



The Sports Hero in the Social Imaginary. Identity, Community, Ritual and Myth

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Abstract

This paper aims to introduce the sociological processes and mechanisms defining the social imaginary of sports hero, who is a sportsperson acquiring a special status by virtues of his/her extraordinary and exemplary skills, achievements and biography. The sports hero inspires long-term identification and he is symbol of a community, of its values, ideas and collective meanings, while his body incorporates socially appreciated and celebrated qualities. In the dramaturgical and ritual dimension of sport, an athlete can become a collective symbol, and, over time, an hero with mythical features. However, it is only through media narratives that a sportsperson can be heroic and mythical. Thus, the social imaginary in the narrative construction of the sports hero as a central role. The stories revitalise myths, archetypes and beliefs displaying human passions, ambitions, contradictions, conflicts and so on.

Keywords

Sports Hero | Media Narratives | Rituality | Community | Myth

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1. Introduction¹

Social sciences have not yet provided a univocal and general definition of sport heroism. However, the efforts provided by several scholars have offered detailed analyses and effective explanations of many of the causes and motivations that underlie this phenomenon. Sports heroes are athletes, and in rare cases coaches or managers, who acquire a special status by virtue of extraordinary and prestigious sporting skills and sometimes moral qualities. These sports heroes perform great exploits and feats; their sporting and human biography shows exemplary traits; their deeds shape narratives full of mythical resonances and dramatic connotations. The uncommon excellence of skills and performance is fundamental, since it amplifies the general admiration for the qualities of every sportsman. Thus, the events characterizing the life of the sports hero, especially his sport achievements, inspire long-term devotion in fans; in turn, the sports hero's achievements vicariously feed fans' self-esteem. Fans identify with something considered special, perhaps unique, that puts its glory at the service of collective gratifications; they identify with the protagonist of a story that is an archetype of issues, passions, aspirations, contradictions, and deeper human conflicts. In this way, as we shall see later, principles, ideals, and abstract values can be incorporated into a visible form.

A champion or a celebrity becomes a hero when these features solidify over time, when they spread through the generations and sustain a persistent, strong, exemplary devotion. In fact, the charm and the popularity of many athletes are usually ephemeral, and once the sporting activity is over, they gradually decrease (Barney 1985, Vande Berg 1998). This is the case for simple celebrities, famous individuals, whose appeal is also based on media visibility, which these celebrities often use to exploit their name to create a marketable brand. Some of these, more acclaimed and revered, can at most be considered a short-term hero. Of course, before their retirement, these champions are praised and admired. Once their career is over, their presence in collective memory fades, becomes less vital, although a remnant of their sporting history can remain in the less lively institutional forms of memory, such as rolls of honour or catalogues.

Instead, the sports heroes themselves keep the greatness of their achievements, their triumphs, even their failures alive in collective memory. They bring with them a constant aura of uniqueness. Sports heroes become exemplary and ideal characters to identify with; they become enduring spokespersons of institutionalized values, objects of public devotion, part of a binding collective tradition, and benchmark for new generations. They are idealized because they possess skills appreciated by a community and because they demonstrate superiority, thereby placing themselves out of reach of ordinary people. Thus, sports heroes live in a time that is both mythical and

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historical. They are, in fact, real people, concretely living in specific and recognizable circumstances, which have left tangible traces. At the same time, sports heroes are archetypal figures of human splendour and misfortune (Dini 2014: 17-18).

2. Body

Sports heroism, especially in the case of athletes, is related to the body, or more specifically, to the way the champion shapes and uses it. Sport achievements, actually, are the result of the embodiment of athletic skills starting from an original talent. The body of the athlete incorporates socially appreciated and celebrated qualities on which sports triumphs are founded, such as ability to win, dexterity, strength, courage, perseverance, dedication, sacrifice, accuracy, self-control, readiness, agility, grace, and perspicacity. These skills are fundamental to excelling in a highly competitive world. Furthermore, competition is influenced by the occurrence of numerous accidental and fortuitous factors. Of course, ideas related to the body differ across socio-historical contexts because of the dominant social values that distinguish different eras. For instance, the image of the body in the 20th century, typical of a productivist era and linked to work performance, is in fact different from the current one. The current image of the body is determined by a greater attention to the aesthetic aspects producing clear forms of narcissism. In this sense, the excellence of the athlete's body is always measured in reference to the values that the social imagination, in a specific cultural context, generates through the production of shared symbols.

