

On caring for the body: the press and hygiene in nineteenth-century Rio de Janeiro

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Abstract

Intensive efforts to urbanize the city of Rio de Janeiro and civilize its inhabitants began in the nineteenth century. Many of the population's values and habits fell out of favor compared with the new way of life that was being disseminated. The press was considered one of the most important instruments in this process of civilization, publishing a wide variety of knowledge and novelties in its periodicals that suggested a new more urbane and civilized way for the population to live. This article examines the pedagogical discourse constructed during this period, specifically recommendations related to bodily hygiene and care.

Keywords: body; press; hygiene; civilization; nineteenth century.

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The arrival of the Portuguese court in Brazil in 1808 marked the start of a new type of especially urban social experience that gradually altered the social landscape inherited from the predominantly rural colony. From then onward, many colonial values and habits fell out of favor compared to the new way of life that had begun to spread with the arrival of the royal family and the other foreigners who had crossed the Atlantic after the opening of the ports. Throughout the nineteenth century there were numerous transformations in the everyday lives of the local inhabitants, extending from the makeup of the cities to the moral values and customs of their populations (Freyre, 2004, p.106).

Some historians note that until the arrival of Dom João and his retinue, even though Rio de Janeiro was the capital of the Portuguese colony in the Americas, it was considered no more than a limited urban structure most notable for some essentially non-European and patriarchal traits (Freyre, 2004, p.139). It was therefore essential for the newly arrived royalty to transform this unattractive city into the seat of the Portuguese monarchy, providing it with the standards of sociability and civility typical of an Old World court society. In the effort to implement reforms in accordance with what was called the European standard (Schultz, 2008, p.182), the territory and population of Rio de Janeiro became the objects of knowledge and intervention by all kinds of institutions and agents (Machado et al., 1978, p.160-162).

Impressão Régia, the Royal Press, was created by a decree issued on May 13, 1808 and was one of the institutions established by Dom João as part of efforts to civilize the population. It was the first authorized printing house to publish a variety of products on Brazilian soil: everything from decrees, notices, calls for bids, and royal orders (all necessary to run the new court) to newspapers, magazines, books, and pamphlets. This was the beginning of newspapers and magazines in Brazil, which became even more frequent after the freedom of the printed word was established in 1821 and other printing houses appeared and joined the Royal Press in publishing leaflets and periodicals (Barbosa, 2010, p.40).

The number of regular periodicals grew in the city, along with an audience that was more receptive to printed materials and the ideas, knowledge and trends they circulated (Algranti, 2004, p.161). From then on, journalism was integrated for once and for all into all efforts to civilize the population and construct the nation, publishing a series of novelties about the organization of the young Brazilian empire and the daily experiences of those who lived there (Candido, 1981, p.26). With this in mind, the main objective of this article is to specifically explore this pedagogical discourse constructed during the nineteenth century,¹ specifically recommendations related to hygiene and care of the body.

This text was drafted from descriptions comprising a series of citations from these periodicals that “speak for themselves;” in other words, this article is founded on the belief that documents can verify how a given era was socially defined (Veyne, 2011, p.25). In this way, interpretations were obtained from analyzing the sources in the same way I organized the documentation throughout the text: in order and by choosing “from what” and “how” to present it to the reader.

The text was consequently constructed from the fact that I did not use the documentation from the perspective of whether it corresponded to some “intrinsic character of reality” (Rorty, 2005, p.XV), in other words, to the effective scope or implementation of the hygienist

discourse in imperial society. I sought to reveal the civilizing discourse of journalists as a manifestation of the exercise of power, the “object of a struggle, and a political struggle” (Foucault, 2007, p.137); that is to say, from the possibility that this discourse was stated (while disputing with other conceptions) as a supposed bearer of the truth.

This is because journalists were given the mission of enlightening those who required it,² and carried out this task by circulating periodicals (Barbosa, 2010, p.70) that were intended to construct a national culture, shape the population with regard to civics and morals, and lead the Brazilian empire toward “civilization” and “progress,” as was said (França, 1999a, p.257). This is seen in the statement by Hipólito da Costa, in the pioneering *Correio Braziliense* (mar. 1819, p.318) newspaper published in London from 1808, that “the admission and multiplication of periodicals in Brazil will be of incalculable advantage for the improvement of the civilization of that country.”

Conscious of the importance of periodicals, considered “one of the standards of the culture of a people” (O Cruzeiro do Sul, 7 jul. 1849, p.4), journalists sought to shape readers with “good taste,” instructing them in a wide variety of arts, in technical and scientific novelties, and in everything related to the advances of civilization. The Brazilian press fulfilled a pedagogical mission, characterizing itself as an instrument which was much more formative for the population than informative (Pallares-Burke, 1998, p.145-147). In the first issue of his newspaper *Correio Braziliense* (jun. 1808, p.A2), Hipólito José da Costa already warned of the pedagogical role assigned to the men of the press:

The first duty of a man in society is to be useful to its members; and each one must, according to his physical or moral forces, administer the knowledge or talents that nature, art, or education has given him for its benefit. The individual who embraces the general good of a society comes to be its most distinguished member: the lights which he spreads bring out from the shadows those precipitated by ignorance in the labyrinth of apathy, ineptitude, and deception. Therefore, there is no one more useful than the person who is destined to show and prove the events of the present, and the work of those who write publications when, armed with sound criticism and adequate censorship, they represent the facts of the moment, reflections on the past, and solid conjectures about the future.

