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► **To cite this version:**

Pierre Philippe-Meden. Georges Hébert (1875-1957) A naturalist's invention of body ecology. Body Ecology and Emersive Leisure, 2018. hal-02059840

**HAL Id: hal-02059840**

**<https://hal.science/hal-02059840>**

Submitted on 6 Mar 2019

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## Chapter 2

# Georges Hébert (1875–1957)

## A naturalist's invention of body ecology

*Pierre Philippe-Meden*

The French naval commander Georges Hébert, Director of the *Collège d'Athlètes de Reims* from 1912 to 1914 and editor of the journal *L'Éducation Physique* (1902–1972) after 1922, developed a naturalist or naturalist approach to the human body, movement and action that revolutionised the concept and practice of gymnastics. Hébert can therefore be considered as an early twentieth century forerunner of the 'body ecology' movement.

However, Hébert's method went into decline after the 1960s and 1970s. At a conference in 1995 organised by the Centre for Research and Innovation in Sport at the University Claude Bernard Lyon 1, sports historian Pierre Arnaud (1942–2016) described how it had been '[rejected] as a thing of the past in the history of education, teaching and sport'<sup>1</sup> (Arnaud 1995). Since then, the method has made a remarkable comeback, internationally, both in the civil and military world.

Despite this rehabilitation, there are still misunderstandings about Hébert's method because the approach to his work has been historicist, seen from the perspective of certain institutions and only considering the French context. For instance, the key concepts, the Natural Method (NM) and Hebertism, are often mistaken to mean the same. Hebertism is a holistic pedagogical approach that consists of six modules: (i) in-depth use of NM; (ii) daily manual crafts (e.g. gardening, housekeeping); (iii) mental and moral culture (psychic gymnastics); (iv) intellectual culture (e.g. history of philosophy, arts, sciences); (v) aesthetic culture (e.g. the arts, Atlantean studies, dance, rhythmic movement); and (vi) naturalist initiatives (e.g. treatment through exercise and nutrition, aerotherapy, hydrotherapy, heliotherapy). Hebertism therefore covers much more than the method of training and physical education that Hébert developed in the

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period from 1904 to 1911: *Natural Method of Physical, Virile and Moral Education* (Hébert 1936).

Our epistemological exploration of the NM addresses the synthetic dimension of Hebertism, traces its origins, its naturalistic poetry in opposition to scientism, its institutionalisation in France, the reasons for its later decline and the circumstances of its comeback at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

## **A primitive scene: the genesis of the Natural Method**

Georges Hébert has gone down in the history of physical education as ‘a pioneer and explorer’ whose method owes much to his many travels:

‘physical education was developed at the beginning of the [20th] century by a lieutenant in the French Marines who appreciated the natural movements of indigenous people that he encountered on his stopovers, in contrast with his colleagues who considered those incidental and derisory’

(Métoudi and Vigarello 1980: p. 1).

After his training at the École Navale between 1893 and 1895, Georges Hébert navigated the seas until 1903 and visited parts of South America, the Antilles and North America, where he observed with the eyes of an anthropologist what his contemporary Marcel Mauss (1872–1950) called the ‘techniques of the body’ (Mauss 1933).

Georges Hébert studied for instance the French Navy’s topmen – the sailors who work in the top of ships – and the coalwomen of the Compagnie Générale Transatlantique in Martinique. The NM was born when he transformed the movements of the body used to perform these types of manual labour to physical exercises to develop the body and correct body posture. For example, sailors washing the deck was a source of inspiration for an ‘exercise imitating this movement’ to strengthen the core muscles of the lower back and abdominal region and maintain waist flexibility.

Hébert was more impressed with the performance of the coalwomen than that of the sailors. They gave him the necessary ammunition to demolish the stubborn arguments of those convinced of the physical inferiority of the so-called weaker sex: ‘let them try and carry forty kilos kg on their heads and then climb stairs for several hours

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in a day. They will soon realise how much effort the “female human machine” is capable of’ (Hébert 1928: p. 127). The black body was in vogue in those days, but Georges Hébert had fewer affinities with Pierre Loti (1850–1923), who wrote about the sculptural beauty of the young Senegalese in the *Roman d'un Spahis* (1881), than with Lafcadio Hearn (1850–1904), who described the beauty of the body in movement, the erect posture and ease and grace with which these women walked while carrying heavy loads on their heads:

