

TRADITIONALISM AND TIMELINESS IN MODERN SPORT¹

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Abstract: *The essay links social historical narratives about modernity with cultural studies views on sport, and investigates what cultural and social functions are associated with sport in our highly technicized capitalist world. While pursuing this research I always keep in mind how professional spectacle sports interact with different forms of technical media.*

Keywords: *sport, modernity, traditionalism, high-tech world (JEL code: Z20)*

INTRODUCTION

Parallel with the changes in the institutional system of sport that took place in the previous century, the critical discourse surrounding sport and bodily exercise become quite diverse and complex. The (conservative, leftist or liberal) philosophical discourses and the social sciences of the 20th century represented professional competitive sport not as a social phenomenon worthy of praise, rather as something to denigrate and expose. On the other hand, the mass public interest in sport, as well as the media that utilizes this interest and generates even more attention to it, represents this sphere as conveying unique cultural values. My research is devoted to investigating the causes of this two-faced nature of sport.

METHOD

My research, on the one hand, links social historical narratives about modernity with cultural studies view on sport, on the other hand, as a media researcher I interpret the contemporary spectacle sport as a phenomenon whose present shape was formulated in close connection with optical media (photography, film, television).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Cultural History as a Judge

Johann Huizinga's *Homo Ludens* (1938), which had a considerable impact on cultural history, gives an overarching critique of sport from the perspective of cultural studies. The Dutch thinker's critique is in very close connection with the

socio-historical theory he developed about modernity. In his view deep changes took place in the Western world after the baroque period, thus from the 18th century onwards, the ideals of expediency and bourgeois well-being became dominant, which was reinforced by the industrial revolution and the technicization of the world. The spread of rationality and utilitarianism secularized Europe. The elements of various social practices were replaced by the competitive spirit of capitalism fed by the mechanization of work processes and the development of natural sciences, and this competitive spirit was heralded by the propaganda, the advertisements and the commercials as the central theme of social communication and the public sphere. Modern sport, characterized as it is by scientific theories, technical organization and the growing need for funds, in this sense, is nothing less than the model of the modern world stripped of playfulness.

Huizinga's theory comes very close to the leftist critique of sport when he claims that the inciting of competitive spirit serves the needs of the beneficiaries of mass capitalism: the big factories consciously plant this spirit in their workforce in order to increase productivity. In the neo-Marxist view (Rigauer 1969), the nature of sport is, first of all, ironical: while it holds the promise of escaping the world of labor, it still prepares the individual for even more work. On the one hand it persuades the workers, who make up the biggest percent of the audiences of sport events, to see "hard work" as the only way to achieve success. On the other hand, once bodily exercise enters into everyday life, it serves the labor demands of the economic system, because it strengthens the worker's health, increases their power, and decreases the amount of workdays missed because of illness. The neo-Marxist analysis of professional sport – understood as play deformed by capitalism (for example: a high percent of specialization

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and standardization, long term planning, scientific and technical background, the strive for maximum performance, the constant checking and evaluation of performance, the importance of business aspects) – recognizes in sport the familiar patterns of capitalist industry and mass production (Rigauer, 2006).

Sport sociology's branch inspired by Michel Foucault's works proceed from different premises, but these thinkers also see sport as one of the effective disciplining practices of modern society, which makes the body useful, improvable, perfectible, and docile. (Rail and Harvey 2003) Children, who engage in sports because they love bodily exercise, become athletes when they interiorize the view that only systematic, planned and hard training, and in many aspects an ascetic lifestyle can lead to success – thus when they renounce the relative freedom of exercise and play, and devote themselves to the disciplining system. The athlete in this sense is the artificially constituted subject proper, even though sport is usually connected to its opposite, the advent of the “clean” and “natural” body. (Andrews 2003)