According to journalists, the lettered classes should take it upon themselves to instruct, illuminate, and civilize the people, integrating into society the poor and illiterate classes who were considered dangerous, favoring the world of disorder and therefore lacking control (Morel, Barros, 2003, p.41). The priority of these men of culture and their periodicals, however, focused on shaping and civilizing a very specific portion of the population: the local elites, composed of the most cultured and wealthy people in Rio de Janeiro (França, 2002, p.601). Even if poor people (free as well as enslaved) were able to come into contact with the ideals of civilization prescribed by the press, the journalists’ main target was those men and women who could more directly contribute to the country’s “progress,” namely culturally white³ men and women belonging to the elite class. This was a process to Europeanize this class considered most important in the population, and centered on adopting the European model of civilization, especially the French model (Malerba, 2000, p.163). What was at stake, however, was not always the unilateral importation of European

ideas and ways of life, but also a reinterpretation of these models according to the cultural system and social practices in force in Brazil (Velloso, 2006, p.313).

The press became a tool to shape the people, attempting to mold new men and women better suited to national interests by recommending standards related to the body, morals, and customs. Furthermore, it became a favored instrument for the exercise of power, a “mode of action by some over others” (Foucault, 2010, p.287). The role of journalists was to guide the behavior of the population, formulating a set of norms in order to “govern” the actions of these men and women, in other words, “directing the conduct” of these individuals (p.288). The press hoped to undermine behaviors associated with the colonial past and reconstruct them within new arrangements considered more appropriate: the precepts of European civilization. To this end, journalistic activity utilized new technologies and positive strategies to produce subjects (Foucault, 2011, p.185). By prescribing new rules to discipline and control the body, moral principles, and customs of the population, journalists sought to positively shape new women and new men, showing them not the weapons of repression, but rather the benefits that could be gained by adopting everything that was suggested to them (Costa, 2004, p.31).

One of the aspects that received the most attention from nineteenth-century journalists was the hygiene and health of the population of Rio de Janeiro. Women and men became the targets of a series of prescriptions in the press that described in detail how the people of the city should care for their body and health (Chalhoub, 2017, p.49-52). After all, a healthy body was a prerequisite for shaping men and women suitable to contribute to the future of the Empire. Countless everyday elements became the target of hygiene measures by the authorities and doctors who worked in the city. Various periodicals, some edited by physicians and surgeons (cf. Ferreira, 1999), described ways of caring for the body that included “daily cleaning and grooming, which have such a strong influence on health” (A Abelha, 9 fev. 1856, p.4).

Medical journals during the first half of the nineteenth century were nearly always published under the care of one of Rio de Janeiro’s medical institutions, such as the Society of Medicine or later, the Imperial Academy of Medicine. The main functions of these institutions included the publication and maintenance of the journals, which acted as a channel for communications among physicians as well as with the literate society of Rio de Janeiro (Ferreira, 1996, p.8). These specialized institutions and periodicals came to regulate the behavior of the medical corps, establishing scientific norms for the production, dissemination, review, and validation of medical knowledge, especially about problems related to the public and private health of the inhabitants (Edler, 2009, p.157). The journals disseminated international medical knowledge through translations and provided visibility to the work of the medical institutions by publishing minutes of their events, reports, and statements (Ferreira, 1999); in this regard, they were directed toward a specific and small public: physicians themselves. On the other hand, these same specialized newspapers and journals also intermediated between society and the medical community, including in their pages articles on hygiene that were also of interest to the lay public, a necessary activity to disseminate medical knowledge and to popularize and socially legitimize professional medicine (Ferreira, 1996, p.10). As one of these journals points out, the *Revista*

Médica Fluminense (abr. 1839, p.6-7), it was necessary to call “attention to objects of real and permanent interest to humanity,” and it was not “difficult to direct the curiosity of a docile people.” According to the journal:

It is right, it is even necessary for us to mix in with ([what are] in fact dry and soporific) articles of purely medical discussions some general considerations about objects that not only span the interest of everyone, but also please everyone because of the more or less immediate connection they have with the habits, needs, tastes, vices and propensities of the people; in this way, fertilized with the salt of criteria and irony, the people will slowly and pleasantly take tenuous sips of solid instruction in the things they should avoid and those they must acquire or preserve (*Revista Médica Fluminense*, abr. 1839, p.7).

In league with medical journals there were also a number of other literary and scientific journals and magazines aimed at a wider audience than the medical community. These publications were more miscellaneous than specialized journals, gathering in their pages a wide array of knowledge that was organized in these periodicals into different sections: history, philosophy, literature, biography, varieties, poetry, theater, novels, hygiene, industry, agriculture, botany, chemistry, catechism, science, art, travel, politics, miscellany, practical medicine, domestic medicine, home economics, the fair sex, fashion, etiquette, customs, moral education etc. (cf. Freitas, 2006). As one of these journals pointed out, the *Revista Popular* (out.-dez. 1860, p.79):

The advantage of having everything, of talking about everything, of addressing all topics, of discussing all points from the sciences, from literature, of exploring subjects in more detail or not, of revealing inventions, of returning to large social issues and analyzing them point-by-point with the scalpel of criticism, for reflection or just touching the surface, like a butterfly that capriciously kisses a flower.

