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Sport and Integration of Migrants: Some considerations

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Abstract

The potential of sport for the inclusion of minorities is widely acknowledged. Being a non-verbal language, sport is particularly useful to ease the integration of the migrants in the hosting societies; in the present world – in which migrations are one of the most debated issues of the political arena – it can be a valid tool to create a more inclusive society. However, the potential of sport should not be overestimated, mainly because of the limits of its role and the barriers that hinder the participation of migrants. In this context, the role of scholars, which can provide useful tools of knowledge, is essential.

Keywords: Migrations, Integration, Sport, Multi-cultural society.

1. Potentialities and limits of sport as a tool for the intercultural dialogue

The potential of sport to foster integration of minorities and disadvantaged people (migrants, disabled persons, ethnic or linguistic minorities, etc.) is widely acknowledged: institutions, intellectuals, opinion leaders, use to state that sporting activities promote dialogue and integration. Since the end of the World War II, particular attention has been paid to the sport for disabled persons, which now is played in all the world (Martino *et al.*, 2019, pp. 215-220; European Commission, 2018; Smith, 2016; DePauw & Gavron, 2005).

Today, in the continuous evolution of the migratory phenomena, institutions and scholars consider sport a tool to ease the integration of migrants in the hosting society. This assumption is certainly true, but the role of sport should not be overestimated, mainly for two reasons:

1. the participation of the migrants in sport is often hindered by obstacles of economic, social-cultural and bureaucratic nature;
2. when migrants succeed in playing, not always they walk toward a real inclusion.

Stan Frossard, Executive Secretary of the Enlarged Partial Agreement on Sport of the Council of Europe, has summarized the problem in this way:

Played and watched by people from a variety of social backgrounds, it has an educational and socialising effect that makes it an ideal vehicle for intercultural dialogue and social integration. Indeed, when we speak about "integration through sport", there is wide acknowledgement of the positive contribution sport makes to social integration, for ethnic minorities and immigrant communities in particular. This consensus has been highlighted by various opinion polls in Europe and by references in political and institutional discourse. Regular participation in sport is thought, for example, to help young people of immigrant origin to develop key skills and to integrate better into society.

It is important, however, not to take things at face value. Often the only visible evidence of sport's potential to promote integration is the presence of international stars in high-profile, top-level sport, which is not always a true reflection of the situation on the ground. Experience has shown that sport can equally be a setting for extreme nationalism, exclusion and discrimination. In the context of the Council of Europe Convention against Spectator Violence, it has been observed that, unfortunately, racism and intolerance are still rife.

Sport in itself does not necessarily foster tolerance. Nor is it necessarily a factor in social mixing and integration. Harnessing this political potential requires first and foremost real commitment on the part of the associations and institutions that administer and support sport.

It is important, therefore, to look beyond the conventional wisdom and rhetoric in order to understand how certain practices contribute to the integration of immigrant communities through sport. Any such assessment must not only look at the (political and cultural) context but also identify the target groups concerned (Gasparini & Cometti, 2010, p. 5).

The attention paid to sport as a tool to ease the intercultural dialogue is due to the fact that, like music, it is a universal language: the rules of the games are equal in all the world and the linguistic barriers are easily overcome, because sport is a non-verbal language. The athletic activities, furthermore, can have some beneficial effects on the players: they can increase confidence and self-regard, and also allow people to forge new relations and widen the network of friends. For migrants, sport can help to keep the identity of the country of origin, thanks to the participation in ethnic teams or through the celebration of the victories of the national athletes in the spectator-sport competitions. Keeping a strong identity is not in contrast with integration but, on the contrary, can ease the dialogue with other people, allowing a sort of peer-to-peer interaction.

Not by chance, over the years sport has often been a tool for integration. In the long history of Italian emigration, for example, the athletic activities have played an important role in helping immigrants to become citizens of the countries of destination. The Italians emigrated to Latin America found

in sport, and particularly in football, one of the way to interact with local people. Through sport, they have also contributed to the nation building of the countries of destination. For example, some of the most known football clubs, such as Palmeiras in Brazil and Boca Juniors in Argentina, were established by Italian immigrants as ethnic associations (Porro, 2016; Riva, 2016). In the United States, where often the immigrants found a hostile environment and had to face the discrimination of significant sectors of the local population, sport contributed to make the Italians accepted, for example thanks to the popularity of some champions of Italian descent, such as the baseball player Joe Di Maggio (Marchesini, 2001). Sport, however, also allowed the emigrants to keep the Italian identity, for example through the celebration of the victories of Italian champions and teams (thinks to the boxer Primo Carnera in the Thirties (Marchesini, 2006) and, more recently, to the performance of the football national team at the 1994 World Cup, held in the United States).

