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**Bill Hayes** *Sweat: A History of Exercise*. New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2023. 246 pp. ISBN: HB: 978-1-62040-228-3; PB: 978-1-62040-230-6; EBOOK: 978-1-62040-229-0

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Anyone who has seen the character-driven and sharp film *Sweat* by Magnus von Horn probably remembers the contrast that is concentrated in the life of its main character, fitness influencer Sylwia: While on the one hand her online life seems brilliant, energetic, content and ideal in every way, the situation looks dramatically different when the cameras are turned off, when her workout classes end and she finds herself in a reality plagued by dissatisfaction, isolation, loneliness and alienation. "Do not judge a book by its cover," says a well-known proverb, and a similar thought could be applied to a similarly titled book, Bill Hayes' *Sweat: A History of Exercise*. On the one hand, the title is tempting, at least for scholars in the field of kinesiology, as it invites the reading of a work that supposedly deals with the history of an increasingly important aspect of (especially Western) modern life. On the other hand, reading the book from cover to cover is somewhat disappointing, especially if one expects a scientific and in-depth approach to the subject. The book can hardly be described as a credible work of scholarship – it is more a mixture of the author's experiences, his personal history and memories, which he weaves together by highlighting a number of references he came across (several times quite by accident) while following "an expedition that would cross more than two thousand years, touch down in three continents, and lead me to study dozens of forms of exercise/.../ [to answer his questions] about how the arts of exercise were invented, lost and rediscovered" (p. 10).

It is fair to point out at the outset that the author is not trying to mislead us – as soon as he describes how he conceived and designed his project, Hayes explains that the book is the result of a desire to connect his exercise experiences with the lost wisdom of the past, adding, "It would be a personal history, not a definitive one" (p. 6). The problem with his text is neither that he does not present a comprehensive, definitive history – history is hardly definitive, even if it is not "personal" – nor that he intertwines the study of exercise with his own experiences. The French sociologist Wacquant, for example, has done a remarkable job in *Body & Soul* as a novice boxer, attempting to radicalise the concept of habitus methodologically and empirically through a reflexive carnal micro-sociology, a sociology of lived experience. The unscientific character or weak credibility of Hayes' book is thus evident elsewhere, for example in the flawed method of his work. He himself never explains the methodology he used, but from his descriptions of visits to various libraries we can infer that his basic method was to reserve a relatively large pile of books (we learn nothing about the search criteria, but it is clear that he was particularly fond of the so-called "rare books"), which he then skimmed more or less superficially, using them only when he was fascinated by a particular aspect (sometimes he did not even have half an hour to spend on the books, sometimes he spent a relatively short and

poor quality time with the reserved pile ("I stayed at the library another ninety minutes but found it hard to concentrate" (p. 92)), sometimes it seems as if he was more fascinated by the fact that he held a book in his hands and that the task was thus done for him, rather than taking this as a starting point for detailed and adequate study). The fundamental work, for example, to which he returns again and again in the course of the book (once in search of its translator, a second time when he meets a scholar of this author, a third time when he wants to see the original drawings, and so on), is thus the work of the Italian physician Girolamo Mercuriale *De arte gymnastica*, published in 1573, which he is fascinated by not so much for its words (he does not understand the original Latin) as for its illustrations (at one point he says quite openly: "If, say, Ms. Shaner had brought out the unillustrated 1569 edition instead, I might have leafed through the impenetrable Latin text, closed the book, and not given it another thought." (p. 115)). Moreover, *De arte gymnastica* is a reference that Hayes did not discover through his own efforts and research, but was offered to him by a librarian, so he found it quite by accident. Coincidences or "happy accidents" are certainly a constant in science as well, and it would be far from truth saying that they do not produce valid results – on the contrary, some important discoveries have been the result of pure coincidences (think of Fleming and penicillin). Similarly, serendipitous discoveries can (and have throughout history) produced important new problems for research. But it is one thing, if serendipity is "the discovery through chance by a theoretically informed mind", as Merton would have put it, and quite another if it is not and cannot be adequately dealt with.

