

The development of European gymnastics in the 19th century: models, networks and connections

Lo sviluppo della ginnastica europea nell'Ottocento: modelli, reti e connessioni

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ABSTRACT

The paper aims to increase the knowledge of the international events that fostered the development of gymnastics in European states in the 19th century, particularly in Italy. The research analyzes sources relating to gymnastics congresses, exhibitions, and coeval publications that facilitated comparative reflections on gymnastics. The methodology used intends to bring new elements to understand the construction of European gymnastic and sporting systems. According to Tomlinson and Young, the Latin hybrid area – which included Italy – had been influenced by the main continental systems. The author of this paper disproved the absence of the “apostles of gymnastics” in the Latin area, who proved, instead, capable of confronting the European gymnasiarchs, and spreading their teaching methods in their countries. Finally, the contribution explores the links between European gymnastics influenced by the principles of militarism and the formation of a colonial mentality during the scramble for Africa.

Il contributo intende approfondire la conoscenza degli eventi internazionali che nell'Ottocento favorirono lo sviluppo della ginnastica negli Stati europei, in particolare in Italia. La ricerca analizzerà le fonti relative ai congressi di ginnastica, alle esposizioni e alle pubblicazioni coeve che agevolarono riflessioni comparative sulla ginnastica. La metodologia adoperata intende apportare nuovi elementi alla costruzione dei sistemi ginnastici e sportivi europei già stabilita da Tomlinson e Young, i quali ritenevano l'area ibrida latina – nella quale era compresa l'Italia – influenzata dai principali sistemi continentali. Sarà smentita, in questo modo, l'assenza nell'area latina degli “apostoli della ginnastica”, che si rivelarono, invece, capaci di confrontarsi con i ginnasiarchi europei, diffondendo così i propri metodi d'insegnamento nei contesti nazionali di riferimento. Il contributo, infine, approfondirà i legami esistenti fra una ginnastica europea influenzata dai principi del militarismo e la formazione di una mentalità coloniale negli anni dello *scramble for Africa*.

Keywords: gymnastics | 19th century | militarism | exhibitions | congresses

Parole chiave: ginnastica | ottocento | militarismo | esposizioni | congressi

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The Italian disciples of gymnastics: a missed history

The perspective of a compared history of the European gymnastics and sports institutions, subject of a recent miscellaneous volume (Polenghi, Németh, Kasper, 2022), has developed starting from several contributions published during the Nineties. This happened thanks to the efforts of the European Committee for Sports History, that identified the common developments transversally achieved rather than considering the single countries (Krüger, Trangbæk, 1999).

However, it was necessary to wait until the second decade of the new millennium to identify four models of European historical sports development.

Tomlinson and Young theorized the existence of four clusters – an English, a German, a Scandinavian and a Soviet one – that were “‘ideal types’ in the Weberian sense, i.e. characterizations of significant patterns of cultural phenomena, which contribute to the ongoing process of theory-building” (2011, pp. 493-494). In addition, they hypothesized the existence of a hybrid “Latin” area, influenced by the main clusters, and encompassing France, Italy, Portugal, and Spain, whose most common features were the “politicizations of sports due to the interference of political parties and the Catholic Church; the importance of cycling culture; and the proximity of Fascist, pro-Franco, Vichy and pro-Salazar sports policies” (Tomlinson, Young, 2011, p. 495).

However, this research suffers from three limits: as a matter of fact, the clusters were referred mainly to the historical sports development emerged in the XX century, whereas the reference to the 19th century dealt only with the definition of the English and German models. Moreover, these clusters focused only on the sports aspect and, instead, the gymnastics one was not considered.

Finally, the last critical aspect had to do with the definition of a “Latin area”, whose historical and sports features would have originated from the four main clusters, with Germany (Ndee, 2010) and England (Mangan, Hickey, 1999) as the most relevant influence. Although it is possible to agree on the essential features of the Latin area, it suffers from the same limits previously illustrated, which excluded the 19th century and gymnastics activity from the historical analysis.

In 2011 another article reflected on the genesis and the development of sports models in Europe: Dyreson identified a line dividing the continent in the north, where some kind of apostles of gymnastics were committed to the diffusion of sports practices, and the south where there was a lack of these agents favourable to the physical activities, therefore destined to failure (Dyreson, 2011, p. 401).