Today, in all Europe many projects and initiatives aim at favouring integration through sport. Migrants participate in two ways: with ethnic teams, composed by players coming from the same country, or within multi-cultural teams, in which foreigners and local people play together. The most involved discipline, as is logical, is football, which is the favourite game of both Europeans and migrants, most of whom come from areas, such as Africa and the Middle East, where the game is very popular.

The European institutions, indeed, pay great attention on sport as a tool of dialogue. In 2007 the European Union published its *White Paper on Sport*, highlighting its importance for minorities:

Sport makes an important contribution to economic and social cohesion and more integrated societies. All residents should have access to sport. The specific needs and situation of under-represented groups therefore need to be addressed, and the special role that sport can play for young people, people with disabilities and people from less privileged backgrounds must be taken into account. Sport can also facilitate the integration into society of migrants and persons of foreign origin as well as support inter-cultural dialogue.

Sport promotes a shared sense of belonging and participation and may therefore also be an important tool for the integration of immigrants. It is in this context that making available spaces for sport and supporting sport-related activities is important for allowing immigrants and the host society to interact together in a positive way.

The Commission believes that better use can be made of the potential of sport as an instrument for social inclusion in the policies, actions and programmes of the European

Union and of Member States. This includes the contribution of sport to job creation and to economic growth and revitalisation, particularly in disadvantaged areas. Non-profit sport activities contributing to social cohesion and social inclusion of vulnerable groups can be considered as social services of general interest¹.

The Union has promoted initiatives and funded projects aimed at spreading the use of sport for the inclusion of migrants. Among them, the project Spin - Sport inclusion network, which aims to “increase volunteering of migrants and minorities through the establishment of equal partnerships and training of mainstream sport organizations”². The project, co-funded by the programme Erasmus Plus, is composed by seven partners, coming from different Member States, who promote research and organize events to overcome the barriers that limit the participation of migrants in sporting activity. For example, on 20 June, UN World Refugee Day, Spin promotes an European Football Day, with the organization of tournaments and other events.

Another initiative funded by the European Union is the project Aspire - Activity, Sport and Play for the Inclusion of Refugees in Europe, started on 1st January 2017 and lasting until 30 June 2019. The projects aims at involving asylum seekers and refugees, who are among the most disadvantaged migrants and, very often, have to face long bureaucratic procedures to achieve a permit of stay. The goal of the initiative is the “implementation of a training module that is based on underpinning evidence and enhances the skills and competences of facilitators in sport organisations how to adapt existing coaching activities to the specific context of refugees and migrants”³. In this way, Aspire aims at providing refugees with psychosocial support and easing the intercultural dialogue between them and the local people.

The Council of Europe, in turn, in 2007 has established the Enlarged Partial Agreement on Sport, which, among other things, deals with minorities and discriminations “related to gender, race, ethnicity, physical and intellectual ability, sexual orientation, migration, prisons and many

¹ For the English version of the text see <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52007DC0391&from=EN>, retrieved 26 April 2019.

² See the website of the project, <https://sportinclusion.net/about-spin/>, retrieved 28 April 2019.

³ See the website <https://www.aspiresport.eu/>.

others”⁴. Since its establishment, Epas has promoted activities and important studies on the role of sport for integration.

Alongside the projects funded by the supranational bodies, many states implement initiatives with the same goal. Moreover, many projects come from the civil societies, by organizations, associations and groups of citizens. For example, the Italian federation Uisp – Unione italiana sport per tutti⁵, is very active in the organizations of tournaments and events that involve migrants. Many teams, mainly in football, have been established by associations and political groups with the specific purpose of including migrants and easing, in this way, their integration.

However, the potential of sport, as stated above, must not be overestimated. Sport, in fact, is only one element of the social life of an individual and beside it many other exists, such as work, social relations, etc. Not always sport has impact on them. Furthermore, the participation of migrants in athletic activities not necessarily entails a real integration and a real intercultural dialogue between foreigners and native citizens: the result depends on the context and the environment in which sport is played. More specifically, the participation in athletic activities generally does not have a direct impact on the economic condition of migrants, apart from the rare cases of expatriated citizens who have become professional sportsmen.

