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# VIKTOR MURNIK: Culture and Physical Exercise

**Author:** Viktor Murnik

**Title:** Culture and Physical Exercise

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**Language:** Slovenian

## About the author

**Viktor Murnik** (1874, Ljubljana–1964, Ljubljana) was a physical educator, gymnast, publicist, and editor of a number of publications. Murnik is not traditionally seen as a political thinker, but primarily as a theoretician and practitioner of gymnastics as well as a Sokol activist. However, because he left behind numerous publications on various tropics, including that of the national economy, the relationship between body and mind,<sup>1</sup> and civilizational hierarchies, the analysis of his political thought can provide an insight into the way his gymnastics-related practice and experience influenced his understanding of relevant issues. This is especially true because he regularly reflected on numerous contemporaneous

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1 Jonathan Westphal, *The Mind–Body Problem* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2016).

transnational—mainly German-language and Western European—pedagogical and physical education-related debates in a sophisticated manner.

Murnik was born in Ljubljana into a well-off family. He graduated from the Classical Gymnasium in Ljubljana and later the University of Graz, where he studied law, in 1892 and 1898 respectively. After his studies, he briefly served at the Ljubljana court and subsequently worked at the Ljubljana Chamber of Commerce and Crafts, of which he became the general secretary in 1901, maintaining this position until 1925. He was the one to put forward the initial proposal for the foundation of the Slovenian Academy of Commerce and Trade in Ljubljana in 1901. In parallel, Murnik also acted as a member of the Executive Committee of the Craft Fair (which acquired its recurring character due to his advocacy), as well as a committee member of the Slovenian Mercury Market Association, within which he also developed and improved the associational journal.

Murnik is mostly known in historiography, however, for his activism in the Sokol gymnastics movement. Within Sokol, he published most of his booklets and articles on a wide array of issues. Sokol was founded in the 1860s in the Bohemian lands as a physical culture-centered Czech national and Slavic association. Following the example of the Czech Sokol (1862), the Slovenian Sokol organization (*Južni Sokol*) was founded in Ljubljana in 1863. By the turn of the twentieth century, Sokol organizations had spread across the Dual Monarchy and beyond, most notably to the Russian Empire, USA, Bulgaria, Serbia, and Montenegro, acquiring sizeable membership in the process.<sup>2</sup> For Slovenians and other Slavic nationalities, Sokol represented one of the key *loci* of nation-building and the dissemination of national ideas. Murnik's family was also involved in the association; Viktor joined on the insistence of his paternal uncle, also a notable political thinker, Ivan/Janez Murnik. Throughout his life, Murnik held numerous high positions in Sokol and greatly contributed to the shaping of its associational practices and culture. Namely, he served as the Ljubljana Sokol official in different capacities at various points between 1893 and 1924, as well as the head of the Slovenian Sokol Union (1906–1918) and later the Yugoslav Sokol Union (1920–4, 1926–30), whereby he was most active as a chairman of the educational section in the early 1920s. In addition, Murnik was active in the Czechoslovak-Yugoslav Sokol federation and in the International Gymnastic Union, representing Slovenian and Yugoslav Sokol on different occasions.

Within Sokol, Murnik's greatest contributions can be seen not only in his work done in a leadership capacity, or in the fact that he trained the internationally best-performing Yugoslav gymnasts of the period, but primarily in his

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2 Claire Nolte, *The Sokol in the Czech Lands to 1914: Training for the Nation* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002).

long-standing publishing activity which supported several of his intellectual and sociopolitical agendas.

First, he tasked himself relatively early on with developing a systematized professional gymnastics- and movement-related terminology in the Slovenian and Serbo-Croatian languages. Before, most trainers relied either on German or on nascent Czech terminology developed by the Czech Sokol Union (*Česká obec sokolská*). This terminology primarily tackled the most basic movements and positions/postures, and was in Murnik's focus not only because these terms were central to Sokol's associational life and practices, but also because of his ongoing theorization on the intimate link between bodily movement and a given nation's culture and economy. In the same vein, he set out to systematize basic gymnastic exercises, taking into account a wide array of physiological, biological, psychological, but also culture- and economy-related concerns. In addition to the terminology itself, which he aimed to 'Slavicize' by keeping the Czech roots whenever possible, Murnik also invented a counting system that captured the duration of each movement. This was applied to the complex calisthenic exercises and gymnastics dances (*telovadni plesi*) he invented, akin to other popular symbolic nation-building tools like the *tableaux vivants* and Dalcroze eurhythmics. This type of public performance was rather typical of Sokol's nation-building repertoire at the turn of the century, most often presented at Sokol *slets* (large-scale urban gatherings and performances).<sup>3</sup>

