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Bodily practices and the education of the body: biopolitics in Belém, Pará

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Abstract: This article examines how bodily practices – especially gymnastics and sports – were mobilized as dispositifs for the education of the body in the city of Belém, Pará, Brazil, between the late nineteenth century and the early twentieth century. The study investigates how these practices contributed to the production of bodily norms, articulating discipline, health, and morality within a broader context of urban modernization. Drawing on Michel Foucault's theoretical framework, the research analyzes historical documents (newspapers, magazines, regulations, and manuals), treated as monuments within an archaeo-genealogical approach. The findings show that medical-hygienist, pedagogical, scientific, and nationalist discourses sustained a regime of visibility surrounding the schooled body, in which gymnastics and sport operated as technologies of biopower and mechanisms of social regulation. The results indicate that such practices constituted a specific pedagogical configuration of control-stimulation, marked by disputes, tensions, and contradictions that produced modes of subjectivation and normalization of bodies. By highlighting these processes, the study contributes to understanding how bodily practices were employed as strategies of social regulation and as means of shaping bodily models aligned with Belém's modernizing project.

Keywords: body; bodily practices; biopower; body education.

1 Introduction

The Belle Époque in Belém do Pará, spanning the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, corresponded to a period marked by intense processes of urban beautification, in which European ways of life – particularly those associated with Paris – became a reference for the reorganization of the city's spaces, customs, and social practices (Barros; Serra, 2018). In this context, this study seeks to demonstrate how certain forms of gymnastics and sports were selected and systematized as supposedly proper ways of educating the body, instrumentalizing it as a target of power strategies. To this end, discursive and non-discursive practices are analyzed, as they instituted specific ways of seeing and educating the body, mobilizing Foucauldian assumptions related to biopower, with the city of Belém during the Belle Époque as the geographical and temporal focus.



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The archaeo-genealogical theorization of Michel Foucault (1988, 1999, 2008, 2013, 2021) underpins the analyses in this study, such that documents are treated as monuments to be dismantled; that is, archives are interrogated in terms of their production and are no longer understood as mere traces of a past to be remembered, but rather as artifacts selected and assembled to supposedly record memory (Foucault, 2008). In order to delimit the research focus, guiding questions were formulated regarding the empirical material analyzed, aiming to render visible the discursive and non-discursive practices instituted in bodily practices – gymnastics and sports – as ways of educating the body in Belém do Pará between the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, understood as part of regulatory biopolitics and practices of biopower. In this sense, memory, understood as archive, is mobilized as an analytical operator to interrogate the conditions of possibility for the production of truths; that is, to understand how games, gymnastics, and sports¹ came to be constituted as true and legitimate practices in the context of Belém.

The sources analyzed include non-official documents selected from archives² dedicated to the preservation and production of memory. These include newspaper articles, advertising campaigns, artistic productions, as well as pedagogical and general-interest magazines containing statements related to bodily practices of body education. To access these materials, records were collected from archival platforms: (1) the Brazilian Digital Newspaper Library (*Hemeroteca Digital Brasileira*)³; and (2) the rare works section of the Arthur Vianna Public Library⁴. A narrative unit (*unidade de enredo*) was constructed to give visibility to the plot that enabled the emergence of a given mode of enunciation. Priority was given to a set of statements concerning body education, as recorded in these materials. References to the historical iconographic documents used were organized as “Figure 1 to Figure 13”.

¹ It was not possible to establish a more in-depth dialogue with other historical studies on sports and other bodily practices that took the reality of Pará – or specifically the city of Belém – as an object of reflection, due to the still limited number of publications dedicated to this theme.

² The historical editions of the newspapers cited were consulted in the digital collection of the Brazilian Digital Newspaper Library (*Hemeroteca Digital Brasileira*), maintained by the National Library, and of the Arthur Vianna Library, which provide high-resolution digitizations of the periodicals from the period studied.

³ It is a portal for the digitization of national periodicals that enables extensive online consultation of newspapers, magazines, yearbooks, and other publications. Available at: <https://bndigital.bn.gov.br/hemeroteca-digital/>

⁴ It is a catalog of rare works that brings together publications of high historical, cultural, literary, and artistic value. Available at: <http://www.fcp.pa.gov.br/espacos-culturais/sede/biblioteca-arthur-vianna>

Thus, an archaeo-genealogy of bodily practices of body education in Belém do Pará is proposed, inspired by Foucault's (2021) conception that knowledge must be articulated with situated memories in order to produce a historical knowledge of struggles that can be strategically mobilized in the present. The movement of temporal retreat is undertaken not to reaffirm continuities, but to identify ruptures, deviations, and accidents – what, according to Foucault (2008, p. 21), lies at the root of what we know and what we are: “[...] not truth and being, but the exteriority of the accident”.

The research was not conducted based on a prior delimitation of documents to be analyzed. Instead, the criterion of narrative unity, as proposed by Albuquerque Júnior (2011), was adopted, guiding the selection and articulation of materials not by their typological homogeneity, but by their capacity to compose a meaningful plot around the discursive production of the body. In this movement, priority was given to statements found in the consulted collections that addressed bodily practices of body education, considering not their interpretative depth, but the discursive regularities and the effects of truth they produce.

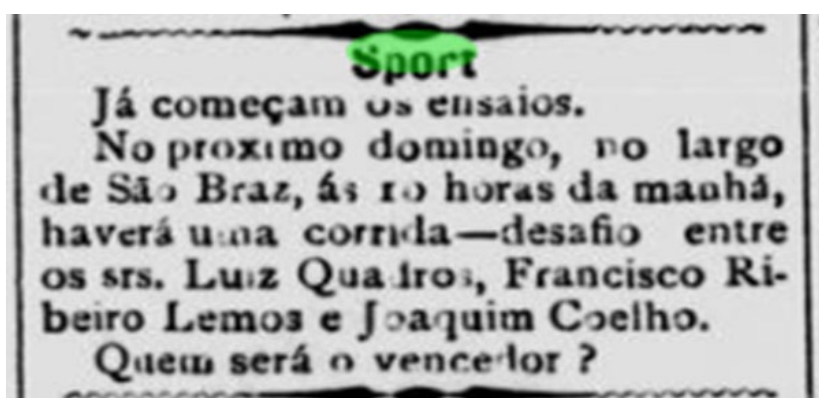
The selection of sources was based on archaeo-genealogical relevance, privileging documents capable of evidencing the conditions of possibility of discourses on body education in Belém between the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The principle of narrative unity was followed, articulating diverse materials according to their enunciative function rather than typology.

The discursive materiality of printed materials, normative texts, and images was considered as events revealing games of knowledge-power, as well as the historical-discursive relevance of sources that express ruptures and disputes related to scientific morality, school discipline, and hygienization. To this end, discursive heterogeneity guided the inclusion of both official documents and non-canonical sources, preserving a multiplicity of voices. The criteria of temporal and spatial dispersion were also adopted, avoiding linear narratives and prioritizing discontinuities. Finally, the selection was guided by the perspective of a history of the present, interrogating the past through contemporary problematizations.