The foreigners, furthermore, find some barriers that limit their participation in athletic activities.

2. Barriers, discriminations, racism

The migrants who play sports are fewer than autochthon citizens. There are not studies offering precise quantitative data, but several surveys carried out in the European countries show that foreigners are less involved. A research collecting the data of several national studies has summarized in this way the subject:

In principle, the sports sector is one of the spheres in which migrant volunteers are in comparison to other social spheres rather strongly represented. The findings of the

⁴ Official website of the Epas, <https://www.coe.int/en/web/sport/inclusive-sport>, retrieved 20 April 2019.

⁵ On the history of Uisp see Di Monte, Giuntini & Maiorella (2008).

individual surveys are difficult to compare, since they deal with different issues and examine different groups. Nevertheless, they reveal differences between migrants and non-migrants at various levels of the sports sector and of voluntary commitment. Different studies find that migrants are underrepresented regarding sporting activities, membership in sports clubs, voluntary commitment in sports and/or voluntary commitment within formal structures in general. Further results indicate the existence of access barriers within the structures of organized sports (e.g. the observed general readiness of migrants to engage and their large proportion of informal volunteer activity (Schwenzer, 2016, p. 15).

The minor involvement of migrants is due to some barriers, which do not exist for native people.

First of all, economic barriers: playing sports does cost and the migrants, who generally live in poorer condition than native people, have not always the possibility of affording expenses for equipment, registration, etc. Furthermore, usually they work more hours and, therefore, have less time to devote to leisure.

Other barriers come from bureaucracy and sporting legislation. The rules of the individual federations are different from one another, but often they require documents that not always migrants are able to provide, such as long-term permits of stay. For some categories, such as asylum seekers and refugees, playing in official teams or associations is even more difficult. In last years, many progress have been made and many federations have changed their rules, easing the participation of migrants. This evolution, however, does not mean that foreigners are assimilated to local people and often the bureaucratic procedure for their registration is different.

Finally, the newcomers have also to face social-cultural barriers. Many migrants, coming from civilizations different from that of the hosting country, have habits and traditions unknown to the native citizens. Sometimes, the favourite disciplines are different: migrants coming from the Indian Subcontinent, for example, traditionally play cricket, a game little known in Europe, which makes difficult the organization of events that involve both newcomers and autochthon citizens, although some initiatives have been carried out. Also other cultural differences can create obstacles: for example, the feast days, during which sport is often played, are different for Christians and Muslims. In the case of women, the cultural barrier are particularly hard to overcome, because traditions and leading ideas of many countries of origin do not encourage (or, sometimes, explicitly refuse) the female participation in athletic activities.

Sport, furthermore, is affected by the problem of racism, which exists since when, between the end of Nineteenth century and the beginning of the Twentieth, modern sport was born.

In theory, the athletic activities should be immune from racism and discriminations, as their only important element is the ability of participants, without regard to ethnicity, but, in practice, this does not happen. William Gasparini, one of the most expert scholars in sports and discrimination, has written:

Sport involves a paradox. Popular, and practised on a voluntary basis, it accepts anyone, irrespective of cultural origin or gender. It can therefore be regarded as an area free from discrimination. Conversely, competitive sport can also be viewed as a form of differentiation, dividing and ranking practitioners according to level of ability. Yet this exclusion of those who are "less good" at their sport, which may look like discrimination, is not in fact based on social criteria, birth, religion or "race". It is even clearer that discrimination is not involved when you consider that the rules require equal treatment: age groups, weight categories and rankings are created precisely so that "the best person wins", skin colour not being a factor. Differences are recognised and differentiation allowed only between the sexes, since it is "natural" for separate competitions to be held for women and men. [...]

In the face of a certain political concept of the universality of sport, day-to-day practice and the conduct of sports institutions surely indicate that sport continues to be affected by a number of identity-related affirmations and specific instances of discrimination (sexual, ethnic and/or based on physical appearance or sexual orientation) (Gasparini & Talleu, pp. 11-12).

In the past, black-skinned sportsmen were generally prevented from playing with white people. According to the mentality of yore, human races were different from one another and, in many countries, the presence of coloured people in sporting events was considered inopportune.

In football, for example, a lasting interdiction, overcome in different moments depending on the countries, prevented black-skinned athletes to play with the white ones (Valeri, 2005). Over the years, the black football players showed more and more talent (just think to the Brazilian football team in the years 1958-1970 and to players such as Garrincha, Didi, Vavá and, above all, Pelé), so that the idea of racial superiority, used to justify the interdiction, proved to be absolutely unsustainable.