In every socio-historical context, these qualities are considered genuine, not artificial or the consequence of improper alteration, so as to shape an ideal of authenticity (Smart 2005). This authenticity builds the greatness of the athlete, who is able to display heroic traits and is worthy of being celebrated and glorified. His genuine body excellence and the singularity of his sporting style, which help him achieve success in competitions and in allegorical battles against his adversaries, speak to his individuality and his uniqueness. It is a kind of "acquired" celebrity (Rojek 2001); that is, the athlete's fame is linked to praiseworthy acts (skill in training, building and disciplining a victorious body) that are long remembered and are unaffected by the corrosive action of time. Through the expression of this ability – proclaiming a singular merit, worthy of prestige, respect and honour – social distance with ordinary people arises. The distinction of the champion and the sports hero, embodied in his skills, means exclusive access to symbolic assets. His reputation provides him deference, admiration, even devotion, in addition, of course, to significant earning possibilities. These assets are afforded to the athlete according to the rarity of his bodily gifts, which are at the same time a factor of individual differentiation and of social cohesion and solidarity. The body of the sports champion, and even more so the hero, is a source of collective identification. His body creates a strong psychological, affective, and empathic connection among those who identify with him by stimulating solidarity and



the cohesion (Wann, Branscombe 1993, Wann 1997). Actually, the fans identify with his success because his bodily excellence provides his triumphs. Through this kind of physical mediation, the sports hero becomes a symbol of belonging to a community – a territorial, national, local community, but also sometimes a community without geographical boundaries. The patterns of body excellence are produced by the social imagination in variable forms that take into account the nature of the sport, the historical epoch, and the cultural context. The hero is an effective physical intermediary in the relationship with the community if, through his body and the narratives transmitting his uniqueness, he corresponds to the symbols and values of the social imagination of a certain space-time context.

3. Charisma

When Max Weber (1999) redefines the notion of charisma and applies it to his sociology of authority and domination, he says charisma is defined by an extraordinary quality that distinguishes a person – or an object. It is a special gift or quality that makes him exceptional. Extraordinariness is the central factor. Leadership is granted to a person with qualities considered extraordinary, whose great strength and ability to obtain consensus emerges in extraordinary and often critical circumstances. He is supported by the trust, enthusiasm, and support of his followers to the extent that his singular and sublime qualities are assiduously confirmed in daily practice. Excluding the main reference to authority, we can apply this notion to the analysis of sports heroism. It is no coincidence that the word “charisma” is now in the public domain, and it is not related only to the sphere of power. Its range of action in the common language embraces multiple forms of devotion, including the one accorded to the sports champion, who is assigned a heroic dimension that is not reduced to mere esteem for a talent or technical skills. If with charisma we mean an innate gift that makes an individual extraordinary in the eyes of his admirers, the possession of qualities able to affect and to bring together an entire community around a figure guiding them to a shared destiny, in real and symbolic terms (Lindholm 1990, Potts 2009), then we can think that the sports hero has similar qualities, even in a translated sense. Also for this reason, the great sports champion often takes on extra-sport significance, and he can also become a symbolic representative and allegorical ambassador of a nation, of an ethnic community, of a social class.



4. Narratives, Media and Imaginary

4.1 "Next Door" Heroism

Although the skills, performances, and results of the sports champions are real and concrete, it is only thanks to the narratives – propagated through every communication and media platform – that they acquire a heroic consistency. Therefore, we can recognize the centrality of the imaginary in the narrative construction of the sports hero. In the stories that are handed down from generation to generation, the hero's deeds are a revitalization of myths, archetypes, and beliefs – from the fight against an invincible enemy/adversary, to the ritual sacrifice, to revenge – and are reproduced in new forms (Halbwachs 1925, Geertz 1988, Dubuisson 1993, Frezza 1995, Winkler 2001, Jesi 2002). Only thanks to effective stories, an athletic ability can achieve a lasting and significant mythical dimension (Bifulco 2014: 43-45). The stories spread the status of collective heroes, forged by the description of exceptionality, talent, singular virtues, and a biography that can be considered an exemplar that can be compared to the reality of everyday life. In this way, sports heroes become repositories of fundamental meanings for the community that welcomes them; they stand up as spokespersons for aspirations, collective desires, and the essentially unattainable excellence that ordinary people can still try to pursue (Holt, Mangan 1996: 1-11). This is the reason why the events that characterize their sporting career and their private life have so much appeal and relevance. It is a "next door" heroism, since we do not have to be born and reside in Olympus to become an acclaimed champion or to be able to permanently penetrate the cultural memory of a community (Ehrenberg 1992).