Despite the differences between these periodicals in terms of their editorial leanings and audiences, the people of letters involved in this educational movement to civilize the inhabitants were still rare in a society where the cultural sector was still taking its first steps. In this way, a single individual could be involved in a wide range of activities: drafting novels, poetry, plays, medical dissertations, as well as chronicles and articles published in all kinds of newspapers and magazines. Their ideas consequently circulated throughout a wide array of genres in the local press. In this sense, even though there were clear differences between periodicals edited by physicians and other literary and scientific publications for a wider audience, the discourse related to medicine and hygiene produced in specialized newspapers and magazines was also appropriated and spread by the general press of that time.

To start with hygiene recommendations about clothing: clean clothes were recommended on the one hand to prevent disease and help patients recover, but also indicated individuals' virtue and refinement. In the former sense, on February 23, 1850 (the year Rio de Janeiro was struck by an outbreak of yellow fever) the *Correio Mercantil* (23 fev. 1850, p.1) noted that for better recovery, “throughout the fever it is very important that the patient breathe air free of impurities and wear clean clothes.” The latter case of clothing indicating social

status is seen in the *Anais Brasilienses de Medicina*, which noted in March 1874 (p.366) that “clean and fresh-smelling clothing never tarnished any genteel man.”

For men’s clothing, consider the necktie, a fundamental component of formal and elegant menswear in the nineteenth century. As a basic element to construct a distinguished image, a clean necktie demonstrated not only personal hygiene but also the richness and power of the individual and his family, since it implied the presence of an entire team of washerwomen and pressers responsible for this cleanliness; a clean tie thus symbolized a gentleman’s virtues (Rodrigues, 2010, p.48-49). In an analysis of certain events of political disputes that took place in 1860, the *Diário do Rio de Janeiro* (14 out. 1860, p.2) noted that “this type of opposition is more specific to the scoundrel than to those who are heralded as having a clean tie,” a symbol of honor and male respectability.

For women, going to balls or the theater with a luxurious outfit acquired from the French shops on Ouvidor Street was synonymous with wealth, and this status was further accentuated if these clothes were properly cleaned (Sant’Anna, 2011, p.292-293). This was because special care was required to wash these garments made with fine fabrics, lace and embroidery, and often decorated with ribbons and other ornaments. A white dress attested to prestige and fortune, considering the additional difficulty and expense required to keep it clean and white (Rodrigues, 2010, p.87). The cleanliness of clothing served as a barometer of personal hygiene and of a family’s wealth, civility, and power (Sant’Anna, 2008, p.123).

In addition to showcasing the prestige, wealth, and power of families, nineteenth-century female dress was characterized by restraining the body of the “fair sex:” through compressing corsets, the sheer quantity of fabric they had to carry, tied-up hair, and gloves that covered women’s hands in an attempt to control the temptation caused when skin could be freely touched (Rodrigues, 2010, p.133). It was precisely these rules about dress that society of this era used to separate “respectable” women from those who were socially undesirable. Clothing marked and socially distinguished women, since as *O Jornal das Senhoras* stated on October 28, 1855 (p.337), “in fact, many signs of moral life and character can be revealed in how one is dressed.”

The extensive apparatus involved in a woman’s being well-dressed included crinolines, bustles, full and wide skirts, all types of jewelry and accessories, hairstyles (with hair always up in public), and hats of various sizes with their own ornaments, and women in Rio de Janeiro at that time had to get used to the lack of mobility their bodies were permitted as a result. The luxury and the rules related to fashion according to European standards practically disregarded women’s comfort (Rodrigues, 2010, p.15). The corset was principally responsible for this immobilization of the female body. Identified in *O Jornal das Senhoras* (24 out. 1852, p.129-130) as “the most important object for a lady’s toilette: with a bad corset, no well-tailored dress is suitable, there is no enhancing elegance,” the corset was recommended to refine a woman’s waist in line with the stereotype of the ideal woman: a narrow waist representing an untouched, virgin body, not yet deformed by motherhood.

The corset reigned supreme in women’s fashion, shrinking waistlines and defining beauty during the nineteenth century. Although it was considered the most important item in a woman’s wardrobe, it was also widely criticized at the time for potential damage it caused to the beauty, body, and health of the “fragile sex.” And in spite of

the beauty standard demanding a narrow waist, newspapers in Rio de Janeiro began a campaign against the corset: assuming that the definition of beauty was perfect harmony between the whole and its parts, “a truly beautiful woman will no longer be beautiful after her waist has been throttled like a rocket, since this smothering breaks the harmonious contours and correct lines that constitute the beauty of the human body” (*Revista Popular*, abr.-jun. 1860, p.272). The *Revista Popular* stated that a corset was more of “an insult to nature and beauty, and far from emphasizing the charms of a flexible waist, makes it stodgy and devoid of grace.” In contrast with the usual model of a garment that imprisoned women’s bodies, the periodical praised their mobility: “If grace resides in the flexibility and elegance of movements, a woman squeezed into a tight corset will never be gracious, because she will necessarily have to move against it and her appearance will be severe.” It goes on to say that with regard to beauty, a corset should only be used by “women with poorly configured or uneven breasts, to disguise these defects” (p.272).