2 Sport as a playful-competitive production to discipline and moralize strong and healthy bodies

Between the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries⁵, discourses “defending” (or not) sports and gymnastics as important elements in the education of children and youth became increasingly frequent in Belém. Statements began to compose medical-hygienist discursive formations or referred to bodily morality, civility of habits, productivity, nationalism, among others. In this sense, to initiate the discussion, we present a footrace held at Largo de São Braz, a public space that functioned as a meeting point for various activities. Figure 1 shows a newspaper excerpt from 1888 announcing a race at this location. The announcement evidences the introduction of organized sports practices in the city. It also reveals the encouragement of sports practice, competitiveness, and the establishment of sporting modalities in Belém (Dias, 2014). The effect fell upon groups seeking to imitate the so-called good habits of “civilized” Europeans through the practice of sports disseminated by them. The newspaper announcement legitimized sport as a “relevant” activity within Belém society at the time.

Figure 1 – Race at Largo de São Braz



Source: *Diário de Notícias* (PA), Belém, Pará, Mar. 24, 1888, p. 2.

During this period, in many European countries, the body began to be conceived and stimulated/educated for “new purposes.” Under the influence of what was occurring especially in Paris and London, Belém began to reproduce similar practices. According to Foucault (1988), modernity represents the period of greatest stimulation of the body, whether for social control or for its utilitarian function within the

⁵ This period coincides with the consolidation of modern sport in some countries.

dynamics of value production. According to the author, modernity replaced the “right of death” with “power over life,” stimulating the body while simultaneously regulating it – not only at the individual level but also at the level of populations, including sexuality.

This construction, however, does not remain confined to the modern episteme; it progresses and establishes technologies of power that reach their peak in the first half of the twentieth century (Foucault, 1988, 1999). Prior to this consolidation, it can be argued that there was no single discourse regarding the “educational” power of sport. Nevertheless, sport appears as a practice (and, for many, still is) that engages its practitioners in a playful-competitive dimension. The question “Who will be the winner?” signals a transformation in bodily practices of body education, which begin to incorporate modern values such as the pursuit of victory through overcoming others and the objective comparison of results among competitors (Kunz, 1989).

The role of the press seems to have contributed to the construction of norms, potentially producing what may be called “sporting pedagogical plots.” By transforming a common practice into a “sporting event,” the press participated in constructing a narrative of sport as a symbol of modernity and progress. In this regard, Bracht (2005) refers to “sportization” as the process of expansion of sport since the nineteenth century to the present day, which, among other elements, produced disciplinary organization, bureaucratic structuring, the creation of clubs (within and outside schools), and competitions. This process unfolded throughout the nineteenth century and continues today (e.g., skateboarding, bodybuilding, surfing, capoeira, and jiu-jitsu as more recent cases). In this context, Melo (2014, p. 1) notes that the body became central in modernity, as “Science, a symbolic mark of the new era, contributed to generating a new urban excitability marked by notions of speed, mobility, and progress”.

Not by chance, in Elias and Dunning’s (1992) account of the so-called civilizing process experienced through a set of political, social, and cultural habits, sport emerged as a central element in the construction of habits that could be identified as more civilized, that is, “non-violent”. In summary, modernity came to display spaces, materials, refined regulations, and sporting techniques as supposed symbols of a new era. Sport consolidated itself as a practice that produces specific ways of being, acting, behaving, training, and competing, partially breaking with the idea and concept of play, which is more uncertain, playful, and subjective (Melo, 2014; Bracht, 2005). In place of

spontaneous play, a type of competitive, organized, rigid, and standardized “playing” emerges (Bracht, 2005), though without entirely abandoning playfulness, which becomes incorporated into competitive dynamics.

Within sport, play ceases to be conceived as a spontaneous activity and becomes a planned, methodical, and regulated means of instruction. More sporting events are observed in Belém. Figure 2 presents a newspaper excerpt dated 1891⁶, referring to a race promoted at the “Jockey Club Paraense.” This was a sporting event with “philanthropic objectives,” held with the support of the state government and likely related to strategies of social status construction among urban elites.

Figure 2 – Race at the Jockey Club Paraense



Source: *Diário de Notícias* (PA), Belém, Pará, July 9, 1891, p. 3.

A narrative of a socially divided society emerges, marked by distinctions between elites and non-elites, between those who possess money and power and those who do not. Sport, as a bodily practice, operates as a marker of class distinction and initially appears primarily as a bourgeois fashion of bodily care (Bourdieu, 1978).

⁶ According to Dias and Soares (2014), it is worth emphasizing that Belém was undergoing a period of major political, social, and cultural transformations.

Sporting events were likely shaped by differing – and even conflicting – interests, including fundraising for the creation of the Lyceum, thus revealing underlying controversies.

On the one hand, the race is presented as an elite event, emphasizing class distinction and its “spectacular” character, described as a “splendid sporting celebration”. On the other hand, it conceals unequal access to leisure and cultural spaces, which were (and still are) limited by social status. The announcement thus suggests dynamics of power and social exclusion. The structure of the event institutionalized power relations by consolidating the role of the elite as “benefactors” and popular sectors as passive recipients of their benevolence. In this regard, Bourdieu (1978) asserts that it was typical of elites to present sport as a space of passive consumption for the popular classes.

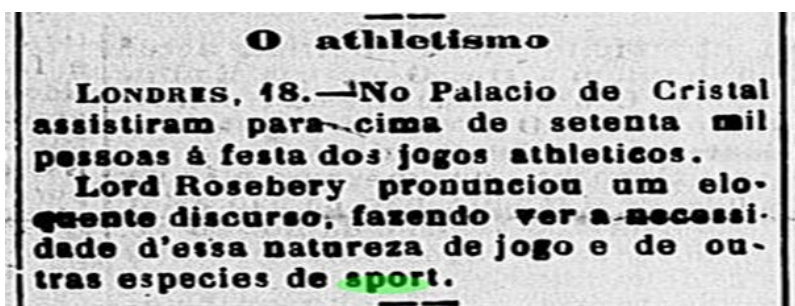
Still regarding Figure 2, the text refers to the concept of “sportmen,” a discourse constructing identity among sports practitioners. According to Matos (2012, p. 3), “[...] being a sportman meant following a model of life based on European standards associated with discourses of progress and civilization”. Dias (2014) notes that such discourse began to circulate in Belém from the late 1870s, particularly with the emergence of rowing practices. Initially practiced by military personnel, rowing was later encouraged among civilians through competitions against the former.

In Belém, sports were produced and disseminated through discourses, especially via newspapers and magazines, and experienced differently across clubs (and also schools), always instrumentalized by some ideal of formation and morality (Matos, 2012). Melo (2014, p. 2) emphasizes that sport was “[...] conceived as a formative strategy; an effective tool for preparing muscular bodies [...] as well as for disseminating this model as an ideal to be pursued”.