From the most tender age – perhaps around five years – she learns to carry small objects on her head: a bowl of rice, a ‘dobanne’ of red earth filled with water, or an orange placed on a plate. Soon she can keep these objects in balance, without the assistance of her hands. [...] When she is around nine or ten years old, she knows how to carry a basket or a wooden tray with high and flared edges, relatively heavy, containing ten to fifteen kilos of goods. She accompanies her mother or her older sister during a long journey of peddling, walking barefoot for twenty or twenty-five kilometres a day; when she is sixteen or seventeen, she has become a robust, supple, vigorous and solid girl, all tendons and firm flesh. She wears a tray or a large basket, and carries a burden of twenty to seventy-five kilos. [...] Created by the extraordinary necessities of her environment, [...] this is a type of human thoroughbred, representing the true secret of grace: the economy of strength...

(Hearn 1890: pp. 107–108)

Hébert considered carrying weight on one’s head an ‘educational exercise’ to straighten the spine, improve balance and walk with grace:

Take a pile of clothing wrapped in a towel, a pouffe, or any other object that can drop without breaking. Balance it on top of your head and try to walk while holding it with one hand at first and then without any support. Walk forward, backward, sideways, turn and make a ‘figure eight’. Increase the difficulty of the exercise by taking objects that are increasingly challenging to maintain in equilibrium, a very high object for instance or an object with

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a flat base. This exercise [...] requires effort in all directions, especially effort in forward flexion and lateral extension, twisting or rotation of the upper body, as well as of the head.

(Hébert 1912)

Hébert also observed the Uruguayan partisans of the revolutionary leader Aparacio Saravia (1855–1904) (from 03 to 06 September 1897 in Montevideo), the ‘macheretos’ of the War of Independence (14–21 July 1898 in Guantanamo and Santiago de Cuba), the ‘guerilleros’ of the War of a Thousand Days in Colombia (from 06 December 1900 to 01 January 1901), American sports students at the University of Philadelphia (07–25 May 1901), and the bodybuilders of Attila’s Athletic Studio and School of Physical Culture on Broadway in New York (04 July 1901). Hébert was intrigued by how the Uruguayan, Cuban and Colombian guerrillas outperformed troops trained in a European or American way from a physical, virile and mental perspective. He specifically emphasised their extreme agility, adaptation to rugged terrain, flexibility and natural instinct, which the sports specialisation of American students and the mechanistic conception of American physical culture (Philippe-Meden 2017) were unable to produce.

On 08 May 1902, following the eruption of Mont Pelée on the island of Martinique, Hébert participated in a rescue operation of the population (Guiraud 1999). The experience marked him so much that he put in place a new method of training and physical education for a simple and utilitarian purpose: altruism. Although he had received a thorough scientific education at the Naval School, his ideas underlying the NM were the result of an anthropological approach of the senses rather than scientism.

## **Naturalism against scientism**

In the beginning of the twentieth century, a vast range of methods of training and physical education existed including the Swedish gymnastics method of Pehr Henrik Ling (1776–1839), promoted in France by Philippe Tissié (1852–1935); the utilitarian gymnastics of Pierre de Coubertin (1863–1937); the method consisting of organs of the body performing gymnastic exercises developed by Edmond Desbonnet (1867–1953);

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the ancient Greece inspired gymnastics of Raymond Duncan (1874–1966), brother of the American barefoot dancer Isadora Duncan (1877–1927); and the rhythmic gymnastics of the Swiss musician Émile Jaques-Dalcroze (1865–1950). In France, the work of the positivist Georges Demenÿ (1850–1917) became so influential that gymnasts turned to scientism rather than empiricism.

Georges Demenÿ, early pioneer of cinematography and biomechanics, and author of *Bases scientifiques de l'éducation physique* (1902), conducted his work at the Cercle de Gymnastique rationnel and later at the Station physiologique du Collège de France (Pociello 1999). Hébert recognised the importance of his systematic research that demonstrated the effects of physical activity to be hygienic (health), aesthetic (beauty), economical (force) and moral (mental). He also acknowledged Demenÿ's method that was inexpensive, adaptable, applicable anywhere, scalable and attractive to all ages and to both women and men.

From a technical point of view, most of the gymnastic methods of this period were variations of the old Prussian drill:

[t]he first principle of the drill consists of breaking down movements into simpler segments that are practised and repeated in isolation. Body movements – according to the second principle – are then standardised and triggered by an external command so that they can be directed [...] The third principle determines the formation of groups by addition. Military units are positioned in predetermined geometric figures, which move without interference of human or circumstantial variables. The purpose of the drill [...] is to produce a soldier in control of his emotions, which favours domination on the battlefield...