However, these characters' narratives maintain an obvious epic dimension. Despite the difficulties they encounter in life and in their careers, the universe they inhabit appears to be mythical, separated from ordinary reality, indeed, capable of reviving it. Nevertheless, at their heart, the narrative models, which enclose and represent the events and actions that have characterized the existence of sports heroes, even in their imposing and solemn form, recursively present conflicts, drives, desires, wills, and obstacles typical of the common human condition. The stories incorporate characteristic dramaturgical elements, including agonism, hostility, cooperation, solidarity, personal glory, compassion for the defeated, the spirit of self-denial, and individual weaknesses. They describe the acquisition of talent and exceptional gifts and move in a plot of great performance, public celebration, but also extravagance, sporting or personal failures, and then redemptions, rehabilitations, new opportunities, ruins, and peaceful or wretched retreats (Whannel 2002: 54). These phenomena often occur according to the phases of the so called "rise and fall biography", which also includes the moment – inexorable for an athlete – of physical decadence, a sign of the end of everything or of a different kind of beginning.



4.2 Competition and Dramaturgy

The ability to publicly reaffirm values, ideas, and common morals in sport also lies in the dramaturgical component of the competition. The competitions or tournaments, in fact, possess a vast and rich dramaturgy. They are, in short, stories with meaning, and strong emotional tones and peaks, which develop during the events and the dynamics of a race. Various dramatic factors represent the constituent elements of these stories: rivalry, cooperation and alliances, disputes and symbolic battles, possible or desperate enterprises, more or less balanced forces, sacrifice, successes (experienced as vital triumphs), and defeats (experienced like collapses and allegorical deaths). In addition, the necessary skills are the most diverse, from strength to inventiveness, from resistance to self-control, from speed to ballistic ability, from courage to cunning; nevertheless, inconvenience, error, chance, and luck can play a decisive role. What emerges is a plot built on a certain amount of unpredictability, which, due to the emotional and narrative impact and the unexpected, unfortunate, or unjust event, gives the competition the dimension of the tragic and enthralling plot. Visceral emotions undermine each other, giving consistency to participation – personal or vicarious – in competition, and joining the dramaturgical aspect with the ritual: excitement, happiness, fear, anxiety, tension, anger, expectation, trust, disappointment, with remarkable levels of enthusiasm or degradation at crucial moments. It also seems interesting to note that the dramaturgical structure changes from discipline to discipline and has a direct and significant impact on the models of heroism. In this sense, each dramaturgical structure is built on recursive patterns, which, in turn, are linked, sometimes in a way that is evident, sometimes in a way that is unseen, to archetypes, myths, and symbols of heroism tout court (Vogler 2007). In other words, the journey of the sports hero through the stages of the competition is sublimated in a series of mythologies, which vary from sport to sport, depending on the specific rules of the discipline, the cultural context, social interactions triggered by the relationship between hero, discipline, storytelling, and the community of enthusiasts. As an example, we can mention the cyclist, the swimmer, and other athletes, who fight against atmospheric agents; the marathoner, who must go beyond his or her physical and biological limits; the semi-unknown boxer, who must defeat the celebrated and famous adversary and so on. These characteristics allow similar narratives to provide a meaningful order, capable of containing and representing the concrete life of the members of a collectivity, in an implicit, translated, and emotional way. Thus, the stories become the raw material of identification, providing basic ingredients to forge, consolidate and reproduce values, ideas, and shared morality. It is in such elaborations of meaning that community membership finds solid ground and takes root. In this perspective, similar narratives intercept identities, motivations, and decisive representations from the point of view of collective belonging, such as those in political, ethnic, religious, national fields.