Other examples reinforce this perspective, such as the news on “athleticism” (Figure 3), published in the newspaper *A República* (1886-1900), referring to a sporting event in London (Crystal Palace⁷), attended by more than 70,000 people. Sport is again associated with urban elites seeking to incorporate values considered “correct” for civilizational progress. The text constructs sport discursively as a supposedly universal and necessary phenomenon.

⁷ The Crystal Palace, built in 1851, symbolized the technical and cultural progress of England.

Figure 3 – “Athleticism” in Belém.



Source: *A República* (PA), Belém, Pará, Oct. 22, 1899, p. 4.

The text offers no reflection on the exclusions implicit in Belém’s urban context. The adoption of the English term “sport” symbolizes a form of British cultural subordination in the sporting field, as seen in the names of two major clubs in Belém: *Paysandu Sport Club* and *Clube do Remo*. According to Dias (2014), rowing – a nautical sport widely practiced in London during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries – was central in this process. In this context, sport was produced as a disciplinary technology regulating bodies and behaviors. These discourses constitute sport as a form of knowledge-power, legitimizing it as a structuring element of “progress.” It also appears as spectacle, “for public entertainment”.

In Belém, “sportive” discursivity became linked to medical-hygienist productivity, thus promoting transformations in the nature, organization, social-cultural dynamics, and policies of popular game practices. Regarding these transformations and the pedagogical use of sport, Melo (2014, p. 2) states that “with its association to health [...], advertising – which was also becoming more defined at the time – did not overlook sport”.

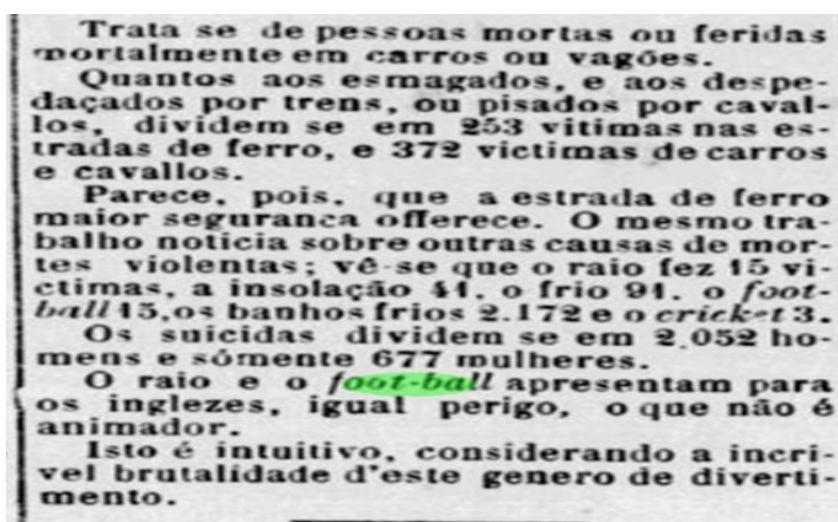
According to Matos (2012), sports in Belém came to be defended in the discourses of chroniclers in newspapers and magazines, who frequently invoked the ideal of the “sportman” and encouraged the practice of physical education among children. This ideal was constructed as modern while simultaneously referencing ancient Greek games. Some chronicles explicitly drew analogies with the past, especially regarding bodily cults (Matos, 2012).

The legitimation of sport through a mythical and glorious origin constitutes an imaginary⁸ artificial continuity between ancient athletic practices and modern sport

⁸ This narrative erases the historical specificity of each context and ignores the complex power relations that permeate modern sport. By invoking the “cult of the body” of antiquity, chroniclers construct an ideal of beauty and strength aligned with the modern project of rationalizing the body.

(Bracht, 2005). Matos (2012) identifies a diversity of sporting modalities in Belém through publications in *A Folha do Norte* and *A Semana*. However, Figure 4 demonstrates that not everyone supported sports; there were also campaigns against these practices, citing their dangerousness, including football. The article, published in *Diário de Notícias*, presents sport as a risky activity comparable to other events resulting in accidental deaths. The perception of sport as violent and incompatible with safe and civilized leisure is expressed in the phrase “sport is barbarism.” The comparison with natural phenomena suggests an attempt to rationalize the perceived danger.

Figure 4 – Sport is barbarism.



Source: *Diário de Notícias*, Belém, Pará, Aug. 22, 1896, p. 2.

The text reveals a discursive regime in which football is represented as potentially harmful to both physical and moral integrity. The body of the “modern bourgeois” tends to be sensitive to excess and lack of control. Not surprisingly, more physically intense and confrontational sports, such as football and boxing, were gradually incorporated into the habits of popular classes (Bourdieu, 1978).

The process of acceptance and popularization of sport in Belém, including football, involved not only its practice but also symbolic and discursive disputes over its place and the control of the body (Dias, 2014). While some advocated its pedagogical use, others opposed it. Since the 1870s, Belém had become a stage for various pro-sport discourses, encouraging young people to engage in physical training.

In this regard, Figure 5 presents a group of athletes (a football team) on a field. The presence of uniforms suggests ideals of organization, bureaucratization, order,

and control inherent in sport. Uniformization standardized bodies, behaviors, and gestures within sporting practices, regulating movements, kicks, passes, ideals of victory, rules, and attire. The “bureaucratization of sport” expands through regulatory processes, including the creation of federations, universal rules, and organized competitions (Bracht, 2005).

Figure 5 – Uniformed football team



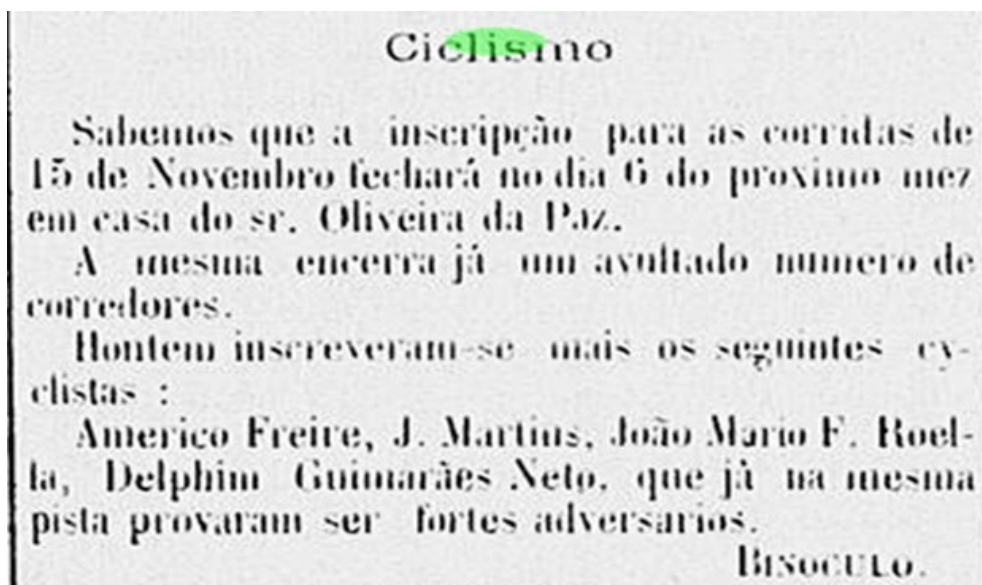
Source: *A Semana: Revista Ilustrada*, Belém, Pará, July 19, 1919, p. 3.