(Pradier 2000: p. 266)

In Hébert's view, this Taylorisation of human beings, geometrisation of the body and decomposition, standardisation and repetition of movements executed on command, destroy imagination and creativity.

Scientist-gymnasts such as Demenÿ and Tissié had an analytical conception of movement and preferred exercises that were static, stationary, repetitive, requiring

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moderate effort and with a strong focus on the form of the exercise. The resulting movements had effects that corrected bad posture and were precise, localised, orthopaedic and hygienic, but neglected cognitive development. For more outspoken artistic gymnasts, such as Desbonne, Duncan and Jaques-Dalcroze, the body became poetry in motion and expressed the world of emotions, passion and subjective experience. However, their methods were still so technical that the aesthetic experience was more scientific than natural. Movement was triggered by external elements, such as the antiquity for Greek gymnastics and music for rhythmic gymnastics. This means that in the latter example, music controls movement, whereas in a natural and spontaneous context, music will follow movement. Georges Hébert devised a method that gave priority to synthesis; natural movements that are dynamic and diverse, progressing in a natural environment and with beneficial effects on the most important physiological organs (e.g. lungs, heart). Education and subsequent control of the body, cognitive functions and the surroundings are based on connecting, intertwining and fusion of internal and external impulses of the subject and the environment that are in a symbiotic relationship.

The essence of Hébert's reform consisted of replacing the gymnastic methods in vogue with a method based on the execution of ten types of body techniques, called natural or utilitarian activities. These body techniques are those for which the human body is built: walking, running, jumping, climbing, lifting, throwing, swimming, self-defence, quadrupedal movement and balancing. These were first presented in 1532 by François Rabelais (1483 or 1494–1553). Hébert adopted Rabelais' method of body techniques without adding or removing anything (Hébert 1909). The Hebertist performed these exercises in a state of near-nudity as far as that was tolerated by the moral police at the time.

Georges Hébert introduced practising 'nude' in the first place for a practical reason: it allowed him to easily see how a movement was performed and to correct it. It also reflects the influence of Bernarr Macfadden's hygiene theories (1868–1955). Hébert translated several of his articles on heliotherapy, aerotherapy, hydrotherapy and vegetarianism to improve physical resistance and endurance (Philippe-Meden 2016a).



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Hébert also had a connection to the naturist physician Paul Carton (1875–1947) that gave him medical endorsement for the use of the NM to work with children (Carton 1935). The third reason for near-nude practice was that a suntan enhanced physical beauty.

The ten families of natural exercises must ideally be executed in the following conditions: the movements should be continuous, at a rapid and sustained pace and progressing on rugged terrain in a natural environment. The objective is to overcome a series of obstacles that require physical and cognitive qualities: strength, endurance, resistance, speed, skilfulness, adaptation and willpower. If a rough terrain in nature is not available, an obstacle course specifically arranged for the purpose can be used. The NM body techniques must always follow a sequence of exercises that are efficient and enable the practitioner to be in harmony with him/herself and nature, but this is always subjected to an overriding moral idea: altruism. In Hebertism, altruism is understood in a horizontal and biological sense (vital, corporeal and instinctive forces) as illustrated by his motto: *Being strong to be useful, being strong to rescue*. It also has a vertical and spiritual sense because it embodies an ontological relation to Nature. Georges Hébert's altruistic naturalism has been seen to be a way to access Christian esotericism (Philippe-Meden 2014c).

Hebertist pedagogy makes use of imagery and fun as key elements for learning. The Hebertist enacts the creations of theatre figures such as Léon Chancerel (1886–1965):

[w]e will be the windmills attacked by Don Quixote; we will be the galley slaves on the bench; we will be the cat that tiptoes or Baloo, the philosopher-bear that lumbers heavily, ensuring that for every step, all the support of the body is on the leg that is moving. [...] Every educator will easily invent stories and characters to dramatise the various elements of a typical Hebertist lesson.

(Chancerel 1941: p. 36)

The NM is transmitted in a natural way through 'an action mime' (Lecoq 1997: p. 82).



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Hebertist body ecology can be adapted to variations in space, time and performance. This is reflected in the evaluation system that Hébert proposes in *Le Code de la Force* (1911), with performance scores based on physiological data (e.g. centimetres, grammes, seconds) rather than an assessment on the effects of the body based on anatomical data (e.g. tape measure, rachigraphy, spirometry, pneumography). Hebertist body ecology is based on three principles: action, adaptation and altruism. But for Georges Hébert, the NM is not a dogma: it represents life force and it can therefore be perfected in accordance with the level of experience and circumstances.

