye sobranie sochinenii*, Vol. II, pp. 85-86.

²² *Ibid.*, Vol. IV, p. 232.

²³ Zetkin, C., *Vospominaniya o Vladimire il'yiche Lenine*, Part II. Gospolitizdat, Moscow, 1955, p. 84.

both in public and private. Wrestling, work, study, sport, making merry, singing, dreaming — these are things young people should make the most of.²⁴ Games-playing, then, was, in Lenin's view, conducive to moral as well as physical health; it was a valuable ingredient in character-training. One can imagine Lenin's ideal young people (not unlike the heroes of Kingsley's *Westward Ho* and Hughes's *Tom Brown's Schooldays*) drawn in glowing colours, adorned with every sort of athletic accomplishment and displaying the excellence of simple understanding and the urge to serve the proletarian cause. The resolution passed by the Third All-Russia Congress of the Russian Young Communist League (October, 1920) — at which Lenin spoke — surely reflected his views on the functions of physical education : "The physical education of the younger generation is an essential element in the overall system of the communist upbringing of young people, aimed at creating harmoniously-developed people, creative citizens of communist society. Today, physical education also has direct practical aims : 1) preparing young people for work; and 2) preparing them for military defence of Soviet power."²⁵ This, the first clear-cut official statement on the aims of Soviet sport, makes no bones about the rational use of physical education for purposes of work and defence. It does, however, hint that, once the society is on its feet and socialism moving towards communism, utilitarian-instrumental aims will give way to that of self-realisation. Nonetheless, here (some years before Soviet industrialisation commenced) was a commitment to use sport for labour and military purposes.

On another occasion, Lenin indicated the powerful social force that sport might be in contributing to women's emancipation. "It is our urgent task to draw working women into sport . . . If we can achieve that and get them to make full use of the sun, water and fresh air for fortifying themselves, we shall ring an entire revolution in the Russian way of life."²⁶ Furthermore, Podvoisky writes that Lenin stressed to him the "huge significance of the task of *Vsevoibuch*: correctly to train physical educationalists and so to attain through them a cultured, comradesly mutual relationship between young men and women."²⁷ Lenin evidently saw in sport a convenient vehicle for drawing

²⁴Quoted in Bezymenshy, A., *Vstrecha Komsomol'tsev s V. I. Leninyim*, Moscow, 1956, p. 18.

²⁵Chudinov, I. D., (ed.), *Osnovnye postanovleniya i instruktsii po voprosam fizicheskoi kul'tury i sporta*, 1917-1957, Moscow, 1959, pp. 43-44

²⁶Quoted in Podvoisky, N. I., *Rabotnisa i fizicheskaya kul'tura*, Moscow, 1938, p. 3.

²⁷Podvoiski, N. I., "Lenin i fizicheskoye vospionie," *op. cit.*, p. 3.

women into public activity and an area where they could relatively quickly achieve a measure of equality with men — and be seen to do so.

Marx, as we have seen, spoke of military training as an element in physical education — indeed, in education in general — in his “Instructions to the Delegates of the Provisional General Council.” Lenin, likewise, pointed to military training as a way to keep youth fit. In a comment on Engel’s “Can Europe Disarm?” he spoke of the “need for the military training of young people and of gymnastics . . .”²⁸ Podvoisky writes that, in his discussions with Lenin on the nature of Soviet sport and physical education, Lenin had “stressed the importance of cavalry-training, skiing, cycling and water sports . . . and (at the height of the Civil War — JR) the need to use pre-military training for labour as well as the aims of war.”²⁹

Lenin, therefore, implied that there was more to sport than mere physical enjoyment; it could, and indeed should, contribute to forming the all-round individual of communist society, to character-formation, especially among young people, to women’s emancipation and to some — not very explicit — labour and military goals. The stress that Soviet leaders later put on the interdependence on sport and work, rather than on the enrichment of the personality, may well not have been where Lenin would have put it himself had he not had a war on his hands. It is evidently necessary to distinguish the immediately pre-revolutionary Lenin, say, of *State and Revolution* (the work in which he most emphasizes free personal development³⁰), from the Lenin in power worried about defence and productivity. Similarly, one must distinguish the rather vague forecasts about the future ideal society made by Marx and Engels, Lenin and Trotsky in regard to the second stage of communist society or ‘full communism’ from their more practical remarks about its first or socialist stage. In the later ‘interpretations’ of Lenin, made during the rapid industrialization period, the emphasis shifts to what Podvoisky, writing in 1940 on Lenin’s views on physical education, calls “a scientific approach to military and labour methods” by means of sport and physical education,

²⁸Lenin, V. I., *Polnoya sobranie sochinenii*, Vol. XXVIII, p. 478.

²⁹Podvoiski, *Rabotnitsa i fizicheskaya kul'tura*, Moscow, 1938, p. 114.

³⁰Free personal development will take place, wrote Lenin, as the pressure of work and state coercive functions decrease “Socialism will shorten the working day, raise the people to a new life, create such conditions for the majority of the population as will enable everybody, without exception, to perform state functions, and this will lead to the complete withering away of every form of state in general” (See Lenin, V. I., *Selected Works*, Vol. II, Moscow, 1943, p. 397).

“making them accessible to the working people so as to attain higher labour productivity.”³¹

(d) *Summing up*

To sum up, a Marxist-Leninist interpretation of culture, mental and physical, including a belief in the interdependence of the mental and physical states of human beings, provides the general framework within which physical and mental recreation is viewed in the USSR, as in all communist states. It should, however, be noted that aphorisms drawn from and myths about Lenin (or Mao, etc.) in regard to physical culture have been taken to justify policies at particular stages of development and need not necessarily be taken as creative Marxist thinking (indeed, they have sometimes replaced it). As Marx and Lenin would readily have admitted, it is the socioeconomic processes that largely fashion patterns of sport, not the prescriptions of philosophers who, to paraphrase Marx, only interpret the world.

³¹Podvoisky, *op. cit.*, p. 121.