Bodies came to be regulated according to new perspectives, meanings, and objectives, since, according to Foucault (2021), power produces bodies through discourse, which not only describes but also constitutes reality. Finally, uniformization also served to reinforce hygienic, educable, and healthy ideals in both clubs and schools. As Foucault (2008, p. 57) states, “the health of populations became one of the economic norms required by industrial society.” The body thus emerges as a central object of control within biopolitics, particularly under the logic of productivity.

3 Sport and “physical” education

The body came to be treated as a “project of improvement.” Bodies that did not conform to established standards were excluded, controlled, and ridiculed, thereby reinforcing social hierarchies. Cycling was also part of the discourses regarded as good practices within sports clubs in Belém do Pará, which, directly or indirectly, suggested a type of appropriate body: thin, strong, disciplined, and predominantly male. In this sense, cycling practices reported in newspapers from the state of Pará in 1899 are brought into the analysis. Figure 6 shows this process:

Figure 6 – Cycling in Belém in the newspaper República⁹



Source: *República* (PA), Belém, Pará, Sept. 22, 1899, p. 1.

It can be observed that, at that time, there were many competitors in this modality in Belém do Pará, as well as a bureaucratic organization of competitions, which were intense during the period, indicating discourses of competitiveness and discipline. At the end of the text, competitiveness among practitioners is reinforced. In other words, the principle of victory was placed at the center, stimulating the need for disciplined training, observance of rules, and a logic of competition. In this sense, educating the body also meant putting it into play, setting it in dispute with other bodies, subjecting it to a regime of work and rest, and inscribing it within complex processes of competition.

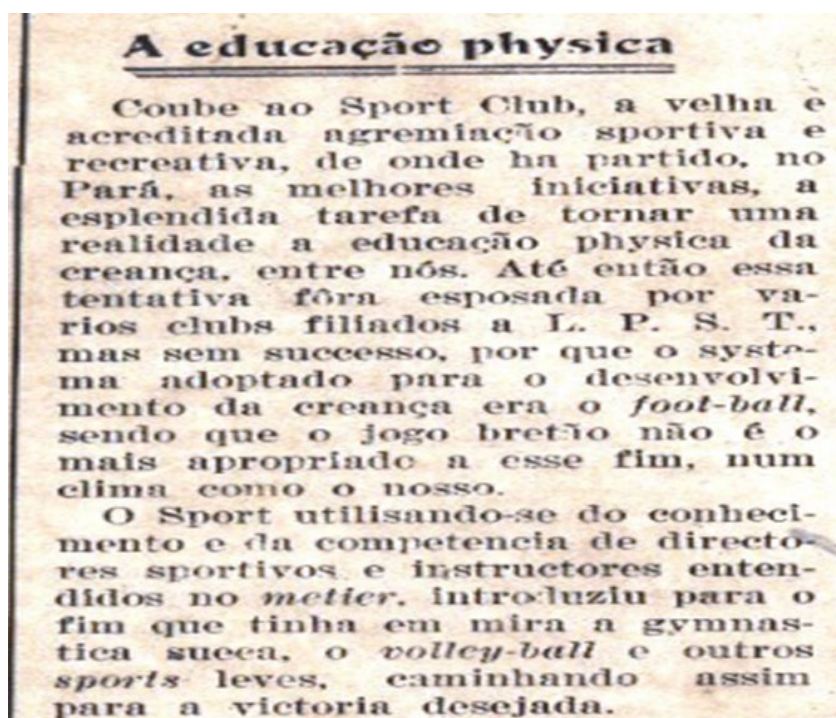
It was not enough to practice a sport; it had to be used as a means of controlling the body, making it rigid, thin, and strong. Sport began to function as a mechanism of regulatory control over youth, within a system of subjection through the encouragement of work and productivity, requiring another type of discipline, education, and everyday practices, through which the body becomes a useful, productive, and subjected force (Foucault, 2013). Contrary to control-repression, body education is inscribed within a form of control-stimulation, through which individuals

⁹ "Cycling / We know that registration for the races on November 13 will close on the 6th of next month at the residence of Mr. Oliveira da Paz. / It already includes a considerable number of competitors. / Yesterday, the following cyclists also registered: / Americo Freire, J. Martins, João Mario F. Hoelth, Delphim Guimarães Neto, who have already proven on this same track to be strong competitors. / Bisouço."

come to desire the aesthetics and vigor of the so-called educated and healthy body (Foucault, 1999, 2013).

In this regard, the analysis of the excerpt from *A Semana: Revista Illustrada* (1919), Figure 7, reveals complex relations among sport, physical education, and ideals of modernization and health in early twentieth-century Brazil. The text addresses the attempt to implement physical education for children through sporting initiatives promoted by the Sport Club¹⁰ of Pará, highlighting the role of football (*foot-ball*), volleyball (*volley-ball*), and Swedish gymnastics. It was a debate about competitions held at the Sport Club, organized as sporting events and mobilizing thousands of people.

Figure 7 – Physical Education at the Sport Club.



Source: *A Semana: Revista Illustrada*, Belém, Pará, jan. 1919, p. 14.

Through sport, statements of dedication, effort, and training were disseminated, as well as a system of rules that began to involve both practitioners and spectators. As Bracht (2019) points out, sport exerted a moralizing potential in modernity, identified with the ethic of productive labor propagated by the commodity production system. However, the text shows that football was considered unsuitable

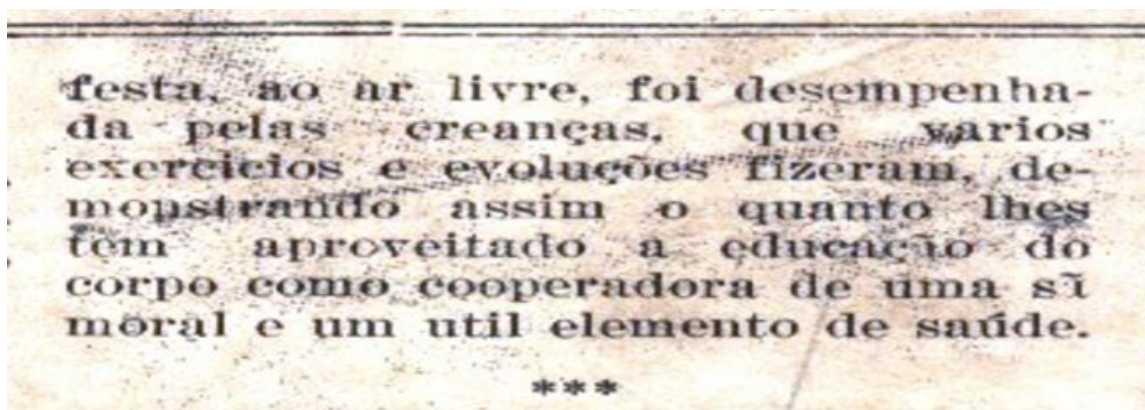
¹⁰ Founded on September 25, 1896, its headquarters were located on Estrada Nazareth, where nautical sports, basketball, cycling, and shooting were practiced. Some of its members founded the rowing group, now known as Clube do Remo. Source: <https://historiadofutebol.com/blog/?p=124040>

for children's physical development when compared to more organized practices, such as gymnastics and sports regarded as lighter.