Although researches conducted in the Latin area (Torrebadella-Flix, 2017; Lopez Fernandez, 2009; Leziart, 1993; Elia, 2018) have pointed out a series of peculiarities common to the development of gymnastics teaching, the scientific literature has not yet engaged completely on models, networks and connections that fostered the gymnastics in the countries belonging to this area, especially in Italy (Freeman, 2012).

Therefore, the present paper describes how gymnastics congresses, exhibitions – both at national and international level – and the reports written by the gymnastics teachers about gymnastics abroad created a bond between Italy and the other European ones.

1. International meetings: The influence of Germany on the Italian model

In the second half of the 19th century, the German gymnastics model considerably influenced the development of this discipline in Italy. This statement is not surprising considering the background of the first gymnasiarch engaged in the Kingdom of Sardinia, Rodolfo Obermann, who was the pupil of Rodolfo Spiess (Elia, 2020, pp. 8-9). However, it had also a relevant influence on the groups working in Bologna and Veneto (D’Ascenzo, 2010), where the studies of Emilio Baumann (Alfieri, 2013; Elia, 2015) were influenced by the “gymnastic theories of the German Jäger, based on the use of small equipment and more natural exercises than those taught by Obermann” (Magnanini, 2013, pp. 249-250). At the first Italian Gymnastic Congress, held in Venice in 1868, “ten [gymnasiarchs] attended, among whom were three distinguished Germans, including the renowned gymnastics teacher, A. Ravenstein from Frankfurt”¹.

1 Central State Archives (henceforth CSA), Ministry of Public Instruction (henceforth MPI), Personnel 1860-1880, bundle

In the conclusion of the volume *Osservazioni sulla ginnastica in Italia e Germania* (Observations on gymnastics in Italy and Germany) (Gallo, Reyer, 1872, p. 23) the authors reported the data of a comparative statistics between Italy and Germany, whose outcome showed an unequal gymnastics practice in the two countries. In Italy 30 gymnastics societies were active, attended by 600 gymnasts – out of them only 20 had a good level – against 1546 German association, that counted 60,000 gymnasts and out of them at least 6,000 had good competitive level.

So, the participation of an Italian delegation, selected by the Ministry of Education, in the International Congress of Gymnastics held from 24 to 30 of July 1880 in Frankfurt (Criard, 1880; Danneberg, 1881; Ohmann, 2008; Elia, 2019) raised high expectations. The most important Italian gymnasiarchs, including Baumann, Felice Valletti, Alessandro La Pegna and Giuseppe Pezzarossa, participated in this event.

Even if the delegates diverged about the superiority of the German model (Fenzi, 1880, p. 5), there were also very positive opinions about its capacity to contribute to the development of “the armed nation” (Conti, 2012, p. 7).

Eduardo Ariotti, president of the Gymnastics Society of Palermo, the following year wrote a letter addressed to the Ministry of Public Education, mentioning Italy’s participation in the German the International Congress ad an “opportunity to know what importance Germany attaches to gymnastic education in order to maintain its primacy as a military power”². In fact, this interpretation is confirmed by the recent interpretations of the Frankfurt Congress given by German historiography, which considers this event as a self-representation of the early German Empire and, at the same time, an effective demonstration of the nation community, formed not so long ago. Therefore, this event seems to be characterised by the coeval publications that adopted a military lexicon, such as fight, combat, victory and honour of their own homeland: by doing this the typical conflictual idea of armed fight shifted into the gymnastics societies (Breitkreuz, 2009, p. 4).

2. International Exhibitions: The success of an Italian Industry

Italian gymnastic model developed also through the participation of national firms in international exhibitions of the 19th century, an important contribution to enhance the value of educational industries (Escolano Benito, 2011/2012) and standardise the school consumption (Lawn, 2009). The high number of visitors who attended these events appeared also to be “a guarantee of success and legitimacy that was indispensable in relation to production costs” (Kesteloot, 2017, p. 58)

Moreover, it is fundamental to consider these events as shapers of the “social imaginary of industrial society” (Tomassini, 2015, p. 161), projected as they were in reflecting the utopian side of capitalism, based on “trust in scientific knowledge, drive of the technological progress and an unlimited economic growth” (Galli, 2014, p. 89), which the outbreak of the Great War tragically ended (Necchi, 2015, p. 377).

