

Naturism: the body as a central element in the return to nature

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Abstract

The term “naturism” refers to a variety of movements, taking different forms, that advocate a return to nature. It originated as a medical term, and initially designated alternative therapeutic practices based on the use of natural elements. In the late nineteenth century, it was gradually associated with calls for lifestyles that were more in keeping with nature, and then at the dawn of the twentieth century, with collective and mixed nudity during leisure time. This practice, which was initiated in Germany in relatively narrow circles, spread to Western Europe during the interwar period. It became popularized after World War Two and was integrated into the economy of mass tourism. Although the hedonistic dimension of nudity often overshadows the initial project of a naturist reform of lifestyles, nudism nevertheless remains, for most of its followers, associated with the ideal of a return to nature.

Article

The adjective “naturist” appeared in the medical vocabulary of the late eighteenth century. At the time, it denoted the attitude of doctors who, due to their scepticism towards the classical pharmacopoeia, chose to rely instead on the natural disposition of living organisms to fight in order to recover health. The term refers less to a genuine body of doctrines than to medical ethics founded on careful observation of the course of illnesses, along with a certain therapeutic abstinence, with the doctor being careful not to disturb the “medicating force of nature.” Initially linked to the cultural context of the period, this medical naturism of the Enlightenment declined during the first third of the nineteenth century. In many respects, it appears in retrospect as a stage in the development of a secularized conception of physiology—the specificity of the living body no longer being attributed to the intervention of a spiritual principle, but to the action of a natural force—as well as the birth of clinical medicine.

The medical scepticism borne by this naturism nevertheless endured. In Germanic countries, a part of the aristocracy and cultured elites turned away from official medicine, preferring to rely on the empirical treatments of healers. Whether it was the hydrotherapy cure of the Silesian peasant Priessnitz (1799-1851) or the Bavarian priest Kneipp (1821-1897), or the atmospheric cure of the Swiss dyer Rickli (1823-1906), these systems were all based on the certainty that the body’s exposure to natural elements, in association with a simple and rustic lifestyle, increased the organism’s capacity to fight illnesses. Various forms of natural medicine enjoyed genuine success, with associations dedicated to their promotion forming throughout Germany. For example, on the eve of The Great War, the Union of German Associations for a More Natural Lifestyle and Medicine (Deutscher Bund der Vereine für naturgemäße Lebens- und Heilweise) had nearly 150,000 members and manifested a kind of social resistance to the professionalization and technicization of medicine.

More broadly, from the 1870s to The Great War, the urban and industrial growth of Western Europe prompted a multifaceted critique of modernity, one that sometimes found in the return to nature a

remedy for decadence. Followers of vegetarianism or natural medicine, promoters of physical culture or garden cities, militants in the fight against alcohol, tobacco, or the wearing of corsets, all shared the same obsession with degeneration and a desire to return to a lifestyle deemed more natural. This militant world was most developed in Germany, where it established itself as a genuine reform movement of lifestyles (*Lebensreformbewegung*). Within this movement, the resurgence of interest in Greek Antiquity and the search for contact with nature, prompted certain authors to advocate the hygienic, aesthetic, and ethical virtues of nudity. In their opinion, the naked body was by nature non-erotic, it was actually the development of modesty that led to increased vice and perversion by arousing unhealthy curiosities and obsessions. The collective and mixed removal of all clothing would bring back the chaste and naive nudity of our origins, free people from shame over their bodies, and promote healthy relations between the sexes.

Nudist associations formed among the urban middle class in Germany, which began to take advantage of paid holidays and established light-and-air baths (*Licht und Luftbad*) to rejuvenate themselves through contact with the natural elements. However, complete and mixed nudity remained improper outside of Germanic countries. For example, in France, naturist doctors prescribed air bathing or sunbathing separated by gender, or in the context of family baths, with a loincloth for men and a tunic for women.

It took until the interwar period for similar movements, based on the example of German nudism, to form in the rest of Europe. In the United Kingdom, the English Gymnosophical Society was founded in 1922, and set up a site in Essex two years later. In France, the first "gymnastics centre," the Sparta-Club, opened in 1927 on a property located in the Eure. This socially condemned practice was most often practiced by a leisured public, which gathered in local associations of modest size. Attempts were made to bring them together, as in the league Vivre (France, 1927) or the British Sun Bathers Association (1943). Yet it was only in Germany, where groups collectively totalled approximately 100,000 members, that a genuine mass nudism existed. The advent of Nazism led to the dissolution of these associations. The only one to endure was the racist organization Bund für Leibesucht, which exalted the "Aryan" body, and ultimately received the regime's support.

In the aftermath of World War Two, there was a genuine democratization of nudist naturism, and the emergence of large-scale organizations in Western Europe: Deutscher Verband für Freikörperkultur (RFA, 1949), Fédération française de naturisme (1950), Central Council for British Naturism (1964), Unione naturisti italiani (1964). These federations, which were themselves part of the International Naturist Federation (1953), accompanied the gradual integration of naturism within the economy of mass tourism. In the GDR, despite attempts on the part of authorities to prohibit the practice, nudism imposed itself as a popular leisure activity, especially along the Baltic Sea coast.

In becoming accessible to all, the degree of personal conviction and commitment required for the practice of naturism was tempered. It is still associated with denunciation of the excesses of modern life, a desire to find a harmonious balance with nature, and the ideal of a healthy life. However, attending naturist centres seems to be primarily motivated by the opportunity it provides to experience the pleasure of the naked body's contact with the natural elements. Naturism thus took on a hedonistic dimension, a sign of the emergence of a new way of paying attention to one's body and the sensations it provides. For that matter, some strands of the 1960s counterculture associated the practice of collective nudity with a larger revolution in mores, notably with a certain form of sexual liberty. Faced with this evolution, the followers of a more classical naturism have continued to advocate a chaste nudity, associated with a sober and rustic ideal of life.

In parallel to this nudist naturism, which developed in all industrialized countries during the second half of the twentieth century, a medical and hygienist naturism endured, which is now referred to by

the expressions “soft medicine” and “natural medicine.” Its followers generally associate a return to nature with a particular type of diet, a rejection of conventional treatments, and a lifestyle that at least partially avoids consumer society.

Although within militant circles naturism is the subject of conflicting definitions and disputes over legacy, the general public now connects this term with the occasional practice of open-air collective nudity, associated in certain cases with an ideal of a simple and environmentally responsible life, and in other cases with a kind of sexual libertinism.

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