Swedish gymnastics¹¹, in turn, was known for its systematic and disciplinary character and was widely disseminated in schools and clubs, while football gained ground as the sport of the elites within clubs. In place of football, besides Swedish gymnastics, so-called light sports were presented, such as volleyball, which appears as an appropriate bodily practice, especially in places with a hot climate. Thus, not every bodily practice met the criteria considered necessary for the educational process.

The analysis of Figure 8, taken from *A Semana: Revista Ilustrada* (1919), also refers to a discourse typical of the early twentieth century concerning the relationship among body, morality, and health, centered on physical education as a tool for citizen formation. The excerpt highlights the importance of physical exercises in childhood, presenting them as a means of constructing a disciplined and healthy body.

Figure 8 – The education of the body for a “sound morality” and “children’s health”



Source: *A Semana: Revista Ilustrada*, vol. 1, no. 44, Belém, Pará, Jan. 1919, p. 14.

The text shows that the relations among sport, health, and morality were embedded in the context of hygienist policies in Belém. Medical-hygienist discourses supposedly aimed to improve the living conditions of the urban population, preventing disease and promoting social order. Childhood, however, began to be recognized as an important stage for physical and moral development. In this sense, physical education in schools came to be regarded as a necessary “tool”.

¹¹ According to Moreno (2015, p. 130), this model of gymnastics proposes that “the body could be scientifically analyzed and, from this, precise and appropriate movements could be constructed, exact and uniform forms [...]”.

To this end, outdoor exercises, mentioned in the text, were considered ideal, since they aligned with hygienist principles that valued contact with nature as a way of strengthening the organism. At the same time as this process promoted the inclusion of children in so-called healthy practices, it also created “exclusions”: those who did not meet physical standards or did not participate in sporting activities could be viewed as deviant or less capable.

In this context, new discourses were enunciated, interacted, and at times came into conflict, producing various events in Belém and composing the gymnastic/sporting pedagogical plot. Among them were nationalist discourses that advocated school physical education practices as part of a national project aimed at strengthening the social body. According to Dias (2014), various sporting and gymnastic practices in Belém were traversed by nationalism, in school spaces, clubs, and school physical education itself. On this point, Melo (2018, p. 2) states that initiatives of “urban control and restriction of certain behaviors” were related to supposed “needs concerning the formation of an elite [...] of national character”.

Among the nationalist discourses identified in Belém were those of José Veríssimo (1906), who defended hygienism as an element of a project of civility for the Brazilian people. In this project, the body should be educated, moralized, trained, and strengthened. Therefore, changing the habits of the Brazilian people and their corporeality were goals discussed in his proposal for national education¹². For Veríssimo (1906), sporting games would be important for the formation of young people, in favor of a nationalist, moral, and supposedly healthy education. More specifically, it is stated that these types of games – sporting games – could be more appropriate for early childhood. However, he associates the practice of sports with the development of the nation, with a “national life”.

4 Gymnastics as a practice of control-stimulation of the body

In the last decades of the nineteenth century and the early decades of the twentieth in Belém, discourses on gymnastics and sports were produced, redefined, selected, transformed, and promulgated. As in other cities, in Belém, different

¹² José Veríssimo (1906) proposed the creation of a national education that was moralistic, hygienic, and supposedly aligned with the evolution of the Brazilian people. According to Guimarães and Sousa (2016), he “starts from the assumption that civilization and progress are determined by a morally regenerated people” (p. 16).

discourses – by physicians, politicians, teachers, and chroniclers – expressed “[...] the desire to oversee the education of youth, especially poorer young people, with the aim of eradicating habits seen as immoral or dangerous and promoting those interpreted as healthy or morally acceptable” (Dalben; Júnior, 2018, p. 170). Thus, in this context, gymnastics, sports, and games became priorities in medical, pedagogical, and scientific discourses on “body education.” According to Soares (2011, p. 117), the scientific character attributed to modern gymnastics¹³ was decisive for the expansion of its practice among both military and civilian populations, in schools and cities as a whole, particularly in large Brazilian urban centers.

The body came to constitute a target of medical-hygienist control. According to Soares (2011, p. 116), popular gymnastics and games were later transformed into pedagogical gymnastics and sports. The author points out that “traditional popular practices of street performers, acrobats, and tightrope walkers, as spectacles,” played an important role in the emergence of modern, scientific, medicalized, Europeanized, and educable gymnastics. Discourses were produced to differentiate rational gymnastics – more commonly practiced in schools – from sports (initially associated with leisure) practiced in clubs, as well as other forms of gymnastics performed outdoors. In Belém, this process was no different.

According to Galak, Zoboli, and Manske (2020, p. 59), between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the human body came to be studied and treated as a system, a machine¹⁴. Medical science, particularly anatomy, forged and grounded a biological conception of the body, establishing the basis for new understandings of the body and how to educate it as a machine. According to Góis Junior, Soares, and Terra (2015), the body came to be rethought as a machine¹⁵, in parallel with transformations occurring in industrial and technological production. The body was thus conceived as productive for the economy – a machine that must be maintained for such a purpose. “A machine-body would be clean, more productive, morally efficient” (Góis Junior;

