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Creating White-Collar Identity: Middle-Class Norms as Cornerstones in Denmark in the School, the Gymnastic Movement, and the Sport System, 1900-1940

Around the turn of the twentieth century, there were three major centers of organized physical activity in Denmark: the school system, the rifle-club movement, and the sport movement. In the schools and rifle clubs, Swedish gymnastics geared towards the promotion of health, hygiene and physical development was the dominant organized physical activity. Until about 1890 sport was primarily a playground for the middle class, but the working classes quickly became numerically dominant, making it the most popular organized physical activity of the pre-World War I period. Sport was an overwhelmingly male activity, associated with the cities and industrialism and led by the middle classes.

In Nordic countries generally and Denmark especially, English sport and Swedish gymnastics have been seen as two different, even incompatible worlds. The gymnastic movement has been associated with democracy, nationalism, tradition, religion and acquiring a sense of history. Sport has also been seen as a means of inculcating democratic values and nationalism, but implicitly rather than explicitly. I believe that the two activities, different in form and content as they are, actually have very much the same social significance for both helped to instill the values of modern society and the middle classes in their participants.

The question addressed here is: How did the cultural and societal backgrounds of the middle class influence the development of the modern state by introducing Swedish gymnastics and sport in Denmark between 1900 and 1940?

It is striking how many of the same kinds of people were responsible for introducing and organizing sport, Swedish gymnastics and physical education. Middle-class men organized activities in the rifle-club movement as well as the sport movement. They dominated as organizers and were the driving force in the social and cultural upheavals of which the so-called “modern breakthrough” was a part. As the socially, politically and culturally victorious class, it was chiefly their attitudes that were prevalent and deemed worth acquiring.

In middle-class culture, a lack of discipline and self-control signified things that were not in their proper place. The great interest expressed in these subjects was directly connected with a preoccupation with laws, statutes, and their implementation. Breaking rules signified a threat to the “natural” order. There was no conscious plan for attempting to win over children and youth to a moral middle-class life and many of the reformers themselves were blissfully unaware that their reforming zeal had a hidden social message. But in organizing gymnastics and sport, and in formulating the rules and regulations governing them, the middle class reconstructed values from the best of all worlds: their own.

This study is based on primary source material. This has been analyzed using both traditional historical source criticism and hermeneutics based cultural studies methods. I have used the ideas of Norbert Elias to understand the changing social processes that were important in forming the personality structure of the Danish middle class at the end of the nineteenth century. As ethnologist Mary Douglas points out, the higher one’s social position, the more one is under the control of society and in control of oneself. In the period 1900 to 1940, the middle class used the gymnastic movement, the sport movement and school physical education as instruments for transferring these values of control, order, and moderation to the children and youth of the new modern state. It may therefore be concluded that the form and content of different physical activities are of less importance in the ‘civilizing’ process than the underlying, unconscious values that are formulated in their rules and regulations.