4.3 Mediascape

The narration of sporting heroism adds a symbolic-allegorical charge to events and athletic deeds. In this way, the individual autobiographies develop “in relation to imaginary experiences, to icons and narrations, which relocate the individual and his ‘living’ the world inside them” (Ragone 2015: 65, our translation). Naturally, the mediascape through which heroic narratives circulate in social spheres is not neutral. Therefore, a research object such as sports heroism can illuminate large techno-medial and socio-cultural transformations. The impressive reconfigurations imposed by the mediatization of most of the processes and interactions (Lundby 2009, 2014, Hepp, Hasebrink 2018), resulting from the digitization of culture (Jenkins 2006), have produced the de-territorialization of space, encouraging forms of aggregation based on sharing of passions rather than geographical places. In the transition from broadcasting communication systems to molecular networks, generated according to the logic of digital media in groups and communities of variable dimensions, the collective co-production processes of sports-related myths have continued to proliferate. In other words, collective imaginary has become more ubiquitous and global and is built through the contributions of fan communities who are increasingly active in producing the media objects and symbolic artefacts necessary to nurture mythologies in social contexts heavily oriented to cross-mediality and transmediality.

Within this imposing metamorphosis of forms of social communication (*mediamorphosis*), sports heroism finds new production formulas, re-articulated at different levels (micro-groups, local communities, national communities, global communities, etc.) around the cult of celebrities and heroes. In other words, the media of the Social Network Society (Boccia Artieri 2012) allow endless remediation (Bolter, Grusin 1999), igniting the “tribal” passions of various aggregative typologies – as we shall see later on – around hyperlocal media cults (for example, the sports hero of a small town or district), national (for example, the sports hero who embodies the values of the national community imagined at the Olympics or the World Cup), global (for example, the sports hero who, thanks to the narrative imagination which propagates his/her ideal model, affirms himself/herself beyond the territorial boundaries). Moreover, the study of sporting heroism can clarify the close affinity between the sociology of the imaginary and media studies, since, as Ragone (2015) rightly notes, *mediamorphosis* (i.e., revolutionizing the forms of production, sharing and distribution of the twentieth century culture) has redefined and regenerated the ways in which societies produce exemplary symbols, myths, and tales. As Frezza writes (2013: 87-88, our translation), we can see how “the relationship between media and myth (...) becomes (...) a typical narration of the modern and technological era”, involving “the deepest spheres of meaning, that such media they have elaborated and disseminated in the relevant public”. Comics and films, novels, radio commentaries, television reports, and the stories of the daily and periodical press have nourished various contemporary mythologies in different media forms. These mythologies have also concerned sports



heroism. So there is a short circuit, in which sports events have fueled the imagination, which in turn has acted as a matrix of beliefs, values, senses, and demands of the audiences. Even in the transition from mass communication to flow communication, as we have seen, digital media determine mitopoietic opportunities and possibilities in media environments that favor an affective and emotional narrative in the construction of sports heroism.

5. Community

5.1 Sports heroes and collective meanings

As mentioned before, the sports hero incorporates needs, characteristics, feelings, values, aspirations, and a sense of union with the group that embraces him. We can refer to this union as “community”, because it has many of the same characteristics. This type of champion represents a group in the public sphere, becoming a symbolic spokesman of its honour. That explains the sort of intrinsic psychological need to think the sports hero of our group has magnificent, exclusive, unparalleled features. In short, he must be accompanied by lasting and unquestionable excellence with which his fans feel a bond rich in strong emotional hues (Teitelbaum 2005). This common sporting membership defines, therefore, a psychological group (Turner 1984), imagined, but endowed with a solid spiritual unity that arises from a shared destiny, expectations, memories, emotions, and passions. This “We” is based on the strong sense of solidarity, loyalty, and trust that is established within it. Even the style of play can be an element that recalls collective identities, the culture, or the typical character of a group, of a community, of a people. Sports heroism is such a community because it incorporates and expresses idealized social or group values.