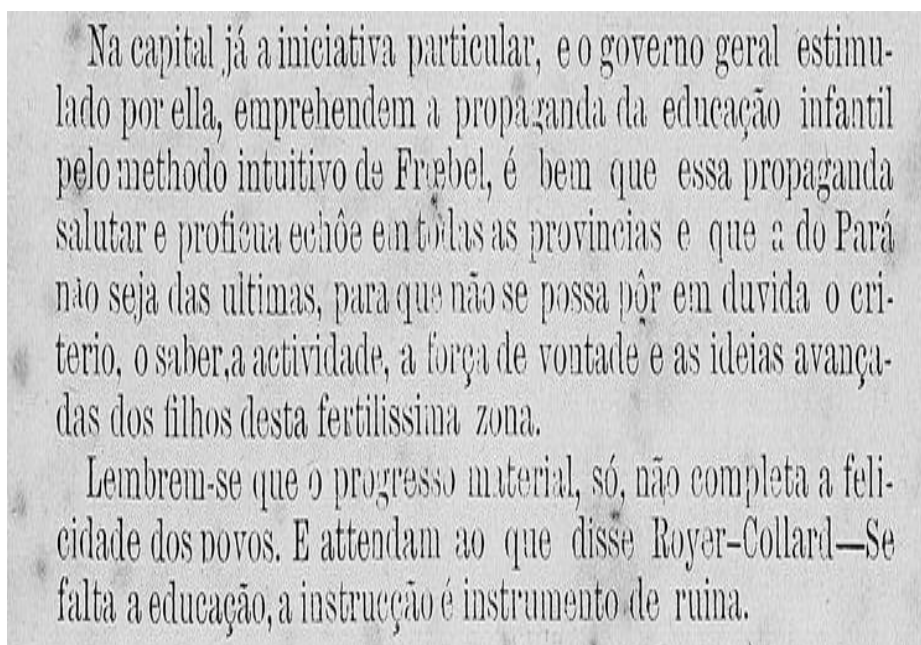
¹³ According to Vigarello (2003), throughout the nineteenth century, developments in the education of the body led to the incorporation of gymnastics. For Fensterseifer (1999, p. 140), the main instrument for the education of the body, movement, and bodily practices came to be gymnastics methods.

¹⁴ As stated by Galak, Zoboli, and Manske (2020), the French physician Julien Offray de La Mettrie was a key figure who persistently defended the view of the body as a machine.

¹⁵ According to Góis Junior, Soares, and Terra (2015), the work of Etienne-Jules Marey (1830-1904) contributed to conceptualizing the body within the parameters of a so-called rational gymnastics. The authors also note that Claude Bernard grounded a medical science based on a rational model for thinking about the body as a “machine”.

Soares; Terra, 2015, p. 975). In the nineteenth century, these discourses contributed to a gradual diffusion of bodily practices within everyday habits (Góis Junior; Soares; Terra, 2015, p. 976). In this way, discourses about the body also produced realities in Belém¹⁶. Figure 9 illustrates this process:

Figure 9 – The education of childhood – Dr. Domingos D'almeida



Source: Revista Amazonica, year 1, no. 1, Belém, Pará, Jan. 1883, pp. 5-10.

Reference is made to Herbert Spencer¹⁷, as a figure of notable authority in philosophy and education, who argued that education should begin “in the cradle,” encompassing physical, moral, and intellectual dimensions. Here, one observes the moral discourse of the traditional family, in which the mother is responsible for childcare, as expressed in the text signed by Dr. Domingos D'almeida. The analysis of this publication addresses early childhood education in Belém and the promotion of rational gymnastics. Medical discourse appears as a guiding force in the formation of individuals, linked to ideals of the “good family citizen,” “work-oriented individual,” and “defender of the nation”.

¹⁶ Sarges (2010) points out that Belém began to experience influences from Paris and London. According to the author, the city was experiencing an economic peak due to latex extraction, with the valorization of rubber-based products, especially for tire production, resulting in population growth and structural changes in the city.

¹⁷ Dr. Domingos D'Almeida refers to Spencer, who emphasized a “complete” education – physical, moral, and intellectual – for the progress of society. He also mentions Fröbel, the creator of the concept of the kindergarten, whose pedagogy emphasized integral development through playful and educational activities.

It was suggested that education should prioritize individual health, work, family, the nation, humanity, and only lastly leisure and pleasure. Dr. D'almeida advocated adopting Spencer's proposal in early childhood education in Pará, specifically the intuitive method of Froebel. In this context, "physical education" functioned as a technology of power aimed at controlling movement, posture, and energy, ensuring the formation of bodies considered useful and obedient. Early childhood education was thus presented as fundamental to guaranteeing the future of the nation, contributing to the development of a strong population with supposedly sound moral character.

According to Soares (2011, p. 114), "the body becomes the object of constant care and of the pedagogies that act upon it." In *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, Foucault (2013) argues that, in a society organized around labor and productivity, the body assumes a central role, as it can only be functionalized when subjected to mechanisms of domination and control that integrate it into structures of subjection. The body becomes integrated into a system of subjection, controlled through the stimulation of work and productivity, requiring new forms of discipline, education, and daily practices. Thus, the body becomes both the target and the producer of modern power. For Foucault (2013), the body became a privileged target of power, especially with the emergence of new modalities of governing and disciplining individuals.

The great book of Man-the-Machine was written simultaneously on two registers: the anatomico-metaphysical register, whose first pages were written by Descartes and continued by physicians and philosophers; and the technical-political register, constituted by a whole set of military, school, and hospital regulations, as well as empirical and reflected procedures for controlling or correcting the operations of the body. These were two very distinct registers: one concerned submission and use, the other functioning and explanation – the useful body and the intelligible body. However, points of intersection exist between them. La Mettrie's *Man a Machine* represents both a materialist reduction of the soul and a general theory of training, at the center of which lies the idea of "docility," linking the analyzable body to the manipulable body. A docile body is one that may be subjected, used, transformed, and improved (Foucault, 2013, p. 132)

The body, treated as a machine, became productive, obedient, and "scientific," and came to be widely studied and educated across different fields, particularly medicine. Discursive practices produced new forms of bodily control (Foucault, 2013, p. 30). The body began to be subjected and manipulated by new desires, controlled within a logic of improvement and regulation. Figure 10, taken from *A Semana: Revista*

Illustrada (1920), highlights the young Cypriano Santos as a symbol of the “primacy of muscles,” exemplifying the ideal of a strong and muscular body.

Figure 10 – The primacy of muscles¹⁸



Source: *A Semana: Revista Illustrada*, Belém, Pará, Aug. 1920, p. 31.

The exaltation of the strong and muscular body composed part of hygienist discourses, which associated health and aesthetics with progress and morality. The emphasis on muscles and physical strength symbolized a disciplined body aligned with values of order, control, and superiority. This type of body disseminated discourses of power, vigor, strength, beauty, and conformity to the modern ideal.

Figure 10 positions Cypriano Santos as a model to be admired and emulated, reinforcing the normalization of an ideal masculine body – strong and productive. The exaltation of the athletic body as “primacy” established standards of beauty that excluded bodies considered weak, feminine, or deviant.

These statements educated bodies to become healthy and moralized, complying with the rules of “proper morality,” producing active, healthy, stimulated, and strong bodies – bodies trained in gymnastics and sports. In this context, educating the

¹⁸ “Miss MEPHISTOPHELES. / The young Cypriano Santos, son of our director, acting in the position of magex.”

body toward a productive morality consolidated itself as a modern dispositif, also in Belém.

Figure 11 – The “overweight” cyclist.