In addition to diminishing female beauty, the corset was accused of being harmful for women’s health. In 1860, the *Revista Popular* (abr.-jun. 1860, p.272) noted that “the lungs, heart, liver, stomach, uterus, everything is squeezed and displaced by this constant compression; pulmonary, circulatory, digestive, and reproductive function are all constrained even more when the corset is tighter.” These problems arise from the fact that “a well-configured woman’s rib cage” should “be narrower at the apex than at the base.” The bottom ribs needed to be “extended to give the abdomen the space necessary for the organs of digestion and reproduction. The heart and lungs function freely in a chest with a broad base, but they can hardly expand in these narrow chests disfigured by the use of corsets.” Corsets also presented a great obstacle to motherhood, the main role for women in the nineteenth century:

There is therefore no doubt that the compression of the corset is detrimental to the freedom of the four main bodily functions: respiration, circulation, digestion, and nutrition. However, it is impossible to impede the free exercise of these important functions without causing severe disorders in the body that are transmitted to posterity. It is easily understood that if the beauty, strength, and health of a child depends on there being no opposition to development during its life in the womb, a woman with a thin waist, and a belly that is flattened, extended, and damaged by a corset will never produce a well-built and vigorous being (*Revista Popular*, abr.-jun. 1860, p.273).

In this way, the *Revista Popular* (abr.-jun. 1860, p.274) called for an end to corsets, noting that “on the same day that men find a strangled waist ridiculous the corsets will fall to the ground, women will breathe freely, enjoy better health, and will not produce such crippled progeny.” Meanwhile, attention to clothing is part of a much wider range of bodily care and concerns about personal and social hygiene which were formulated during the nineteenth century. In this period, the press spread the idea that Brazil’s “economic and social progress” could be leveraged through hygiene, similar to what occurred in Europe (Sant’Anna, 2011, p.300-302). Hygiene would simultaneously protect the body from disease and soul against vices, leading the individual and, in turn, society itself to thrive (Knibiehler, 1994, p.364). The body was subjected to closer attention, in the sense of daily reflections on disease,

health, and the best ways to be healthy. Hygiene and personal health, therefore, became a social and moral concern (Rodrigues, 2010, p.110).

The press was tasked with disseminating prescriptions and methods available to boost health like bathing, dental care and whitening, eliminating bad breath, hair care, etc. These teachings were in addition to those that addressed beauty for ladies, such as advice on reddening lips, whitening the skin, and perfuming the body (Rodrigues, 2010, p.144-145). Homemade treatments and recipes were presented in the newspapers, teaching readers how to care for all parts of their bodies from head to foot. The following recipe was recommended for preserving the hair: "Take a raw egg yolk and wet your hand with it, passing it several times over the hair and then combing it in with a fine-tooth comb" (Novo Correio das Modas, 1853, p.56). Meanwhile, readers were warned to "avoid narrow footwear" and to "keep [feet] clean by scrubbing them every morning with a clean, dry cloth." It was also necessary to "change socks frequently and take baths from time to time; finally, remove calluses after soaking the feet in the water and also cut nails after getting out of the bath" (Novo Correio das Modas, 1854, p.55).

The periodicals also increasingly encouraged bathing. According to the *Revista Popular* (jan.-mar. 1859, p.234-237), baths were useful "both in the interests of cleanliness as well as beauty and health." Women owed their "beauty to the beneficial waters;" without baths, "no matter how much care [one] takes with their person, the skin will never acquire all the desired perfection." Also according to this periodical, at any season of the year "a hot bath is more favorable to beauty," since it "opens the pores more and makes the skin softer and finer... it softens rough skin and refreshes it, as well as the interior of the body, and causes pimples from heat, red spots and stains to disappear, and spreads an air of freshness over everyone who utilizes it" and is necessary "every night when lying down and in many other circumstances." But while hot baths helped women achieve beauty, they also had their negative side: they "weaken rather than strengthen" the person. In this way, "the lower the temperature of the bath, the less it weakens us and the more it becomes healthy. Water cooled to a convenient degree penetrates and distends the fibers, softening them and giving the whole body a finish of freshness and the pink nudity that suits ladies so well;" the article in the *Revista Popular* recommended water "just below natural heat, in order to experience a slight trembling upon entering it." During a bath that was more lukewarm than warm, the periodical also recommended "lathering the body with soap" as well as "using a scrub brush" to properly clean the skin. Baths, as also described by *O Jornal das Senhoras* (5 fev. 1854, p.41; emphasis in the original), "have the strength to open the pores, accelerate circulation, facilitate and increase transpiration, and cleanse the skin of all these 'scales,' so to speak, that cover our body's epidermis."

In addition to prolonging beauty, baths were considered "the main means of health and freshness" (*Revista Popular*, jan.-mar. 1859, p.234). As such, they were recommended "especially as a great means of prophylaxis and preserving health," not to mention that "in our climate [they are] indispensable during the summer" (*Revista Popular*, out-dez. 1860, p.43).

Alongside baths, dental care was widely advocated by the press, which published homemade recipes for cleaning and lightening teeth as well as eliminating bad breath. Just like routine handwashing, toothbrushing became both a way of avoiding some illnesses

and a social distinction (Sant'Anna, 2011, p.304) In 1852, the *Novo Correio das Modas* commented that “the teeth, which are so essential for health as well as beauty, ornaments of the mouth and chewing instruments, demand care in the morning when we wake and at night before going to bed.” Despite care at home, the newspaper considered it “prudent to have them examined every three or four months by a dentist of recognized skills.” But on an everyday basis, some standards were to be followed for proper dental cleaning, such as purchasing a “fine and soft” brush used for “the person to scrub vertically.” Powdered charcoal was normally recommended to improve the results of brushing, just as toothpaste is used today (Novo Correio das Modas, 1852, p.117). The periodical adds:

The best way to preserve the teeth is to use a non-rough brush topped with fine carbon powder and water every day. ... It eliminates the bad smell emitted from decayed teeth when it is used to wash the mouth with a little water.