As we said before, the hero offers on the public stage uncommon performances and, in his achievements, goes beyond the usual limits. For this reason, devotion, homage, and commemoration are the collective response to his presence, the socially appropriate treatment granted to him (Klapp 1954). His correspondence to an ideal model of virtue, ability, and excellence makes him a relevant tool to define social solidarity. After all, as mentioned, the sports hero, in the ritualized dramaturgy of competition, displays and enlivens some of the most important collective meanings, expressing appreciated values such as bravery, fairness, integrity, self-control, sagacity, etc. Sharing these values in such a strong emotional domain like sport creates membership, identification, community, cohesion. From a psycho-social point of view, the mechanism known as “basking in reflected glory” reinforces identification (Cialdini *et al.* 1976); his fans and his community consider the hero’s sports history to be made of achievements, but also of some defeats, just as their own history is, and this is emotionally relevant. Since the fans identify with the vicissitudes and the features incorporated by their champion, the champion can become the fans’ identity and an



extension of their self-esteem (Ashforth, Mael 1989). Thus, as a symbol and representative of the community that identifies with him, as the emblem of its idealized unity, the sports hero is honoured and revered, while his reputation is constantly defended. As the protagonist of a sport history, rooted in epic and tragic plots, he constantly fortifies the self-respect and pride of his community, representing a public symbol that solidifies collective belonging and self-esteem (Durkheim 1912). For this reason, his name is an inestimable element of the tradition of the group that he symbolises. We are talking about different groups and communities.

5.2 Social Imagination and Archetypal Forms of Heroism

It is important to repeat that sports heroes are such because they represent someone and are heroes for someone. This is the reason why there are heroes integrated into the dominant values of society, athletes who recall the glorious past of a group, rebel anti-heroes challenging the established power and representing resistance groups, athletes considered heroes or villains according to different perspectives, etc. It is a matter of community membership and identity. In this regard, it would be useful to re-examine sports heroism within the social imagination and to reconsider it as a matrix of material and immaterial culture (Marzo, Meo 2013), or rather as a “relatively autonomous evolutionary cultural structure” (Ragone 2015: 68, our translation), which gives a certain rhythm and direction to the development of all cultural forms, including sport, of course. In other words, in the social imagination, it is possible to find archetypal forms or typologies of heroism embodied in sports.

The identification processes between sports hero and community are based on intense forms of emotional and imagined connection. Not by chance, already at the beginning of the 20th century, there were intensely empathic links between communities and sports heroes – think, in Italy, the myth of the cyclists Maurizio Garin and Luigi Ganna. Gabriel Tarde observes how, during the same period, the passions of the masses involve all social processes, since they feed the desire. According to Tarde (1893, 1901), collective emotions undermine reality, which is conceived as one of the possible realizations of the imaginary. To understand the composite modalities of interaction between social imagination and sports heroism, it seems useful to go beyond the observations of Tarde and to consult some sociological reflections by George Simmel (1918). According to Simmel, the individuals of the twentieth-century metropolis produce an incessant mediation between rationality and imagination, between material and immaterial elements of culture. The individual tries to continually reduce the gap between real data and representations through the production of symbols and narratives which favour the structuring of the social imagination – with cultural artefacts reconfiguring physical places and spaces of social interaction – and satisfy the hunger for stories. This search for a synthesis between rational and imaginary, in Simmel’s thought, allows the individual to give a coherent form to his existence. With all due caution, it is possible to interpret the identification



processes between the community and the sports hero in Simmelian terms, just as a continuous effort to trace the forms of sublimation of processes of the social imagination in the unique actions of the athlete. Within the “extraordinary” inside every unique and unrepeatable act of the hero, the community can renegotiate its distance from the social imagination, and each time it can use symbols and values, in a pre-rational dimension, strongly linked to the emotional involvement.