The data of The International Exhibition in Milan (1887) however, highlighted that Italian production of gym equipment was limited, as was the case for all the national school industry (Pomante, Brunelli, 2017, p. 645). Only two companies showed a complete system of gym equipment³. On that occasion, the highest honour was given to the factory founded in 1880 by the master from Bari Giuseppe Pezzarossa, who was rewarded until the Thirties of the 20th century with 48 honours during national and international exhibitions (Elia, 2013, p. 139).

In order to encourage the government to grant him a subvention and thus participate in the Paris International Exhibition of 1900, the Apulian entrepreneur recalled that he would have had the chance of showing the quality of his production to a German colleague who, without even see his tools, had already

(henceforth b.) 931, file (henceforth f.) Gallo: “Report of the 3rd Federal Gymnastics Congress held in the city of Verona”, October 1872.

2 CSA, MPI, Division of Libraries and General Affairs (1860-1898) (henceforth DLGA), General Archives (1860-1989) (henceforth GA), Gymnastics, shooting, swimming, gyms, fencing 1861-1894 (henceforth G), b. 43, f. 110: “Letter from E. Ariotti to G. Baccelli”, January 30, 1881.

3 CSA, MPI, DLGA, GA, G, b. 3, f. General Affairs: “Milan Exhibition Gymnastics Section”, August 16, 1887.

invited “the German suppliers to send their catalogues to Italy”⁴. Pezzarossa complained that, had he not participated in the exhibition, not only his company, but the national reputation itself would have been damaged.

Again in 1904, on the occasion of the International Exhibition to be held in St. Louis in the United States, Pezzarossa lobbied the government, this time unsuccessfully, to obtain a subvention to support his idea “to send a complete system of my gymnastics equipment, encouraged by the Italian sports press, which already believes that I will hold high the national decorum in this branch in St. Louis”⁵.

International exhibitions were useful also for fruitful exchange of ideas between entrepreneurs and purchasers of gym equipment:

my continuous relations with the juries of national and foreign gymnastic competitions – Pezzarossa wrote, were among the factors that enabled him – to provide precise equipment and school benches, and to accredit them in such a way that they are also appreciated abroad⁶.

3. Outside national borders between censorship and innovation

The work of two gymnasiarchs that studied foreign gymnastics gave evidence of the perceived need to know better other European gymnastics methodologies.

The work of Sebastiano Fenzi and Angelo Mosso was praiseworthy and their writing became known even beyond national borders through English and French translations.

The speech given by Fenzi at the “Circolo Filologico” (Philological Circle) of Florence was for instance translated and diffused in England to the author’s great satisfaction: “this is an honour that the English rarely bestow on the writings of foreigners, especially when it concerns a subject in which they seem to be masters” (Fenzi, 1887, p. 17).

The necessity to study European models is pointed out in a letter sent in 1876 by Fenzi, The President of Italian Gymnastics Federation, and addressed to the Ministry of Public Education. The content was a comment on the news of the potential publication of the Proceedings of Rome’s Gymnastics Congress where

a comparison would be made of the development of gymnastics in Italy with that of other countries. The Federal Presidency would like to know if the news is true because it would be delighted if such a paper were published, which would attest to how the government holds this important branch of national education in honour⁷.

We do not know if the report was finally published: it is sure instead that at the end of the century, Felice Valletti, Head Inspector of Gymnastics in the Ministry of Public Education, published the *Storia della Ginnastica* (History of Gymnastics) (1893) where he devoted great space to the gymnastics teaching methods in other European countries. As for the German national case, for instance, which was fundamental for the development of Italian gymnastics, the author declared that “from what we have briefly recounted [...] one can understand how gymnastics entered the habits of the strong German people and contributed to making them powerful and great” (Valletti, 1893, p. 111).

Finally, throughout the last twenty years of the Twentieth century, there were some private and official visits of masters and representatives of the Government to schools and other European and American education institutes.