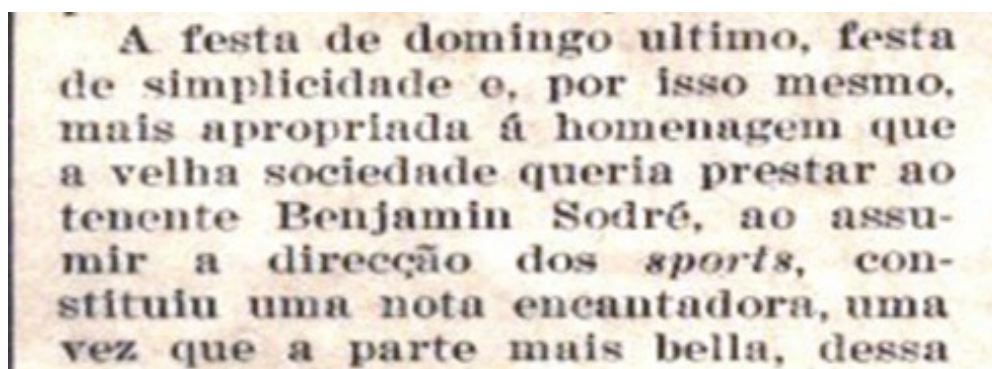
Source: *A Semana: Revista Ilustrada*, Belém, Pará, July 1919, p. 40.

On the other hand, Figure 11 shows a cyclist “overweight,” satirized as being pushed by a smaller and thinner individual. Gymnastic practices such as cycling reinforced ideals of an “adequate” body – thin, agile, and disciplined – associated with masculine values. The caricature criticizes bodily inadequacy in an environment that values thinness and physical performance, producing the exclusion of bodies that deviate from the ideal.

In this sense, gymnastics – here exemplified by cycling – became a space that reinforced social hierarchies, rewarding those who conformed to the dominant model and marginalizing those who did not. The caricature does not merely depict a fat body, but a body that challenges the normative ideal of the “modern body”.

Hygienist discourses were also linked to military discourses. In the *Revista Ilustrada* article (Figure 12), military figures are praised as promoters of sports practices, particularly Lieutenant Benjamin Sodré. In this case, body education is presented as a “cooperator of morality,” a form of “useful” knowledge grounded in discipline and health.

Figure 12 – The Sport Club and the tribute to Benjamin Sodré.



A festa de domingo ultimo, festa de simplicidade e, por isso mesmo, mais apropriada á homenagem que a velha sociedade queria prestar ao tenente Benjamin Sodré, ao assumir a direcção dos sports, constituiu uma nota encantadora, uma vez que a parte mais bella, dessa

Source: *A Semana: Revista Ilustrada*, vol. 1, no. 44, Belém, Pará, Jan. 1919, p. 14.

The reverence for military figures as promoters of sport produced effects on the relationships between sports, moral education, and individual discipline in the early twentieth century. These discourses contributed to the inclusion of gymnastics and sports in school curricula, presenting them as extensions of military training. The association between bodily practice and moral construction reinforced the idea that a disciplined body is also a morally correct body, operating as a dispositif of exclusion for those who did not conform.

The exaltation of military figures in *Revista Ilustrada* (1919) reveals intersections between power, health, and morality, with the school functioning as a key locus for disseminating this discursivity. According to Soares (2016), interventions in schools aimed to legitimize an urban educational project, as was also the case in Belém.

Considering that it was not simple to control the impetus of a growing population in a complex city, Costa *et al.* (2014) point out that, since the nineteenth century, (school) physical education has been constituted as a mode of medical and pedagogical intervention. The authors highlight the implementation of “a reform of bodies, which first occurred within the family nucleus through hygienic education in childhood” (Costa *et al.*, p. 273). Concern with public health was linked to the growth of large cities, such as Belém. Nineteenth-century hygienic discourses “helped legitimize the presence of the State in the field of public health, but also in the educational field” (Costa *et al.*, p. 273).

Medical-hygienist statements, including military ones, began to reposition possibilities for experiencing bodily practices and, therefore, forms of body education. Considering a Belém undergoing processes of industrialization, modernization, and

urbanization, which received a large number of immigrants – facts that strengthened and expanded practices of bodily regulation – we argue that physical education (including in schools) came to compose statements of bodily control and regulation of life in society (Foucault, 1999). There was an increase in collective regulatory interventions, with an emphasis on a more expansive control that may be understood as biopolitical control of populations (Foucault, 1999).

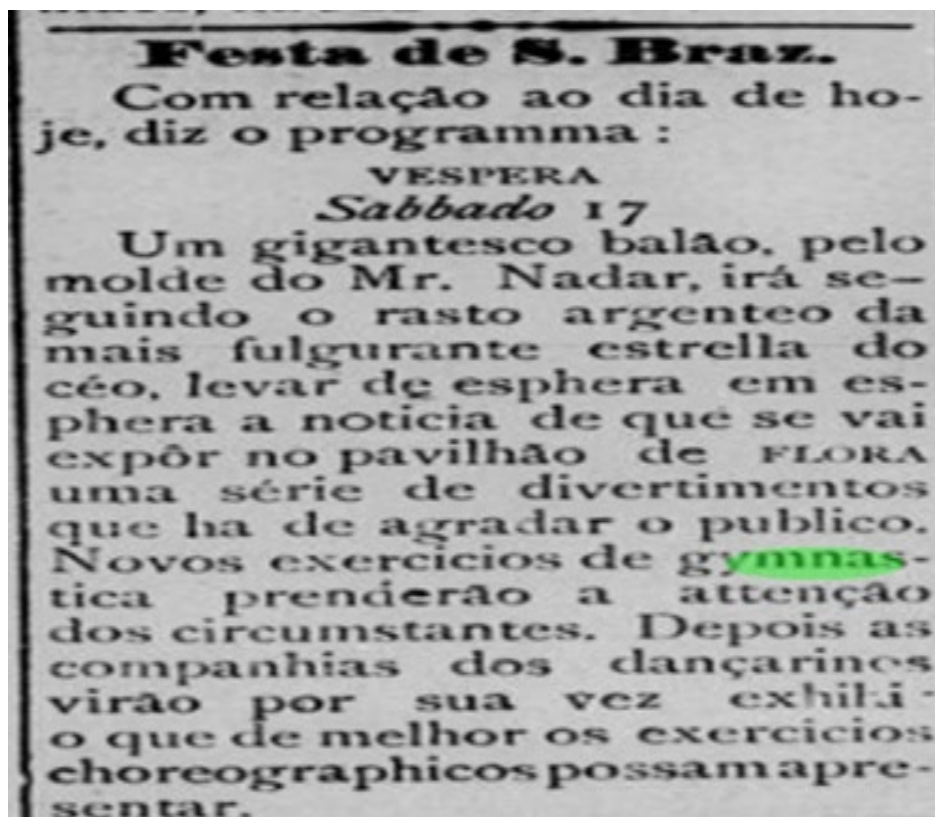
At times, discourse on gymnastics was linked to military discourses. In the nineteenth century, relations between military institutions and gymnastics unfolded in various developments, including the emergence of sports and gymnastic practices in Belém, as noted by Dias (2014). This reverberated through nationalist discourses within school discourses and school physical education. On this point, according to Melo (2018, p. 2), initiatives of “urban control and restriction of certain behaviors” occurred both in the civilian and military spheres, taking as reference “what occurred in Europe and related to the needs concerning the formation of an elite [...] of national character”.