6. Ritual

The sports hero is the protagonist of the ritual inspiring every contest and sport event. Ritual is a mechanism that helps to create social solidarity and identity (Durkheim 1912; Collins 1992, 2004). The contests are rituals which athletes and spectators participate in and which generate strong emotional experiences; these shared emotional experiences transform athletes and spectators into members of a group, a “family” in a sense. The sport rituals allow individuals to share values, symbols, social meanings and group identities (Goodger 1986). Cooperation, antagonism, solidarity, the will to excel, individual or collective ability, adherence to a shared destiny, respect for the rival are some of the qualities that the dynamics of contests, the award ceremonies, or the ritualized greetings to the opponents put on stage. The ritualized experience of the contests is based on an assorted set of emotions. Joy, discouragement, hope, fear, anger, envy, pleasure, relief are just some of the structural emotional components of sport. This emotional abundance elaborates and reproduces collective characters, identities and meanings – such as the importance of success, discipline, etc. – or strengthen ties, memberships, and community loyalty (Duquin 2000). As mentioned before, the ritual incorporates this wide range of possible emotions within dramaturgical structures which vary according to the discipline and the socio-cultural context and which, in turn, are part of various forms of high emotional impact media narratives. In fact, with the advent of the 20th century audio-visual media, the sport ritual becomes also a media ceremony. In particular, the passage of the narratives on the printed paper to the radio creates the conditions for a new kind of ceremony, which Dayan and Katz (1992) call a “media event”. In the television sphere, however, high symbolic and emotional events reach massive audiences. In these cases, the distance between news and historical event is reduced, and the audio-visual images are imprinted more than any other in collective memory.

These media ceremonies are closely related to major sport events – consider, for example, the World Cup final or Olympic contests, which are broadcast worldwide. Dayan and Katz talk about the competition, a kind of media event displaying a challenge, in which the audience is made of fans who are emotionally encouraged to take part in the contest. Massive media ceremonies directly affect sporting events and modify the way heroism is communicated; in this way, they support the identification between hero and community through an identity process that necessarily takes into



account the specificity of media environments. In any case, as mentioned before, in the ritual dimension, the centrality of the role of sports heroes gives them social prestige and the possibility of becoming the spokesperson of values, qualities, and shared allegorical destinies. Thus, they are also symbols of group identification, real sacred objects that materially represent the collective identity and recall the sense of belonging and the gratifying emotions inspiring it, even when they are not competing. This is the reason why their images crowd into the web profiles of fans and are hung on the walls of fans' bedrooms, or the reason why they are evoked in songs, choruses, hymns and other cultural productions. Not by chance, then, every fan defends their hero's honour in conversations with rivals, so that the symbol of community membership, and the community itself, are not violated. These identity needs lead the hero to become, over time, part of the tradition and the shared cultural memory, even more so if he represents other relevant elements of identity, such as political, religious, ethnic, or class membership. The ideal of the sports hero, therefore, has a concrete impact on reality: in this perspective, belonging to a "nation", to a community, is expressed in mythologies, "genealogies" and imagined collective epics, reinforced by sharing myths, beliefs, symbols, and by public and private memories (Anderson 1983), all linked to contemporary and past sports heroes.

7. Conclusions: Sociology of the Imaginary and the Sports Hero

The ritualized dramaturgy that accompanies the sporting event (and the related forms of media narration) raises another relevant question, namely to understand what the sports hero has to do, or not, with a mythical dimension. The sociologies of the twentieth century imaginary provide more than a useful contribution to addressing this theoretical question.

As we know, Durkheim thinks that organized religions have a spectacular apparatus built around myths, foundational narratives, prohibitions, taboos, and above all, exceptional rites which vivify the power of the sacred, modeling the symbolic and physical spaces inhabited by the faithful.

Both Simmel and Durkheim trace the richness of social life to the exchange of symbols: it is through symbolic exchange that the imaginary penetrates into everyday life and influences social life through negotiation. In the wake of Durkheim, Mauss analyzes the game, which we can certainly bring back, at least in part, to the sports event. Caillois (1958) identified four characteristics of the games: *agon* (the game based on competition), *alea* (game characterized by chance and gambling), *ilynx* (game based on the search for thrill and risk), *mimicry* (based game on fiction and disguise). *Mimicry* is a typical feature of those phenomena called "play" and not "game" in English. But it is possible to easily bring the various sports disciplines to one or the other (or a combination) of the remaining characteristics identified by Caillois (*agon*, *alea*, *ilynx*). For Mauss, in the game the symbols and the things coincide on an imaginary plane.