Hébert's naturalism contains some rational and scientific elements, but it has more points in common with the transcendentalism of Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803–1882) and Henry David Thoreau (1817–1862) or the pragmatism of William James (1842–1910) and John Dewey (1859–1952). Georges Hébert's focus on subjective experience, the senses, psychology, pedagogy and the development of the self in a global physical, mental and moral context, is an approach that is similar to Edouard Claparède's (1873–1940), Ovide Decroly's (1871–1932) and Maria Montessori's (1870–1952).

## **Institutional impact of the Natural Method**

From 1904 to 1912, the NM was test piloted on one thousand Marine fusiliers at the French military school, *École du Bataillon de Lorient*, with half of the population of soldiers renewed every six months. It was also tested on 800 children and adolescents from 14 to 17 years old at the *École des moussettes de Brest* in 1908 and about 20 instructors and 50 girls at the *Collège d'athlètes de Reims* in 1913. In 1914, the NM as practised at the *Collège d'athlètes de Reims* was also taught to children in hospices and schools in the city for roll-out to physical education for children on a massive scale, but this was interrupted by the war of 1914–1918. During the war, the NM was adopted in 1916 by the 4th Army of General Gouraud (1867–1946) for rehabilitation of soldiers after injury.

After the war, from 1919–1925, Georges Hébert developed physical education for women and children in the community *La Palestra*, close to mundane Deauville

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(Philippe-Meden 2014b). He also worked on *L'Éducation physique*, the journal that he relaunched in 1922 with an explicit motto: 'Physical education must be promoted by the schools. The teachers shall be the masters'. In 1925, without consulting Hébert, the French State incorporated the NM into the Règlement général d'Éducation physique (Ministry of War, 1925). The Hebertists criticised this regulation for being a 'watered down' version of the NM – and for having been drafted by the military.

Many diverse institutions adopted the NM at this time, including les Compagnons de l'Université Nouvelle (1919), la Ligue internationale d'Éducation nouvelle (1921), l'École du Vieux-Colombier (1921), la Compagnie des Chemins de Fer du Nord (1922), the schools of the Michelin Tyre factories (1925) and the Scouts (1926). Georges Hébert became internationally renowned. Following the International Congress on Physical Education held in Paris in 1913, his influence reached physical education institutes in Czechoslovakia, Denmark, Argentina and Brazil, and it then spread to the USSR (1925), the Republic of Cuba (1927), Poland (1928), Bolivia (1930), Vietnam (1934), Lebanon (1945), Jordan (1956) and beyond.

In the mid-1930s, Hébert gradually withdrew from French Society: 'From 1936 onward, [he] started to work on the Physical Education (...) by the Natural Method that would take him 20 years, with the fifth and last volume published post-mortem in 1959' (Terret 2006). In 1937, he refused to be part of the Groupement Hebertiste, which was established by Raoul Dautry, the director of the State Railways (1880–1951), the publisher Henri Vuibert (1857–1945) and the Inspector of Education Ernest Loisel (1892–1943). In 1938, Georges Hébert announced that he would have nothing further to do with the Hebertist movement.

When the Vichy Government (1940–1944) came to power in 1940, some Hebertists became associated with the regime. According to the Official Instructions of 01 June 1941 for general education activities, the NM was taken as the basis for national doctrine. However, Hébert was never consulted:

[...] the idea of a meeting or association with Georges Hébert, if it was ever mentioned, never materialised. As a matter of fact, word had it that the old

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master was somewhat feared at Vichy (...). [There] was, to my knowledge, never an encounter between the author of the NM and the authorities of Vichy (Gay-Lescot 1995: p. 29).

In 1942, the Groupement Hebertiste was institutionalised as the French Federation of Physical Education. Georges Hébert refused to be the honorary president (Terret 2002), reminding everyone that he had 'always been against federalism and state subsidies'. A very explicit statement was published in the press in 1938: '[...] concerning [his] position of independence vis-à-vis any group, including the Groupement Hebertiste'<sup>1</sup> (Hébert 1942).

At the Liberation of France, Hebertism continued to play an educational role in various civilian and military communities. In 1955, the fiftieth anniversary of the NM was celebrated at the Arènes de Lutèce in Paris under the aegis of the President of the Republic René Coty (1982–1962). On the programme were various demonstrations by the National School of Military Physical Training of Antibes, the Centre of Physical Education of the Marines at Saint-Mandrier, the Paris Fire Brigade, the Athletic Association of the Prefecture Police of Paris, the Scouts de France, the elite National School for Girls' Physical Education, the School for Construction Vocations and the French national railway company.