Today the interdiction has been abolished and the sporting federations forbid any kind of discrimination. However, new forms of racism have arisen: discriminations and racial insults are quite frequent by supporters and, sometime, opponent players, mainly in football. A survey realized in

2018 by the English organization Kick It Out, with interviews in 38 countries, has reported that 54% of respondents has witnessed at least one case of racism ("The Guardian", 21 November 2018). The most affected country is Peru, where incidence is 77%; in the Netherlands, on the contrary, there is the lowest incidence, 38%. The survey, furthermore, has highlighted that only 28% of football fans know how to report the episodes of discrimination. The situation is worrying, despite the progress made in last years, and the chairman of Kick It Out, Herman Ouseley, has commented: "If you were asking this question 10 years ago, certainly 25 years ago, about how many fans had witnessed racist abuse it probably would have been about 90%, so the fact it's 50% is both disappointing and pleasing" (The Guardian", 21 November 2018).

The progress, however, is jeopardized by xenophobia and nationalism, which are increasing in many countries. Racism in sport, in fact, reflects the racism in society and, if the latter grows, also the sports fields risk being more affected.

Lilian Thuram, one of the footballer most engaged in the fight against racism⁶, has explained:

It is vital to realise that racism and discrimination in sport reflect the racism that exists in society. The more racism there is in society, the more will occur at football grounds. The racism that occurs is not therefore specific either to sport or to football, and it is not sport which gives rise to racism. On the contrary, it is through sport that people come into contact with one another and get to know each other, with the result that prejudice becomes less marked. Thus, football is a fantastic means of integration. Clearly the situation is not the same in society, where people do not always meet others, and therefore retain their prejudices. Football does not solve all of society's problems, but does bring people together and get positive messages across to combat racism and encourage people to accept others. In fact, I am surprised that people feel that sport contributes to racism. While sport does involve rivalry, that rivalry is friendly. I think that there is less discrimination in sport than in society as a whole. Performance is what counts most, not skin colour (Gasparini & Talleu, p. 5).

At present, the diffusion of racism is diverse. In some Western Europe countries it is less common than in the past, at least in the spectator-sport,

⁶ In 2000, Thuram refused to be hired by the Italian club S.S. Lazio because its supporters were known for their racism and the frequent insults against black-skinned players. Moreover, Thuram has established *Fondation Lilian Thuram. Éducation contre le racisme*, aimed at combatting discriminations. See the website <https://www.thuram.org>, retrieved 2 May 2019.

also thanks to the commitment of sporting and political institutions, which have promoted anti-racist campaigns and established sanctions for the perpetrators of discriminatory behaviour. In many countries, however, xenophobia and polemics on immigration have created a climate of intolerance, which also affects sport and, particularly, football (although cases of racism against black players have also been reported in other disciplines). It is the case, for example, of Italy, where in last years the landings of asylum seekers have raised fierce polemics and for some political forces the contrast to immigration is the main element of their political engagement. The growing xenophobia has affected the football fields, mainly in the dilettantish levels, where the insults against dark-skinned players by opponents and fans are more frequent. As for professional football, many insults against black players by opponent supporters have been reported in last *Serie A* championships (Gherpelli, 2018). Also in many Eastern European countries the polemics on immigration and the fear of the foreigner risk provoking a dangerous increase of racism in the stadiums.

Racial offenses are usually directed against the opponent players. Very often, the supporters accept that black athletes play in their favourite team, but show racism against the opponents: in other words, when a dark-skinned player contributes to the success of their own team is welcomed or, at least, tolerated; when, on the contrary, his talent contributes to the defeat of the favourite team, xenophobia arises. In this sense, racism is also a form of frustration, provoked by the talent of the black athletes, whose performance reminds the racists how false are their ideas of superiority. In most extreme cases, however, the racist fans even insults the players of their own club, thinking that they make the team “impure”, with their presence. For example, the supporters of the Israeli team Beitar Jerusalem, who are strictly tied to the far right nationalism, use to insult any Arabian, black or Muslim footballer, *de facto* preventing the club to hire them (“Haaretz”, 8 February 2013; “The Jerusalem Post”, 11 July 2013). Something similar also happens in other countries. In Italy, for example, some supporters of Hellas Verona and Treviso have protested against the hiring of dark-skinned players by their clubs (Valeri, 2005, pp. 633-675; “La Repubblica”, 3 June 2001).