Not only does charcoal work as a hard body, but it even breaks down the tartar and cavity matter. Many toothaches have calmed down entirely after this activity, and stinking breath is especially unable to resist if a person swallows a bit of powdered charcoal (Novo Correio das Modas, 1852, p.118).

Powdered charcoal was described as being “simultaneously a disinfectant and anti-rot.” Once applied during brushing, it “slows tooth decay, removes bad smells and preserves the teeth” (*Revista Popular*, jul.-set. 1861, p.371). For this reason, as *O Jornal das Senhoras* warned (30 jan. 1853, p.40), “teeth cleaning is necessary for decency and for the preservation and cleanliness of these teeth.”

In addition to all these hygiene measures, appropriate food was required for a healthy and beautiful body. Eating correctly, a *Revista Popular* columnist said, “favors us with beauty.” According to her, women’s nutrition should comprise “a succulent, delicate, and methodical diet” that “long staves off the external signs of old age, the greatest disgrace that can happen to us.” In her words:

A good diet gives the eyes more shine, more freshness to the skin, and more elasticity to the muscles; and physiology having confirmed that muscle depression is the cause of wrinkles, these fearsome enemies of beauty, it also cannot be denied that all else being equal, the woman who knows how to eat always stays ten years younger than another who ignores this very important science (*Revista Popular*, abr.-jun. 1861, p.226).

In addition to feminine beauty, ingesting suitable food and beverages provides benefits to people’s lives, with increased longevity. As the *Revista Médica Fluminense* (jul. 1839, p.129) noted, “if we scrupulously examine the range of the most frequent chronic diseases of Rio de Janeiro, we will freely find that the most common cause lies in the food that is eaten.” Proper nutrition would grant the population better health. This is what the *Revista Popular* (out.-dez. 1861, p.76) promised its readers:

To those who know how to regulate, according to the precepts of science, the food intended to entertain life, and to wisely take care of the belly. Honoring your father and mother will not, therefore, henceforth be the only way to live long upon the Earth; that same benefit will be shared by those who honor the abdomen and stomach, eating and drinking well, that is, *secundum artem*.

Good nutrition is infinitely superior to bad for preserving health and prolonging life, and it cannot suffer the slightest doubt. The consequence is that under the same circumstances, gourmets live longer than those who are not.

The food in Rio de Janeiro was considered too strong, heavy, and stimulating, making it unsuitable and causing health problems for the population. In 1839, the *Revista Médica Fluminense* (maio 1839, p.42-43) noted:

Our food is, for the most part or in general, entirely animal and overly stimulating. Meat, and the most fibrinous meats, pork and beef, comprise the ordinary and everyday sustenance of our population: ... and to everything we do we also add the excessive use of stimulating drinks. Wine, spirits, coffee, and pepper... This strong and stimulating diet concentrates the distracted forces on the periphery [of the body], commands slow movement, an inability to work, invites sleep, lust, ... imperfect digestion, and finally a thousand annoyances that are added on to same proportion as age, wearing out the springs of life, providing less strength to react. The opposite would be a less strong diet, such as white meats and more vegetables, if fish instead of meat and water instead of spirits were the sustenance of the people.

Lighter meals were recommended for better health, with more consumption of water and fruit, considered more appropriate for the intense tropical heat (Silva, 1993, p.219-220). The print media recommended “a diet not only suited to the climate but also the temperament, morbid predispositions, and gender,” since as the result of this diet “many diseases would be avoided and not a few would correct themselves” (*Revista Médica Fluminense*, jul. 1839, p.129-130). The *Revista Médica Fluminense* (jul. 1839, p.132) lamented that “our errors in food, drink, and clothing gradually and progressively deteriorate health that is already overly weakened by the climate itself, thus predisposing us to this multitude of acute diseases that afflict us from time to time.”

But nutritional concerns were not restricted to controlling diseases that might affect the population; there were also intensifying esthetic concerns with the body itself, namely bodies that were too thin or too fat. Lean bodies were said to “always be compatible with health,” but marked thinness could be detrimental to beauty and well-being, requiring its causes to be “beneficially combated by hygienic means” (*Revista Popular*, jan.-mar. 1859, p.239-240). This is because, as the *Revista Popular* stated in 1859, it caused a “total lack of rounded figures, yellowish skin, concave and cadaverous eyes, protruding knees, a sharp nose, a deep mouth, a long neck, letting all the joints appear.” As a result, it continued, the features of an overly thin person “are rough; their physiognomy is dry and dehydrated, their countenance unrefreshed, their mouth unattractive; their limbs seem to be part of a body they do not belong to; all their movements are ungoverned and appear alien to a body with neither strength nor consistency.” An overly emaciated body had to be combated with “some fat bird or lamb, well-fattened veal or succulent beef; this meat must be roasted or grilled so its nutritious juices do not evaporate;” along with this, the diet was to be varied with “good milk, fresh eggs, very strong broths, jellies, sweet oils, butter, starch, tapioca, rice, potatoes, and all types of vegetables cooked with a lot of fat or lard” (*Revista Popular*, jan.-mar. 1859, p.240-241).