Second, he greatly contributed to changing Sokol's associational practices and culture. Initially, it had been oriented toward an essentially elitist and certainly urban, middle-class symbolic politics centered on artistic performances, symbolic rituals in urban spaces, and socializing and networking in a neo-Slavist tradition. Murnik re-oriented Sokol rather toward highly professional and holistically understood gymnastics, which aimed not only at the maximization of associational membership, but also at the positioning of Sokol as an organization that would practically "mold" the "national body." Importantly, Murnik's most notable strategy of expanding the associational membership was to include women and women's gymnastics trainers, thus creating women's departments

3 *Tableaux vivants* were employed by various (national) movements to perform their ideology over the long nineteenth century. For the French Revolution's Festival of Reason (1793), see Mona Ozouf, *Festivals and the French Revolution* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988), 210. On *tableaux vivants* in the promotion of imperial loyalty in the Habsburg Monarchy, see Daniel L. Unowsky, *The Pomp and the Politics of Patriotism. Imperial Celebrations in Habsburg Austria, 1848-1916* (West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press, 2005), 63, 79, 84, 87. For their role in staging English national identity in the complex imperial context, see Karen Elisabeth Harker, "Reconstructing Shakespearean Soundscapes: Tableaux Vivants, Incidental Music, and Expressions of National Identity on the London Stage, 1855-1911," doctoral dissertation (University of Birmingham, Birmingham, England, United Kingdom, 2020).

and committees within Sokol, where they could exercise independently and develop their own practices. In other words, his work was essential for initiating a novel phase of nation-building whereby it was translated from a primarily cultural and intellectual endeavor into a primarily practical one, with the aim of actually producing Yugoslavs with greater bodily capacity, body-mind harmony, and “national awareness” through Sokol’s associational activities.

Overall, his most important texts were published almost exclusively in the context of Sokol, within its associational periodicals or as stand-alone publications. Within this frame, the main topics that he tackled were those of the (holistically understood) pedagogy of physical education, the systematization of physical movements, national economy, and Sokol ideology more broadly.<sup>4</sup> Importantly, he also acted as the editor of some of the most important Sokol periodicals and authored a number of choreographies for the gymnastic dances inspired by both classical and integral Yugoslavist canon.<sup>5</sup>

**MOST IMPORTANT WORKS:** *Sokolstvo in življenje* (Ljubljana, 1932); *Kultura in telovadba* (Ljubljana, 1929); “Prosvetni rad u Sokolstvu,” *Sokolski glasnik*, no. 3–4 (1923): 89–95; “O problemih sistematike telesnih vaj,” *Soko: List prednjaštva Saveza Sokola Kraljevine Jugoslavije*, nos. 1–12 (1935), nos. 2–12 (1936), and no. 2 (1937).

## Context

The text of this source appeared in a booklet that Viktor Murnik self-published in 1929,<sup>6</sup> and before that as a series of articles in the main Sokol periodical, *Sokolski glasnik* (The Sokol Herald), in December that same year. It can be considered one of his most sophisticated pieces of writing on the relationship between holistically understood physical education and culture, respectively.

Due to his long-term prominent position within Sokol, as well as his practices within the association—particularly his systematization of movement and the development of Sokol pedagogy—it is important to use different elements from his biography and associational activities as a crucial context around the

4 “Prosvetni rad u Sokolstvu,” *Sokolski glasnik*, no. 3–4 (1923), 89–95. Viktor Murnik, *Sokolstvo in življenje* (Ljubljana: self-published, 1932). Viktor Murnik “Narodno gospodarstvo in Sokolstvo,” *Trgovski list* 15, nos. 29–36, March 8–26, 1932, 4. Viktor Murnik “O problemih sistematike telesnih vaj,” *Soko: List prednjaštva Sokola Kraljevine Jugoslavije*, nos. 1–12 (1935), nos. 2–12 (1936), no. 2 (1937).

5 *Vestnik tehničnega odbora Jugoslovanske sokolske zveze* (The Herald of the Technical Committee of the Yugoslav Sokol Union); *Prednjak* (Gymnast), which was renamed in 1930 into *Soko: List prednjaštva Sokola Kraljevine Jugoslavije* (The Falcon: Journal of Sokol Gymnasts in the Kingdom of Yugoslavia).