Sport, however, over the years has also been a tool to fight racism and discrimination. One of the most known stories is that of South Africa. As is

known, during the Apartheid regime, the sporting federations of the country, which discriminated against black-skinned people and prevented them to play together with white athletes, were excluded by all international institutions. This interdiction contributed to raise awareness about the exceptionality and unsustainability of the situation. After the end of apartheid, sport, and particularly rugby, was one of the tools for the reconciliation between blacks and whites (Carlin, 2012; Mastroluca, 2012, pp. 233-251; Farquharson & Marjoribanks, 2003, pp. 27-48)

Today, many organizations and clubs have been established with the aim to fight racism in sport. The teams established to favour integration, for example, usually organize anti-racist initiatives and, furthermore, their performance shows that the union of cultures is not a burden.

The anti-racist football clubs have also created a continental network, Fare - Football against racism in Europe, which aims to combat any discrimination (racism, nationalism, sexism, homophobia, discrimination against disabled people) by implementing several initiatives: organization of international events and conferences, production of materials for educations, monitoring of matches and report of the witnessed cases of discrimination to the international federations, Uefa and Fifa. The network intends to use football as a tool to tackle discrimination, fostering exchanges and giving voice to anybody engaged in the fight against racism. The basic principle is "that the game, as the most popular sport in the world, belongs to us all and can propel social cohesion"⁷.

Despite these interesting and useful initiatives, racism in sport continues to be a serious problem. It also makes more difficult the integration and reduces the potential of sport for integration, because prevents migrants from feeling completely at home in the hosting country. Therefore, the fight against any kind of racism and discrimination must be a fundamental commitment of institutions and civil society.

3. The contribution of research

In the "battle" to make sport more inclusive, research plays an important role. Scholars, in fact, can provide essential tools of knowledge,

⁷ See the website <https://farenet.org>, retrieved 14 April 2019.

able to help organizers, instructors, decision makers and also players to perform the task of fighting discrimination. Research, for example, can highlight which barriers limit the impact of sport activities on integration, what are the best practices for removing them, which result the projects aimed at easing integration have produced and which are their limits.

In last years, many studies have examined the potential of sport for migrants and many projects, such as the mentioned Spin and Aspire, include the promotion of new research among their objectives. In turn the Council of Europe, through its platform Epas, has promoted interesting studies (for example, Gasparini & Talleu, 2010; Cometti & Gasparini, 2010) and has organized the congress *Newly arrived migrants and their integration via sport*, held in Vienna in 2016, whose proceedings have not been published yet. National bodies, universities and individual scholars have promoted many other studies. Sociologists, political scientists and jurists have been the most attentive intellectuals, while the contribution of historiography, until now, has been small. Apart from some interesting exception (for example, Ross Mormino, 2010, pp. 5-17; Gems, 2013) the role of sport in the social-cultural of immigrants has rarely been examined in a diachronic perspective. History, however, could shed light on important elements of the potential of sport, mainly examining in which way the athletic activities have contributed to the integration of the migrants over the years.

More in general, many subjects have to be examined yet and the evolution of the migratory phenomena entails a continuous update of the studies the promotion of new research. This issue of the Journal of Mediterranean Knowledge aims to give a small contribution – a drop in the ocean – to the knowledge of the relations between sport and migration, by proposing articles on some little known topics.

The role of sport for the integration migrants is examined in two articles. Giovanna Russo proposes a general analysis, focusing on different European models and explaining how sport can be a positive tool of intercultural dialogue or, on the contrary, a mean of discrimination. Erminio Fonzo, who has already paid attention to the role of sport for integration with a book on the history of the football team Afro-Napoli United (Fonzo, 2019), has widened the range of his research, examining the situation in a region of southern Italy, Campania, telling the story of four sporting projects and highlighting their results and their limits.

Javier Torres Velasco examines the role of sport in the modernization of Colombia in the decade of '20s. His analysis includes all spectator sports in a particularly difficult context, marked by high mortality rate and immigration.

The focus of the issue, however, is on the Mediterranean, which, as is known, is both a bridge and a barrier: most of the immigrants living in Europe have crossed this sea, which, over the years, has allowed fruitful exchanges among people and cultures. Our hope is that the Mediterranean might be a bridge also for sport, allowing athletes and amateurs of different origin to play together.

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