An obese body was also to be avoided, since “very obese people live less than others.” The “abundant use of very succulent foods, very nutritious drinks, such as thick wines,

beer, cider, chocolate” were to be eliminated. Additionally, “lack of or excessive sleep, the suppression of certain secretions, great tranquility of spirit, and total absence of passions” helped make the body more stout (Revista Popular, jan.-mar. 1859, p.237-238). Like excessive thinness, obesity had negative impacts on the esthetics and health of the body. The *Revista Popular* (jan.-mar. 1859, p.238) noted:

Too much fat generally harms beauty, erasing from the face the subtle lines drawn by the hand of delicacy, destroying this fine and slender shaping that links the appearance and removes from the limbs this flexibility and agility that seduce the senses through the most vivid and pleasant emotions.

But in actions we see only negligence and slowness that put to sleep or sicken the observer. In this state, which should announce robust and perfect health, the sensations are less vivid, breathing is more difficult, and diseases more frequent.

In order for the body to eliminate accumulated fat, it was necessary to “supply the blood with less nutritious parts” or “expel or destroy that which has already been incorporated.” To do so, continues the *Revista Popular* (jan.-mar. 1859, p.238-239), the first requirement prescribed by the newspapers and magazines was “to subject oneself to a strict diet,” in other words,

gradually reduce the quantity of food, since any sudden change is dangerous.

Eat light and less nutritive foods, such as green beans, bitter greens, spinach, carrots, asparagus, artichokes, cauliflower, all cooked in water and seasoned well with salt, vinegar, or sugar, depending on their nature.

For meat, choose beef, lamb, goat kid, rabbit, all very free of fat, and some white meat, provided that it is well stewed and spicy.

As for drink, only take sour ones such as lemonades, Seltzer water, and currant, orange, and cider. Above all, often drink black coffee and white wine. Have very strong coffee or tea with a lot of sugar.

When the meal is finished, find something to occupy yourself immediately afterward.

Excess fat and thinness were not only unhealthy but incompatible with beauty, since “if one thickens the forms, exaggerates and fattens the contours, the other flattens and dissects them and reduces angular lines that constitute ugliness” (Revista Popular, jan.-mar. 1859, p.240-241). But diet was not the only factor involved in attempts to regulate the bodies of Rio’s residents; physical exercises played a very important role from the nineteenth century. To lose weight, journalists recommended along with controlling food consumption “continuous gymnastics like walks until one becomes tired; races, dances, fencing, and swimming. Initially, none of these exercises should last longer than a quarter of an hour, but should be extended by another fifteen minutes each day until reaching two hours” (Revista Popular, jan.-mar. 1859, p.239).

Gymnastics was considered paramount for improving health, that is, “one of the most powerful resources for hygiene and therapy,” noted the *Revista Médica Fluminense* (jan. 1840, p.473). It goes on to say that “gymnastics was one of the most powerful levers for ensuring this precious gift [of health]. Indeed, humanity can derive countless benefits from it! How many resources for the art of healing and hygiene are not found there!” For this very reason, physicians defended the “need to occupy some pages of the *Revista Médica Fluminense* to also draw the public’s attention to a topic of immense interest” (p.473).

During the nineteenth century, one of the tactics used by hygiene to radically transform the habits and customs of elite families was to intervene especially in children's daily routines. As part of these efforts, the press launched a campaign for compulsory physical education in Brazil, declaring "a thousand votes to see this precious art more widespread in our country and above all to see it introduced in Brazilian high schools, where it is an absolute necessity" (*Revista Médica Fluminense*, jan. 1840, p.481). In 1853, *O Jornal das Senhoras* (26 jun. 1853, p.207) argued:

You, the intelligent directors of schools teaching Brazilian youth, why not add a gymnastics course to the catalog of the many gifts you teach your students, among the branches of science and fine arts featured on the list of your teachers? Do you question the return? Do not hesitate: one of you will be the first. Establish a gymnastics course adapted to the sex and age of each of your students, run it with care, continue, and later you will earn the acclaim of many, many mothers who will bless you everywhere.

Physical exercise was considered one of the most powerful levers for health. For the *Revista Médica Fluminense* (jan. 1840, p.474), gymnastics was an enormous source of benefits, and was to be recommended because it influences almost "all the bodily systems, with its actions extending everywhere, and all functions modified by it to some degree." The periodical continues to say that gymnastics "not only produces great advantages for the locomotor system, but also for all other apparatus and even mental faculties".

The main condition for practicing physical activity in schools was to separate children by age and sex (Costa, 2004, p.185). By performing specific exercises, each student could obtain better personal results. For girls, physical activities were expected to bring both immediate and future benefits ranging from recovering from disease and suppressing a sedentary lifestyle until some future day when they were able to marry and bear children, and improving the nutritional qualities of their breastmilk (Costa, 2004, p.118). As the *Revista Médica Fluminense* noted (jun. 1839, p.112): "Strenuous studies, lack of exercise outdoors, alter their constitution and expose them to the most serious afflictions. Frequent walks, runs, gymnastics, fencing, dancing etc., are therefore indispensable at this tender age."