For instance, two missions deserve attention: a private one undertaken by Angelo Mosso in the United

4 State Archives of Bari (henceforth SAB), Chamber of Commerce of Bari (henceforth CCB), I Dep., b. 180, f. 27, sf. A: “Memorandum”, September 1st, 1899.

5 SAB, CCB, I Dep., b. 191, f. 42: “Letter from G. Pezzarossa to Antonio de Tullio”, January 20, 1904.

6 State Archives of Brindisi, Historical Archive of the Municipality of Brindisi, Cat. IX, Cl. 18, b. 1, f. 3: “Preface to the Jury Report of the 1900 National Hygiene Exhibition in Naples”, no date [1900].

7 CSA, MPI, DLGA, GA, G, b. 25, f. 61: “Letter from S. Fenzi to M. Coppino”, December 9, 1876.

States in 1899, and another carried out by Colonel Cerruti at the Training School of Gymnastics and Fencing in Austria-Hungary in 1883. A letter addressed to Pezzarossa, a correspondent of the distinguished physiologist from Turin, gives evidence of the first visit. Here, Mosso glorified the physical education practised beyond the Atlantic:

In American cities, physical education is of such importance that they do not see, do not believe and cannot know that such colossal means are employed for gymnastics and sport. [...] The interest and wonder I feel, however, give me a feeling of melancholy when I think how far we are from this perfection in Italy⁸.

The report of the second visit, which is kept at the State Central Archives, was drafted by Lieutenant Cerruti on the behalf of the Ministry of War and forwarded for information to the Ministry of Public Education. The report caught the attention of the author's superior officer when he wrote about the necessity of completing the gymnastics education "with training in an exercise that troops can be called upon to carry, especially in small towns where there is no special fire brigade"⁹, an element already pointed out by Reyer and Gallo (1872, p. 23).

There was, however, resistance to be inspired by foreign models: during the conference carried out in 1883 among Italian masters of gymnastics in Turin, Reyer asserted that "about going abroad to study the systems [...] he was not too keen on it because of the many sorrows one incurs"¹⁰, though this lack of trust emerged due to the poor consideration the gymnasiarch had regarding the German methods except that of Jäger. It can be observed that his position, within the same meeting, was counterbalanced by the proposal of Caravella that requested a Special Committee to study the foreign systems.

Firmer were instead the oppositions raised in 1888 by the Ministry of Public Education to the requests of Emilio Baumann, Director of the Normal School of Gymnastics in Rome, who was asking to be

sent on a mission for a few weeks to Stockholm with the aim of completing my studies on medical gymnastics and then disseminating them [...] through our school. On my journey I will also visit the other Normal Schools on my itinerary, namely Munich, Stuttgart, Karlsruhe, Leipzig, Berlin and Vienna and I think this visit should not return fruitless¹¹.

The Ministry's answer was negative, citing as reasons "the great expediency of first of all giving the more restricted teaching of gymnastics as it is now taught all the development and improvement it needs, both to announce to the Senate of the Kingdom the bill for the establishment of the Normal School of Gymnastics"¹². However, it is plausible, that the denial reflected also the general secretary of gymnastics Valletti well-known hostility towards Baumann. Still in 1892, Valletti complained with his superior about "the pertinacity of the director [of the normal school in Rome] in giving teaching that differs from the Government's programmes and the ascertained deficiency of pupils, [which] call into question the usefulness of the school"¹³.

8 SAB, Historical Archive of the Municipality of Bari (henceforth HAMB), III Dep. Post-Unitarian (henceforth DPU), cat. IX, cl. 9, b. 1635, f. 2: "Letter from A. Mosso to G. Pezzarossa", August 17, 1899.

9 CSA, MPI, DLGA, GA, G, b. 1, f. "Gymnastics Schools in Vienna. Report": "Teacher training school of gymnastics and fencing", August 15, 1883.

10 CSA, MPI, DLGA, GA, G, b. 3, f. 7: "Gymnastics Conferences in Turin from 16 to 30 September 1883. Copies of the Minutes of the Midday Sessions. Minutes of the 5th Sitting", September 21, 1883.