But, precisely because symbols act as the total representation of things, they create, among those who adhere to their symbolic values, what he calls a *communio*, that is, a connection, which does not provide an illusion of reality, but creates sociality itself. If, for Mauss, “mythologies (...) are, in short, imagined and reworked by society starting from shared symbolic representations, and in turn based their individual consciousness and action” (Ragone 2015: 70, our translation), the foundation of the social bond, which unites a community of enthusiasts, can be traced in the adhesion, through the dramaturgy of the rite, to the mythology of one or more sports heroes. So, for Mauss, what matters are the forms of community adherence to symbols. The fact that such adhesion regards a magical-irrational belief or the technical-scientific knowledge does not change the mechanism of the functioning of sociality (Mauss 1903).

The social imaginary and the reality of the sports hero are, therefore, inextricably linked to the forms of representation and narration. According to Morin (1956, 1962), the image acts as a constitutive pivot of both the real and imaginary levels, which are to be understood as alternative dimensions that can also be integrated. But above all, for Morin the mass media (as they will later do in very different forms, such as social media and networks) continue in the fundamental function of producing myths which ensure the balance of social life by staging the structural opposition between order and chaos, rationality and magic, the visible and invisible.

If in contemporary mythology it is possible to trace such a dynamic of symbolic antagonisms, then sports heroism can be considered one of the most prolific and productive territories.

In this perspective, analyzed in the light of the anthropological structures of the imaginary identified by Gilbert Durand (1960), the semantics of myth is a tool that can be easily applied to sports heroism. In this sense, we can affirm that the contemporary symbolic figures refer to more ancient mythical substances.

This mythical essence of sports heroism manifests itself in ritual ceremonies, which sometimes touch the mystic ecstasy and the “magical” fusion between the hero and his/her “people”. In reality, as we have seen above, the forms of identification between the community and the hero always manifest themselves in a pre-rational dimension, activating the deep emotions of the individuals and groups involved.

The identification of individuals and the community in the hero touches on the need to belong, on identity representation and reproduction of shared values. This passionate connection can take on different shades of intensity. In some “special” moments, in fact, the myth of the sports hero – in the declinations of the fantastic and the marvelous – can act as a radical element of rupture of the rational principle that governs political-economic systems. Maffesoli (1988) ascribes to the myth the ability to undermine the logical-rational foundations which regulate social institutions on the basis of a conception of the imaginary as the non-logical “substance” of the social bond. In Maffesoli’s view, the ritual is the space in which the dialectic between archetypes and stereotypes is produced, in which irrational impulses are freed in an



attempt to establish new forms of social connection. In sports passions, it is easy to find surplus, irrational, and fideistic ways with which the link between the hero and his community is sometimes established. In this context, the spectacularization, mediatization and aestheticization of the sports event favors the proliferation of fan tribes, founded on the sharing of the passion (even beyond any geographical affiliation) for a hero or for a team.

Sporting events are progressively transformed into performances with dramaturgical structures, which, although calibrated with respect to different disciplines, are increasingly hybridized with the rhythms and timing of audiovisual communication and, more recently, with the reticular and deconstructing forms of the Social Network Society.

In the age of convergence, thanks to the endless opportunities for groups to communicate, self-represent, and thus contribute to the collective construction of contemporary culture, the tribalization of the relationship between community and hero manifests itself in the surplus, creative, and imaginative practices of the Internet. Here the relationship between the passionate tribe and the hero comes to terms with the extemporaneousness with which feelings and emotions are shared and communicated through social media through a wide range of emotional nuances ranging from “mythization” to derision, to hate, and so on. If, according to Maffesoli, we are dealing with a minor “polytheism” in the network society, the sports tribes are part of this process, since it is in the social interactions they generate that the imaginary continuously produces new sports myths. However, the element that perhaps distinguishes the sports tribe (for example, the groups of fans offline and online) from other communities established on an emotional and aesthetic basis is the controversial relationship with the nomadism of passions. The continuous transition between different aesthetic consumptions is one of the essential prerogatives of contemporary tribes; however, sports tribes exhibit relative stability and recognize sport as a symbolic space of contrast to the logical-rational order of the institutional and political system, even though they retain a certain propensity for cyclical replacement of their myths, sometimes in violent form (for example, the consequences of the transfer of a footballer from a team to a historically adverse one). In these cases, the sports hero becomes the vehicle of the values of the imagined community (loyalty, defense of the city, loyalty to the team, etc.), precisely in an inexhaustible negotiation between the imaginary and the real, which, in the rite of event, finds its recursive moment of development.



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