6 Viktor Murnik, *Kultura in telovadba* (Ljubljana: self-published, 1929).

chosen text. These include, first, his very particular political socialization in *fin-de-siècle* Ljubljana; second, his subsequent role as an intellectual mediator between Western intellectual trends and regional ones; third, the relevance of the volatile local political context and his eventual ideological transformation. This transformation can be seen in Murnik's gradual shift from an optimistic, culturally Yugoslavist evolutionist thinker socialized in the modernist neo-Slavist traditions, towards a culturally pessimistic one that heavily biologized and essentialized cultural phenomena. It stemmed from his and most other intellectuals' grave disappointment brought about by the turbulent politics of the first decade of the interwar Yugoslav state and later the Great Depression. For that very reason, this 1929 booklet is one of the first publications that reflects his change of attitude.

Sokol, as the main venue of his political socialization, was rooted in its founders' and subsequently Masarykian evolutionist and modernist ideologies. To that end, Murnik heavily drew on these traditions throughout his life, albeit reading them through lenses of different disciplines at different points in time. This meant that he held strictly liberal beliefs on the value of voluntarism, "small-scale work," and gradual change, in contrast to those who increasingly argued for radical, revolutionary change from both left and right. Importantly, as with other Sokol thinkers, Murnik tasked himself with translating these thoughts into practice and, consequently, "molding the national body" which he saw as culturally and economically underdeveloped. The goal of this process was to raise the level of collective culture and productivity so that it could eventually fit the political modernity he initially thought the new Yugoslav state embodied due to its relatively more democratic character when compared to the previous state structures, e.g. the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy.

Crucially, Murnik was one of the most profound positivist thinkers on physical education in the region and belonged to the camp of those who vehemently argued for a distinction between (Western European) competitive sports and (Swedish, German, and Sokol) gymnastic systems on philosophical, pedagogical, psychological, but also economic grounds. This was primarily due to gymnastics' collectivist and sports' individualistic characters, rendering the former as a potential vehicle for large-scale change in national health, strength, efficiency and beauty. In this sense, Murnik can be regarded as a mediator between Western European positivists and theorists of gymnastics as boundary-work performances, such as Georges Deménÿ, and the local knowledge producing milieux that hadn't yet experienced the institutionalization of such disciplines in the Slovenian or wider South Slavic context.

The thinkers who greatly influenced Murnik in this period usually stemmed from the strain of contemporaneous cognitivist pedagogy which sought to reject

the previously dominant behaviorist paradigm. Additionally, they acquired monistic views on the relationship between body and mind, seeking to connect gymnastics, education, and wider sociopolitical systems. In other words, these thinkers believed in the possibility of physically training people into adopting certain psychological traits as a consequence of bodily exercise. They believed that this would consequently create conditions for the creation or upholding of particular sociopolitical systems. This belief was in stark contrast with both Western European competitive sports- or aesthetics-based physical culture at the time, but also with the stances that came to dominate the East Central European contexts in the mid-to-late 1930s, after many such thinkers and practitioners experienced grave disappointment with the lack of results of their long-standing practical efforts.

Murnik and the rest of the thinkers engaged in associations similar to and including Sokol had a holistic and monistic view of physical education. They assumed that physical exercise greatly influenced human psychology, cognition, values, and capacities. Because of this, they engaged with the associational membership with an aim to establish and improve practices that were to raise the population's cultural level, but also labor capacity and efficiency.

However, the volatile party politics in 1920s Yugoslavia caused a wide-spread disappointment among those post-Habsburg Yugoslavist thinkers.<sup>7</sup> This was true also of Murnik, who had expected the state to take the lead in achieving the aforementioned goals. Therefore, he gradually adopted cultural pessimist and essentially antimodernist views around 1929, which is very much reflected in his subsequent stances towards physical education as well. This becomes particularly visible in this text, in which Murnik relied on works of Oswald Spengler and Friedrich Nietzsche to espouse arguments on modern life's harmful impact on human bodily capacities.<sup>8</sup> He also used this antimodernist argument to overturn civilizational hierarchies, claiming that primitive cultures are bound to develop (unlike modern societies which are bound to stagnate), due to their bodily movements being more natural and unbound. His main inspiration for this, beyond Spengler's take on Slavic nations as the youthful rising ones, was the work of the Leipzig-based ethnologist Karl Weule, who studied different groups' relations to physical exercise and their allegedly consequent cultural development.