In *The Culture of Narcissism* the American social historiographer Christopher Lasch disputes the views of Huizinga and the leftist thinkers in order to defend the inner values of sport, yet he also criticizes the processes that shaped the most popular American sports from the middle of the 20th century. Lasch argues that the problem with sport is not that many people take it too seriously, quite the opposite: the downgrading of sport was due to the high amount of incompetent interest raised by television and the tabloid press. Because of this, the system of conventions, which previously regulated the behavior of both the players and the audience, and enabled the athletes capable of wonderful achievements to become real representatives of the community, seems to disappear. It is evident that in this view, sport, which seemed to directly oppose the secularized, narcissistic society devoid of collective values, or at least held the promise of momentarily escaping this sphere, later debased itself to serve the needs of consumer capitalism. Lasch is not criticizing the investing of sport with religious significance (sport basically becomes a supplement for religion), quite the opposite, he regards it as a positive phenomenon from a social point of view. His real criticism is aimed against the demystification of sport, and the way it was swallowed by entertainment industry. (Lasch 1979, p. 100-124)

Sport as an Island

Even though various forms of audiovisual media, television, the Internet, or even the multiplex cinemas are always ready to satisfy our entertainment needs, engaging in sport activities, as well as attending some significant sports events is still part of the lives of many. Due to the specialization of work processes, most people do not have a chance to use their personal creativity in their day to day job. Eugen Fink, who is investigating the ontology of play, claims that in the age characterized by the sounds of machines, the role of play, as

an activity that can compensate for the unpleasantness of the technicized world, becomes even more important. (Fink 1995, p. 100) The more routine-like life becomes, the more modern man is likely to escape into play, which, in its most valuable forms, enables us to show – if only for ourselves – such capabilities in us that remain hidden in everyday life. During sports activities we perform many such moves (jumping, sliding, throwing, etc.), which are hardly ever present in our everyday lives, thus sports can become a stage for gaining our self-identity. (Gebauer and Wulf 1998, p. 71-72)

Another undisputable positive aspect of play is that with its artificially created rules, it can relativize those social and other differences (rich/poor, beautiful/ugly, young/old, etc.), which are very prevalent in everyday life. The clean borderlines of the playfield symbolize that different rules apply here, and the transition between the two worlds is limited. The stadium as a unique space-time is clearly differentiated from the space-time of the everyday world. On the rest of the days the stadium is just an unused area where nothing interesting happens.

Sport can create cooperation, friendship and solidarity even between people who have never met before. And this is true not only for the team members, but the case of rivals as well, because in order to start the match, there needs to be a consensus about the rules. Thus in our age characterized by overt individualism in the worlds of work, traffic and entertainment, sport can be seen as a different microcosm where we can reach beyond the borders of our individuality. While sport undoubtedly incites competitive spirit between the rivals, it also strives to ensure the ideal and democratic frames of the competition: voluntariness and equal conditions. Perhaps the charm of sport comes from the belief that in the pitch, as opposed to the everyday world, the impact of external conditions can be reduced, and our success is only determined by our own capabilities.

Bodily dexterity, understood in a broad sense, is an unalienable part of sport, so it is no accident that the modern day history of sport is in close connection with the reformulation of the cultural meaning of the body that took place in the past century. The beginning of the 20th century witnessed the start of many overarching changes whose sociological background was the birth of the democratic mass societies. As the number of work hours decreased, the large number of laborers in industrial cities sought different modes of spending free time. New public spaces appeared where there was a chance for bodily exercise: spas, swimming pools, ice skating rinks. As consumer societies developed, more and more attention was diverted from people's spiritual needs to their bodies, its care (beauty industry), exercise (sports), and health (modern medicine), up to a point when these themes became the most frequent concern of social communication. Photography in the 19th century, and films in the 20th century focused on the body, the models and actors seen in picture magazines or movie screens contributed a lot to the changes in bodily culture, exactly like how sports events drawing a large number of people were both a cause and an effect of certain social processes and developments.

The Appeal of Sport

It is difficult even to give a brief outline of the various factors motivating the audiences of contemporary professional sport, because since television broadcasts globalized the most important events we need to reckon with a socially as well as culturally heterogeneous group of people. We can certainly claim that for the fans in the stadiums it is especially important to partake in the collective identity granted the team they support, and we can observe a similar phenomenon at the time of the Olympic Games, when people who otherwise care nothing about sport support their national team in front of their screens.

There are certain aspects contributing to the effect of sport on the spectators, which are separable from the different subsystems of society, that is, they cannot wholly be traced back to the audience's social milieu (understood in a wider sense). The example of such sports like athletics, slalom, or speed- and figure-skating show how the human body can reach that state of grace and elegance that can only be experienced in dancing. Even the supporters of ball sports can be charmed not only by the explicit objectives within the game (scoring a goal, a touchdown, etc.), but by the graceful moves as well.