Another shortcoming of Hayes' book is that nowhere does he really define exactly what he means when he speaks of exercise, and the history of what he intended to write. It must be emphasised that Hayes quotes Mercuriale's definition of exercise – "Strictly speaking, exercise is a physical movement that is vigorous and spontaneous, which involves a change in breathing pattern, and is undertaken with the aim of keeping healthy or building up a sound constitution." (pp. 26-27) – that he additionally emphasises Mercuriale's emphasis on a specific aim or intention of this physical activity, namely the maintenance of health, and that Hayes is also clearly aware of the distinctions between different types of physical activity (for example: "This notion of *intention* is also useful in distinguishing exercise from sports. /.../ Of course, you can get exercise when playing basketball or tennis or even golf (some say), but exercise is secondary to the actual intention of engaging in sports" (p. 27)). However, throughout the work, in which he combines his own experiences with leaps into selectively chosen history, he is not consistent in these distinctions and does not maintain them. If we follow the highlighted definition from

the sixteenth century, Hayes often writes about activities that can hardly be classified as such – for example, forms of physical activity that in the past served to prepare for war, forms of physical activity that were primarily a survival strategy, or, for example, inventions such as the safety bicycle, which served primarily as a means of locomotion, offered women the opportunity to gain previously unknown forms of freedom, and as such was an important tool in their struggle for emancipation. It would be wrong and an exaggeration to say that reading these parts cannot be instructive and interesting in some ways, but it deviates from the author's basic intention and is somewhat less relevant in this respect. The author's more personal writings, such as the chapter on the AIDS pandemic in the 1980s and later, or, for example, the writings that talk about his late partner, are also somewhat less relevant for the reader who is primarily interested in the potential history of exercise. But even in his attempts to defend exercise and its possible health benefits, the author is somewhat superficial, at least in some places. At one point, for example, he attempts to deny the value of Greif's essay *Against Exercise* on the basis of the documented physical and mental health benefits of exercise (if Greif is *against* exercise in the exposed essay, this does not mean that he denies its potential health benefits – these are not actually the main topic of his essay, for Greif focuses on something else, namely, in short, the modern transformation of exercise into something that can be articulated as a moral imperative).

This is not to say, however, that *Sweat: A History of Exercise* cannot in any way be a useful read, and that even those seeking more of what the title promises cannot find some useful information; some meaningful contextualisations that let us know that forms of movement are always and everywhere embedded in the prevailing organisation of social life (for example, the meaning of exercise in Mercuriale's time and its distinction from the meaning of exercise in ancient Greek culture and its gymnasium); or at least some inspiring reflections. Let us try to draw a conclusion in this respect as well. When Hayes was following "Mercuriale's footsteps" and spending some time in Rome as a visiting scholar, he met Alice Waters, the famous American chef and founder of Chez Panisse in Berkeley. They talked about his project and she surprised him with her opinion: "Gyms are the fast food of exercise /.../ How unpleasant it is /.../ that people think they must go to a gym to exercise," (p. 142), she told him. It would be interesting for her, she said, to translate what she did with food to the level of exercise and "work out" in a way that is integrated into everyday life, based on pleasure and bypassing extravagance and artifice. "It's the difference between going to a gym and dancing: one is work, the other is pleasurable." (p. 142). Her view cannot be easily generalised, but she echoes Grief's

opinion that exercise today is often more work than pleasure. "Good health shouldn't be the goal of exercise. Make 'pleasure' the goal /.../ and it will lead to good health." (p. 143). We can doubt that Mercuriale – who considered the same activity, e.g. digging, as exercise exclusively when it was performed with the aim of strengthening health, but not, for example, when someone dug to cultivate the soil – would call the activity whose basic aim becomes the pursuit of pleasure exercise, but on the other hand: might not a different understanding and focus also contain a much greater motivation?