When regarded from this perspective, Murnik's writings on the theory of movement and his notable work on systematizing basic calisthenic movements, as well as their expert terminology in Slovenian and Serbo-Croatian languages, represent a crucial vehicle and backdrop for his further theorizing on "versatile

7 Dejan Djokić, *Elusive Compromise: A History of Interwar Yugoslavia* (London: Hurst, 2007).

8 Oswald Spengler, *Der Mensch und die Technik* (Munich: C. H. Beck, 1931).

movement” (*svestrani pokret*). He saw “versatile movement” in turn as conducive to the production of citizens with enlarged labor capacity, energy, and efficiency, but also psychological traits enabling the development of a more stable and progressive political culture, such as feelings of social solidarity, social justice, democratic spirit (*demokratičnost*), cooperativeness, intelligence, and so on.

In this particular booklet, *Kultura in telovadba* (Culture and Physical Exercise, 1929), Murnik argued that all culture is merely an exponent of the nature of the human body and is thus solely builds upon those foundations. This argument can be read as an essentially antimodernist—but at the same time evolutionist—take on civilizational hierarchies.

Seen from the Slovenian perspective, which was the most industrialized and literate language group in the interwar Yugoslav state, Murnik’s theorization on physical and psychological malleability on the one hand and the placing of these debates into a civilizational framework on the other hand, can be seen as an attempt to argue for equalizing the state’s immensely diverse populations—at least in terms of bodily capacity and psychological disposition. Importantly, having in mind his strictly anti-clerical, urban liberal milieu in Ljubljana, which was aligned with the royal court’s integral Yugoslavist exponents in party politics (e.g. with the *Jugoslovenska nacionalna stranka*, the Yugoslav National Party), among others, for economic reasons his amalgamation-focused theoretical arguments and practices within Sokol can be seen not only as modernization attempts, but also as supportive of the centralist conception of the novel state.<sup>9</sup>

When examining this and other texts he produced, it is visible that the pool of sources and debates he mainly drew on consisted of progressive, reformist Germanophone physical education theorists, such as the immensely influential Karl Gaulhofer and Margarete Streicher, who jointly coined the theory on “natural movement,” as well as Friedrich August Schmidt, the promoter of open-air gymnastics and the FKK movement. Furthermore, he also relied significantly on the Hungarian-Jewish philosopher and physicist of the older generation, Menyhért Palágyi, who dealt with the philosophy of perception and imagination, and whose theory of “virtual movement” Murnik used to further theorize on and experiment with the connection between the physiology of exercise and imaginative psychological processes.

Combining the American-style theory of scientific management, derived directly from Henry Ford, and the holistic cognitivist pedagogy of Eduard Spranger, Murnik strongly believed in the ability of physical education to teach or train

9 Oskar Mulej, “‘Post-Liberalism,’ Anti-Clericalism and Yugoslav Nationalism. Slovene Progressive Political Camp in the Interwar Period and Contemporary Czech Politics,” *Střed. Časopis pro mezioborová studia Střední Evropy 19. a 20. století. / Centre. Journal for Interdisciplinary Studies of Central Europe in the 19th and 20th Centuries* 6, no. 1 (2014): 65–93.



individuals to use their physical energies in an economically efficient manner, as well as to apply those same principles elsewhere in life and thus to culturally develop, ultimately achieving state sovereignty through economic emancipation. In the context of the relatively small, unstable, and certainly economically weak Yugoslavia, this question was of paramount importance, especially when framed in positivist terms.

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**VIKTOR MURNIK**  
**“Culture and Physical Exercise”**

A nation’s true and genuine culture requires not only healthy geniuses but also healthy average people. The culture of a nation is not and cannot be in the domain of geniuses alone. Ordinary people—in fact, as many of them as possible, or actually the entire nation—must also take part in it, each according to their own capabilities, which they must strengthen and keep healthy. According to the prominent pedagogical scientist and philosopher Eduard Spranger, the task that education in general has to fulfill is to enable people to support culture (i.e., to explore and experience it), create culture (i.e., in an ideal sense, to participate in its further development), and possess culture (i.e., to strive to become someone with a more mature, richer, and sophisticated personality). However, to be able to fulfill these goals in culture, it is necessary, above all, to have a healthy body because all culture is originally based on nature. In a sense, it merely represents an elevated and ennobled nature. Each person who is filled with culture and animates culture is also characterized by their coexistence with nature; they, too, would be unable to create anything spiritual if their bodies were not healthy and strong.