Similarly to theatrical performances an implicit contract comes into existence between the players and the audience, which means that whatever happens on the field during the game will have genuine importance. (Bülles and Kaminski, p. 8) A common trait of old and modern sports is that the players do not only compete, but also partake in a ritual familiar to the spectators, and in such a way they reinforce collective norms and practices. The outstanding athlete stages the moral values of the community inasmuch as they become the incarnations of bravery, stamina, tenacity, teamwork and fair play in the eyes of the audience. (Birrell 1981) Another aspect that might link sport events and rituals is that they are both based on repetition in which the bodily moves uphold and transmit traditions. Even though competitive sports – especially team sports – went through a significant change during the last century considering the new records and the speed of the game, they still retain a lot of archaic features. (For example the popularity of rugby in Great Britain or France could probably be explained by the traditionalism evident in many aspects of the game.) We have referred to Lasch earlier, who is convinced that one of the virtues of sport is that it does not let traditional norms disappear, and he sees a danger in the growing audience brought about by the television broadcasts: there are more and more people who – because they do not understand the logic of the game, and are not familiar with the traditions and conventions surrounding the event – are only watching the games because of the spectacle and the sensations they provide, and this has an effect on the inner development of the sports, too. We could cite many examples to support Lasch's claim – for example when they tried to introduce European football in the USA the offside rule was disregarded for a time because of the pressure from sponsors –, still, the most valuable versions

of sports seem immune to these detrimental effects. Sticking to the example of football: even though the profit-oriented operation changed a lot about the conditions surrounding the game – the star system, the commercials urging to consume, the fight against hooliganism, etc. – yet the rules constituting the game remained the same for decades.

It is possible that one of the most interesting features of contemporary professional sport can be pinpointed in how this traditionalism meets the hyperrealism of the high-tech world. Day to day sport seems like an alluring possibility for ordinary people because it gives them a chance to get away from their technicized surroundings, and to experience their bodies in a more immediate way than while sitting in front of the keyboards or steering wheels. In the meantime certain sport events – like cycling or sprinting – could not even be imaginable without optical control media (for example finish line photos). A similar paradox is that sport stages the abilities of the human body in the most explicit way, because real people perform real deeds, but if we do not belong to the lucky minority witnessing first handedly the event, we can only watch them in front of our screens. As viewers we only get a non-real, artificial, medial representation of a real event. In spite of all these, we view athletes as the center of the acts, as persons whose talents, diligence, and stamina helps them achieve extraordinary feats. The cultural significance of this phenomenon cannot be emphasized enough in our contemporary world, which offers many mechanical substitutes for various bodily functions (sensual experience, motion, and even the logical operations taking place within the brain), and when the artificially created virtual worlds are overtaking our environment.

Maybe the exorbitant broadcast fees of high prestige sport events are related to this unique cultural value. Television seems hungry for broadcasting real events, and nothing could satiate this hunger more than live sport events. “The sporting event, such as an Olympic competition, has an externally situated reality that pure entertainment programming does not; in this it resembles news programming more than scripted drama. [...] Real people perform real acts, are injured, and win or lose in a story that has a reality beyond that of popular movies, music, and literature.” (Real 1998, p. 23) Doping and match fixing endangers precisely this as they weaken or remove the “reality effect” of the sport events. Match fixing gives a predetermined script to the sport event, which becomes similar to a bad film – even though in the case of films we take fictionality for granted, but in sports we tend to disdain sham. When a sports channel gains exclusive rights to broadcast a series of matches in a given region, it means that the channel buys a product that does not have any rivals in the market, whereas in any given time frame there are a lot of crime series, or sitcoms competing for spectators' attention. (Nicholson, 2007, p. 58-59) As opposed to fiction based television genres, sport events provide less opportunities for production: there are only a handful of men who can run 100 meters within 10 seconds, but there are many more who can impersonate a policeman or a nitwit. Global media events

in our age offer no rivals for professional spectacle sports, and this does not seem to change much as digital communication gathers even more ground.

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