The exercises suggested in the press — which over time were "adopted in all the well-regulated high schools" (*O Jornal das Senhoras*, 26 jun. 1853, p.207) and also practiced by the rest of the adult family — were instruments that transformed the female body. Up until the turn of the nineteenth century, colonial society isolated elite women inside their homes. John Barrow, an Englishman who visited Brazil in 1792, commented that "most women in Rio de Janeiro get fat at a young age due to the confinement to which they are subjected and little physical exercise" (França, 1999b, p.222). This segment of colonial women had flaccid and sickly bodies, which the press fought hard to combat. Journalists, many of whom were physicians, recommended exercise to develop both the beauty of women's figures and "the energy of the corresponding muscles" (*Revista Médica Fluminense*, jan. 1840, p.474); as *O Jornal das Senhoras* (26 jun. 1853, p.206-207) observed:

Beyond the advantages of developing beautiful statures, lovely shapes, good health, strong constitution, exercise also can serve many sick people; I saw a large number

of young women who were kept very sedentary because of the habits of their sex recover quickly from more or less chronic bronchitis or congestion that had resisted other forms of this art.

The model of the *healthy* body (in other words, clean, exercised, and beautiful) advocated at that time was constructed in contrast to the flaccid, ill body of colonial times, which was to be overcome along with a series of other elements that referred back to a past considered “uncivilized.” The dissemination of this new model was so successful that to this day it still forms the basis of socially accepted standards of beauty (Engel, 2004, p.15).

Besides gymnastics, there were other forms of physical exercises specifically for women. To better develop certain organs and senses, singing and oratory were recommended to young women to improve the respiratory system and dance was also suggested to strengthen the body and spirit (Costa, 2004, p.185). The French waltz, for example, as pointed out by *A Nova Minerva* (dez. 1845, p.14), “heats the blood, promotes sweating, and strongly tints ladies’ faces; it is a smooth, slow and graceful movement that appears to be caused by a delicious, imaginative state of the soul.” Ten years later, *O Jornal das Senhoras* (4 mar. 1855, p.70) commented on the importance of music for the development of civilization in Rio de Janeiro:

Music, whose history throughout time offers an immense number of examples of its prodigious influence on civilization, customs, passions, disease, and military heroism, is a necessary means of human culture; music is associated with physical education and gymnastics, developing the organs of the voice and increasing the strength of the lungs and chest, and moral and intellectual education, awakening feelings of justice, love, and benevolence in the heart and providing greater vivacity to your intelligence.

As in Europe, although physical exercise had gained some ground among women in nineteenth-century Brazil (even on the assumption that it would be beneficial for motherhood), gymnastics was specifically an activity that was at least idealized as belonging to the male universe, if not exclusive to it (Melo, 2013, p.138). The benefits of gymnastics included “increasing the sphere of muscle action as well as preserving and restoring health, thus favoring the increase in men’s physical and moral faculties” (*Revista Médica Fluminense*, jan. 1840, p.473). As advocated by the medical press of Rio de Janeiro:

Exercise also has a significant influence on the brain, the senses, and the moral faculties, both for the reasons already explained as well as the great relationships that exist between the physical and the moral. ... to develop and strengthen the body, and to perfect the senses and the intelligence. That is why it gives men much higher levels of vitality, courage, and energy. How often do we see this single cause improve the senses, gaining more strength and sensitivity! How often do they enlighten our thinking, make our intelligence more insightful, and boost our memory! (*Revista Médica Fluminense*, jan. 1840, p.476).

The *Revista Médica Fluminense* (jan. 1840, p.478) went on to state:

It can not only improve the moral faculties of man, but also strengthen and improve the locomotor system, combat masturbation, facilitate breathing, make circulation more active, make the blood more oxygenated, and also animate the vitality of the

functions that contribute to digestion and nutrition. ... Finally, observation has shown that longevity, the greatest good to which man can aspire, is almost always the reward of the people who apply themselves to repeated and methodical exercise.

While gymnastics resulted in health benefits for the individual, it also had an essential social role: it was a means of defending the nation. It earned respect in the armed forces for forming citizens prepared to protect the Empire, since it kept soldiers in good physical shape while regulate discipline in the troops (Melo, 2013, p.123).

But gymnastics was associated with other sports to control the bodies of adult men as well as young people and children. For boys, swimming, horseback riding, and fencing were recommended (Costa, 2004, p.185). Added to this list for adult males were sports that also accentuated their virility, like hunting and fighting, but the more “dignified” gentlemen were expected to combine their strength and virility with vanity and courtesy (Raspanti, 2013, p.196-197). Sports also offered men a public opportunity to exhibit their masculinity (encompassing a set of accepted and valued social roles), which was to be constructed from a very young age and respected from childhood (Mauad, 2013, p.151). This masculinity was noted in the attitudes and actions of those who practiced sports (through the marks left on their bodies, like scars and bruises) as well as by the behavior of spectators in places where sports were played (Melo, 2013, p.129). The “upstanding” gentlemen who appeared at galleries to watch horse racing, for example, marked their presence, wealth, and power as spectators. Beyond modification of the body as a result of actually practicing sports (since jockeys were usually hired from the lower classes or foreigners), the universe surrounding the turf helped regulate a series of behaviors among elite men.

By the end of the nineteenth century, many sports had already won over the citizens of Rio and consequently developed a certain structure, organized into clubs and competitions in areas that included track and field, cricket, and fencing but mainly focused on horse racing, swimming, and rowing (Melo, 2010, p.46). Unlike horse racing, swimming played a crucial role in modifying the male body standard. Prior to the 1800s, the beaches of Rio de Janeiro had previously been used almost exclusively to anchor boats and as a dumping ground for the discards and waste of the city; afterward, it began to receive the population that began to diversify its leisure pursuits, even though these initially took up more space on the sand. The distance to the sea gradually diminished due to both a greater concern with the cleanliness and hygiene of the beaches and physicians recommending the therapeutic benefits of bathing in the sea (Melo, 2010, p.25). In 1841, the *Revista Médica Brasileira* (jun. 1841, p.68-70) advised its readers of “important hygiene recommendations [that] could be obtained from bathing in the sea.” It stated that “bathing in the sea, when conveniently applied, can also decrease or weaken the effects of certain general morbid predispositions ... and even prevent the appearance of certain diseases.” On this same premise, in 1859 the *Revista Popular* (jan.-mar. 1859, p.236) recommended bathing in the sea because of its ability to provide “those who can stand it notable strength and activity. Its action on all organizations is toning, healthy, and cooling.”