People can only maintain their relationship with nature through their bodies. The more in harmony with it, the more naturally they live, and the healthier and more robust they are. Natural life, health, and strength are impossible without vigorous and versatile physical activity. As long as our ancestors were in a *primaeval* state, they had an irresistible impulse towards physical movement and were forced to engage in it by their very living conditions. Contemporary living conditions in the civilized world no longer force people to pursue versatile and vigorous physical activity, but rather quite the opposite: they promote monotonous, often weak bodily movement with a detrimental effect on the body. In the civilized era, the genuine, powerful,



and healthy physical activity inherent to *primaeval* life can only be achieved by engaging in systematic physical exercise, possibly in nature. Such exercise is the only way for the people and nation to maintain the natural conditions which are indispensable for culture to thrive in the ever-worsening conditions of the new era.

This is the connection between physical exercise and culture, which is crucial. Modern physical exercise represents an inevitable and basic condition for modern culture. It should develop, strengthen, and keep healthy and strong all those natural human strengths that guarantee the healthy further development of culture.

...

### **Spirit and Life, Each to Its Own, but Both in Harmony!**

Indeed, the truth and the proper path lie in the middle. Klages supposes that the spirit will one day cease to dwell in humans. Be that as it may, it remains in people for the time being and will remain there—if not forever, at least into the foreseeable future. And as long as it dwells in people, it must be in harmony with life, with the living body, if it is to do well and right. If the spirit can recognize that it is not doing what is proper and healthy, if it can recognize its mistakes and then force itself to correct them, then it will not succumb to such a terrible fate as Klages thinks. If it were in the essence of the human spirit to want and need to oppress life, this spirit would not lament, regret, and force itself to correct mistakes, as we can see from the abovementioned sayings of prominent men. Klages himself would not lament, either. If the oppression of life was contained in the essence of the human spirit, it should represent an essential part of every human being's spirit. However, as the voices of the aforesaid profound spirits reveal, it clearly does not.

So, the spirit also deserves what it is owed. People should not be aimlessly carried or driven by the powers stemming from a strengthened life force without any reflection or work of the spirit. They also need knowledge, now more than ever: knowledge that great men have attained and accumulated over time with the help of their spirit and based on their intuition. The intuition that these men possessed throughout history cannot simply appear in one's head but needs to be learned. People need to move a lot, strengthen their bodies, but also learn. In ancient Greece, the youth had to exercise much more than today's youth, but they also had to learn a lot. With a strong body filled with vigorous life, healthy and robust emotions, and a lively, healthy imagination, learning will not only mean stuffing knowledge into the brain because a healthy intuition will ensure a healthy digestion of that knowledge.

It will not be “cramming,” loading information into memory, but rather experiencing education. Properly and soundly digested knowledge will allow people to control their own intuition and examine if their intuitive “hunches” are right or wrong, if they “illuminate” or not. They will also be able to judge what is pristine and genuine in the “spiritual food” so abundantly offered in these increasingly “ink-stained” times. ...

... Vital force is fading from both the intellectuals and the circles which are to receive their works. And what are these circles like nowadays, when everyone is moving to the cities, and more and more people are gathering and concentrating in them? When people smell and breathe nothing but smoke, when they see only the movement of machines, these soulless and lifeless contraptions, when at home and in the streets they only come across mechanized nature, merely wires, screws, wheels, and constructions; when at home and in the streets, their heads are filled with voices from the radio, separated from actual life—these monstrous voices, almost disembodied as if the emotions emanating from them were preserved in formaldehyde; when their ears are continuously assaulted by the roar of motorcycles and cars and the hideous screaming of their horns, a sound that only a modern civilized man could produce and whose ears are soothed by this howling but are torn apart by the ringing of bells that Napoleon still loved to listen to; when so many people hardly ever move their bodies except for sluggish modern dance moves they make in smoky rooms to the screeching sounds of a jazz band, compared to which even the sounds of cats in heat are a true comfort to the ears; and so on. In such an environment, it is no wonder that factories are built even on the city’s Parnassus, spewing out, promptly on order, poetic and other artistic constructions, dark, sooty constructions of smoke that the brain spews.

However, Europeans have recently felt an increasing desire to return to unstructured life. ...

The intensive fostering of physical exercise, if anything, is the only thing that can make culture compatible with civilization—a fusion that some hold up as an ideal.

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