

INTERPRETATION OF HISTORY

Subterranean Tradition: Ancient Greek Metaphors in Contemporary Physical Culture

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Many works exist which observe and criticize particular academic fields of study or professions in terms of the specific values, traditions and icons that the fields cultivate within their memberships as valuable. Furthermore, various sociologies and histories of science have documented how and why what we study and construct to study is tied to what we hold at varying time periods to be legitimate, politically safe or correct. In addition, much has been written since the Renaissance regarding the West's romanticization of the ancient Greeks. Within the sport—physical education—physical culture area of study, scholars such as David Young have documented how notions tied to ancient athletics, such as amateurism, were modern, biased creations. However, in terms of these themes, we have never analyzed how the ancient Greek ideal has permeated modern athletic festivals and the field of physical education through such things as our collections, our travels, our furnishings and our rituals. From a critical historical—anthropological—literary perspective, I notice how the broad areas of physical education and athletic festivals (which I collectively—along with sport, games, contests and the artistic and social representations of these—have labelled “physical culture”), have possessed, collected, idealized, made pilgrimages to, and have reappropriated cultural signs and icons that we may roughly consider to be linked to ancient Greece.

What is the dynamic social relationship between the ancient Greek past and the purpose that present-day physical culture invests in that past? The ritual kindling and relaying of the Olympic flame in the modern Olympic Games is one example of a multitude of modern political/cultural practices wedded to “ancient” physical culture that can be examined from this perspective. Throughout the world, why do higher education physical education departments often feel obligated to set a copy of Myron's discobolus statue at the entrance to their gymnasiums? What do the pilgrimages from both the East and West to the site of the ancient Olympic Games by those allied to sport-related professions represent? What does the proliferation of ancient Greek images of physical culture on such consumer

items distributed at athletic festival sites as T-shirts mean? A modern global-cultural bond to the ancient Greeks, as well as a kind of political hegemony seem to be reflected in these cultural practices.