However, the influence of Hebertism was starting to fade and became obsolete after the wars of Indochina (1946–1954) and Algeria (1954–1962). During this period of relative peace, military training underwent reform. The French army was involved in very few military operations abroad and this meant that French reputability on an international level was in decline. Under the Fontainebleau doctrine (1975–1990), it was planned that the army would henceforward be used to extend the actions of national education to the field of sport:

General de Gaulle entrusted the military institution (...) with the mission to prepare our young athletes for the Olympic Games [...] the desire to seduce the French youth in this period which saw a clash with civilian society (wars of decolonisation, May '68), made it revert to media coverage of sports to propagate a new image. [...] There is a lot of criticism that it [the doctrine of

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Fontainebleau] is a failure and it is not the role of the army to take on National Sports Education [...].

(Lapouge 2012: pp. 515–519)

In parallel with the military world, the appetite in civilian society for new outdoor physical activities, such as boardsports and alternative practices such as yoga ended up obliterating Hebertism. Added to that, it was perhaps not surprising that the Sexual Revolution generation could not identify itself with a method of physical, virile and moral education.

## **The strong comeback of the Natural Method**

In the 1990s, Georges Hébert was represented in the history of sport as a negative, conservative and reactionary person, who successively broke away from or opposed the military, medical and sports approaches of physical education. He was a defender of natural equilibriums, and defended empiricism against scientism, synthesis against analytism and utilitarianism against Olympism. Although he preached absolute independence of the mind, he was above all ‘antimodern’ – not in the sense that he was yearning for a return to the past, filled with inert nostalgia but in the sense of a vigorous renewal with the past to invent one’s own modernity (Banu 2013). In France between 1990 and 2000, the NM was only taught in history books or by a few irreducible Hebertists such as at the Centre Hébert of Nantes.

In the beginning of the French army’s involvement in Afghanistan (2001), when it became clear that sport had failed to successfully train combatants for rugged terrain, the NM was dug up as ‘an old concept with modern virtues’ and used to prepare experts in Military and Sports Training and Physical Education (Entraînement et éducation physique militaire et sportif, E2PMS):

[t]his method prioritises the adaptability of the environment and the soldier by gradually increasing the complexity of the exercise. It considers the environment and offers the advantage of managing constraints in time and space. It is therefore legitimate to say that it is suitable for various terrains,

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in particular OPEX [external operations], and it can be put in place with very limited means...

(Flourette 2009)

As a leading figure in the NM at the National Centre for Defense Sports, senior instructor Roland Gonnet explains:

Although it is legitimate to say that [NM] is not the right tool to reach optimal personal achievement in a sports discipline, it does remain the best way to learn the basics of a sport. When you are initiated to a sport via a Hebertist lesson-type, the sensation of being able to perform a set of simple moves without any effort will allow you to implement a protocol of effective and thought through actions and this will have a real impact on the physical engagement. Need and instinct are very powerful catalysts. Developing one will increase the other, and applied to a soldier you will have a real chance that in particularly harsh combat operations as we are seeing more and more, the potential of an entire company will be improved.

(Gonnet 2010)

In the same period, the NM has attracted renewed interest in the civilian world from alternative sports communities (Lebreton 2010): David Belle's 'Parkour', Sebastien Foucan's 'Freerunning', Erwann Le Corre's 'MovNat', and 'Athletic Explorations' by John-Edouard Ehlinger, to name only a few. Many have turned to the Hébert-Sport'Nat® section of the Belgian Federation of Hebertism because they are seeking a meaningful activity and are disappointed with the mindset in sport that focuses on competition and spectacularity. In France, Georges Hébert's work may have been forgotten but Hebertism is still practised in a 'traditional' way in Belgium (Philippe-Meden 2016b).

As sport is plagued by doping (pharmaceutical, genetic and others) in the race to extend human physiological limits, Hebertism is perceived as an ecology-of-the-self approach or eco-athleticism, with the moral dimension acting as a bridge between the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. However, the generational divide between the Hebertists and the neo-Hebertists does call for a discussion about the issues of

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transgenerational transmission, the relationship between tradition and ultra-contemporaneity, the need for innovation of the technology and perhaps also the pedagogy of the Natural Method.

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