On the other hand, did the streets, the festivities, the lowlands, the favelas, the rivers, the streams, and the beaches also play? Did capoeira and *carimbó* escape forms of control – the potentials of being, playing, dancing, running, jumping, leaping, spinning? According to Matos (2010, p. 71), in Belém many festivities took place during the nineteenth century: elite celebrations, with high costs for access, and festivities of an impoverished population, with folk games, dances, and popular gymnastics. The author shows that, during this period, “the process of spatial remodeling of part of the city of Belém with urbanizing and prophylactic intentions and the influence of European urban values in popular cultural manifestations were strongly present”.

During this period, elitized spaces of sociability coexisted with a city idealized in Paris, with better living conditions, controlled by codes and overt surveillance. In this Belém, authorized and controlled festivities took place. However, in the excluded city, festive practices assumed different forms, aesthetics, rituals, and developments. In contrast to medical, pedagogical, and military discourses, according to Melo (2018) and Soares (2011, p. 116), bodily practices originating from popular spheres constituted a set of knowledge that also served as a basis for scientific gymnastics and school physical education. In this sense, in Belém, in 1881, as shown in Figure 13, the

festival of São Braz featured popular gymnastics performances and choreographed dances, also with the purpose of presentation and entertainment.

Figura 13 – Gymnastics at the São Braz festival



Source: *Diário de Notícias* (PA), Belém do Pará, Feb. 8, 1881, p. 3.

It can be observed that practices similar to present-day folkloric street parades were already present during this period. It is evidenced that the festival of Nossa Senhora de Nazaré, in 1876, involved much dance, gymnastics, and artistic manifestations. It was a celebration organized by the parish itself, unlike today, when so-called profane manifestations are organized by artistic and cultural groups. The analysis of the text, taken from *Diário de Notícias* (1881), highlights gymnastics and choreographed dances as cultural attractions and forms of entertainment. The São Braz Festival, as described, presented a program that combined traditional elements with modernizing practices, such as gymnastics. The fusion of religious and artistic practices in the São Braz Festival rationalized and moralized popular spaces and festivities. Through artistic manifestations such as dance and gymnastics, local elites controlled and disciplined popular participation in these events.

Regarding the Nazarene festivities, according to Matos (2010, p. 72), there was a greater valorization of “cultural productions on the rise in Europe,” such as more organized and spectacularized circus performances. Thus, folk festivities, including Nazarene ones, “[...] began to be standardized, associated with outdated manifestations, and subjected to persecution and discrimination, a practice evidenced in various popular festivities in Brazil” (Matos, 2010, p. 72).

Matos (2010, p. 73) states that “[...] no efforts were spared in the attempt to moralize religious and playful practices” and that the Círio was – and still is – a major event that mobilizes commerce, generates large flows of people, and mobilizes both faith and festivity. Mediation was necessary regarding what was permitted or not permitted in popular manifestations. Furthermore, according to Matos (2010, p. 85), overt controls of these popular festivities took place, involving repression and statements that made possible the definition of what is correct, establishing certain behaviors and standards.

Popular gymnastics served as entertainment but, on the other hand, were framed as exotic, deviating from the rules and order (modern). Conversely, according to Soares (2011, p. 116), “[...] traditional popular practices of street performers, acrobats, and tightrope walkers, as spectacles,” constituted an important basis for modern, scientific, Europeanized, and educable gymnastics. In other words, popular gymnastics also served as an empirical-methodological basis for those developed within schools, clubs, and universities, which embodied the medical-hygienist-scientific discourse.

However, recent studies on body education in Belém do Pará demonstrate that gymnastics, games, and sports were not incorporated in a neutral or spontaneous manner, but rather constituted historically selected and systematized practices within a set of dispositifs that articulated medical, hygienist, pedagogical, and urban discourses, operating as techniques of bodily regulation and management of life in the context of the city’s modernization at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries (Paes Neto; Vieira, 2025).

The city, in its process of urbanization and beautification, functioned as an expanded pedagogical instance, insofar as public spaces, bodily practices, and discourses on health and civility came to compose a network of regulatory biopolitics aimed at producing disciplined, productive, and moralized bodies, evidencing that body

education extended beyond the limits of the school and was inscribed in everyday urban life in Belém (Paes Neto; Vieira, 2025). According to Foucault (2008, p. 57), collective health came to be configured as a fundamental economic requirement for the functioning of industrial society, with the body as a central object controlled within biopolitics. However, distinct forms of control were developed among different people and social groups. If, for a group of wealthy individuals, it was acceptable to dance, perform, and circulate through hidden social spaces, for their children such practices were deemed inappropriate. For youth, popular or “spectacular” festivities were often described as harmful.

The archaeo-genealogical reading of bodily practices in Belém do Pará allows us to understand that body education was constituted through disputes, contingencies, and power relations, moving away from linear or teleological interpretations and revealing how certain truths about health, movement, and discipline became historically stabilized to the detriment of other bodily possibilities that were silenced or interdicted (Paes Neto; Vieira, 2025). Thus, popular practices (folk games, gymnastics, dances, capoeira) were not, in themselves, well accepted within discourses surrounding power relations in societies of control and their dispositifs. All of these practices were considered appropriate in certain contexts and for different purposes, with variations across individuals, groups, and historical moments. However, more popular forms of gymnastics did not enjoy prestige as a “formative value,” being instead placed within another network of statements – that of spectacle and entertainment.

5 Final Considerations

With this study, it was analyzed how bodily practices – gymnastics and sports – were used as a pedagogical and political dispositif for the education of the body in the city of Belém do Pará between the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Based on Foucauldian contributions, it is demonstrated that sporting practices did not emerge in a spontaneous or neutral manner, but were discursively constructed as tools of biopower and biopolitics. Bodily practices constituted a dispositif of control-stimulation, which not only disciplined bodies and standardized behaviors, but also articulated with hygienist, moral, military, productivist, nationalist, and modernizing ideals that shaped Belém society during this period.

The analysis of the artifacts made it possible to affirm that discourses contributed to the configuration of a “pedagogical plot,” in which bodily practices were systematically directed toward the formation of healthy, productive subjects who were morally aligned with medical-hygienist values. Tensions and disputes that permeated discourses in Belém were evidenced. While certain segments of society viewed such practices as a civilizing and moralizing means, others perceived them as dangerous and uncontrolled practices. The contradictions revealed by the discourses of the period point to the complexity of these phenomena. Discourses of health, discipline, nationalism, and morality intertwine, also in Belém, constructing narratives that produced multiple events and stimulated forms of control over bodies and subjectivities. Therefore, they were constituted as strategies of social regulation of bodies through discourses of control-stimulation.

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