Although the beaches initially became a space for amusement and health due to the benefits of bathing in the sea, swimming gradually took on the status of physical exercise

capable of affecting not only health but also the esthetic standard for the body (Melo, 2011, p.517). This sport consequently became highly recommended by the periodicals in Rio de Janeiro, as seen in the pages of the *Revista Médica Brasileira* (jun. 1841, p.60-61):

But certainly no exercise is as useful, advantageous, and enjoyable as swimming, an exercise that should be incorporated into the education of all men, so that by familiarizing ourselves with one of the most powerful elements of nature, it can be useful to maintain our existence in a wide variety of circumstances. The entire body gains from this exercise, since in addition to the effects of cold baths, it experiences great and profound changes, as a result of the various locomotor activities required in the different modes of swimming.

It goes on to add: “The man who has just swum, and not tired himself with strong and prolonged movements, exhibits agility, good mood, and vigor, and even if he is tired, as soon as he rests for a while he feels the good effects of his bath. Continuing this exercise develops the locomotor organs and activates all organic functions” (*Revista Médica Brasileira*, jun. 1841, p.60-61).

Gymnastics, swimming, and physical exercise in general gradually highlighted the strong, muscular physique that became the reference for the male body starting in the following century (Melo, 2010, p.26-29). Even more: by intensifying gentlemen’s contact with the public spaces for sociability and promoting the movement of bodies, sports were also among the activities responsible for extracting “respectable” men from the world of idleness that had characterized the elites since colonial times.

Final considerations

The press played a prominent role in efforts to bring Brazil into the world of “civilized nations,” as it was given the mission to enlighten and instruct the people, spreading wisdom and technical, scientific, and artistic knowledge that would form the foundation of any nation’s “progress.” Its activities were devoted to what was often described as “advancing” the country. While journalists were concerned with shaping citizens that could help contribute to the nation’s future, their writing was mostly directed at the elites, namely culturally white men and women belonging to families with more resources and a more refined culture. They were the ones who could more directly steer toward the directions the nation would take. As such, periodicals were responsible for prescribing to this segment of the population a series of norms related to their bodies, morals, and customs to be adopted for the benefit of a more “civilized” family and country.

The press published a series of these recommendations that, together with other agents and discourses, sought a profound change in the sensibilities of the inhabitants with regards to their bodies. It spread the idea that, through hygiene and caring for the body (which were responsible for protection against illness and vices), “progress” could be made for the nation (Knibiehler, 1994, p.364). Promoting hygiene among the country’s inhabitants became a social and moral concern, since Brazil’s future depended on healthy bodies capable of building it. Journalists worked to publicize a number of methods developed to

boost physical health such as regular bathing, dental cleaning and whitening, combating bad breath, hair and beard care, and adequate nutrition. For women, ways of enhancing beauty were also indicated, such as reddening lips, whitening skin, and perfuming the body.

Male as well as female bodies were to be healthy: in other words, clean, beautiful, and exercised. In fact, this latter aspect was constructed in contrast with the flaccid, sickly bodies of colonial times; it was necessary to combat the morbidity and flaccid nature of the sedentary bodies of cloistered women and idle men. Physical exercise was recommended to women for its benefits to health as well as motherhood. But gymnastics was more specifically recommended for men, transforming the esthetic standard for the male physique during the nineteenth century. Although lean body types were still most valued during this period, gymnastics and other physical exercise gradually developed the strong, muscular body type for men, which became the reference for the male physique from the twentieth century onwards. In short, caring for the body was necessary because it implied simultaneously caring for Brazil as well as its future as a country.

NOTES

¹ The corpus used in this study naturally consisted of periodicals published in Rio de Janeiro during this period. Since the peak of this pedagogical mission occurred in the literary and scientific press that predominated between 1841 and 1870 (Sodré, 1999, p.200-201), texts from these periodicals throughout the entire century were the main (but not the only) sources selected. The journals cited were searched on the Hemeroteca Digital Brasileira portal organized by the Brazilian National Library Foundation (<https://bndigital.bn.gov.br/hemeroteca-digital>).

² In the nineteenth century, journalism was not yet a specific professional category, since newspapers and magazines were written by people who exercised a wide range of activities or were trained for different professions: novelists, poets, lawyers, doctors, philosophers, soldiers, diplomats, politicians, and clergy were found among the ranks of editors and contributing writers. It should also be recalled, as Carlos Costa (2012, p.435-436) points out, that “texts are usually not signed by their authors ... Unlike today, when a reporter strives to have his name highlighted in print on the byline of a text, the concealment of authorship was common in the nineteenth century.” Hence the option of referring in general to the title of the periodical instead of the author of the text in citations presented throughout the course of the article.

³ In the sense that a certain social position was expected for white women and men that required certain conduct, behaviors, expectations, and ways of acting and imagining, although this was not always restricted to white individuals per se.

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