11 CSA, MPI, DLGA, GA, G, b. 4, f. "General Affairs (GA)": "Letter from E. Baumann to P. Boselli", April 19, 1888.

12 CSA, MPI, DLGA, GA, G, b. 4, f. GA: "Letter from P. Boselli to E. Baumann", May 31, 1888.

13 CSA, MPI, DLGA, GA, G, b. 5, f. GA: "Normal School of Gymnastics in Rome, Naples and Turin. Report to H.E. the Minister", March 21, 1892.

4. Conclusions: Italy's Contribution to the development of the Latin Area

The heuristic potentialities regarding the ways in which gymnastic practices were transmitted and disseminated, not always understood by historical international research (Park, 2008, p. 521), showed the links between the cultural aspect of the process of *nation-building* and the process of militarization of national societies (Dencker, 2001, p. 527).

The above-mentioned request of Baumann to go abroad, indeed, was connected to the national military needs: “if by adding a few exercises to the current gymnastics programme, the army could be spared the loss of even just 100 men out of the 100,000 who reform for conscription each year, the mission expense would already be offset”¹⁴.

As a matter of fact, the Italian gymnastic movement had interests in the scramble for Africa, which in the same years affected the foreign policy of the great European colonial powers (Pakenham, 1992). The Italo-Turkish war (1911-1912) for the possession of Libya, for example, demonstrated the need to train “a physically and morally strong youth” to ensure overseas expansion (Bottini, 1914, p. 294). Some gymnasiarchs, however, as Mosso did, refused to link gymnastics and militarism:

America gives us the clearest and grandest example that physical education can develop without military intent. Here, no one thinks about being a soldier; for this purpose there are, as in England, mercenaries. Nevertheless, America and England are the two countries where physical education has reached its highest perfection¹⁵.

This work highlighted that Italy actively participated – proportionally to an inferior development of the gymnastics movement in comparison to the other countries mentioned – to the European networks of ideas, movements and methods of gymnastics. As a result, Dyreson's claim (2011, p. 401) stating the absence of disciples of gymnastics of Southern Europe can be refuted.

In the historical phase examined, the predominance of two national models that inspired the development of gymnastics in Italy emerged clearly. The German model was generally considered the best one, albeit adapted in different ways according to the theories of various Italian gymnasiarchs, whereas the English model was adopted by a minority until the promulgation of the new syllabuses for physical education, in 1893. However, this conclusion does not imply the absence of an influence coming from the Latin area. For example, the dean of Neapolitan gymnastics teachers, Alessandro La Pegna, attended the institute of Francisco Amoros (1770-1847) in 1858-1859, who had an enormous influence on the development of the gymnastics system in France (Di Donato, 1998, p. 135).

The European interconnections of the Italian development of gymnastics, however, should not lead to overestimate common features in the Latin area. Cultural resistances and bounds to the educational policies of the governments during the last twenty years of the 19th century, sometimes made relations with the models developed in other national contexts difficult. Also, Fenzi, who invited the ministers' authorities to look positively at the English *athleticism*, criticizing the German gymnastics, could not avoid observing “that some habits get well along with the nature, character and usages of the tradition of people and the consequence is that they deserve consideration, and neither cannot they all of a sudden change” (Fenzi, 1880, p. 12).

This interpretation is not so different from that expressed by Valletti in his work on the history of European gymnastics. Commenting on the English case, he pointed out the different vision of liberty that this country benefited from: “the young English boy grows up with a freedom that we would consider excessive; but if he abuses of this liberty, he is guilty and deserves a merciless punishment” (Valletti, 1893, p. 125).

It seems necessary therefore to remember how the development of gymnastics also depended on specific social contexts: “the forms and aims of physical activities as well as the motives, feelings and associations connected with them depend on the social contexts” (Pfister, 2003, p. 61).

14 CSA, MPI, DLGA, GA, G, b. 4, f. GA: “Letter from E. Baumann to P. Boselli”, April 19, 1888.

15 SAB, HAMB, III DPU, cat. IX, cl. 9, b. 1635, f. 2: “Letter from A. Mosso to G. Pezzarossa”, August 17, 1899.

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