

THE CIVILIZING PROCESS IN SPORT

by

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Norbert Elias, the author of one of the great sociological masterpieces of the twentieth century, *Über den Prozess der Zivilisation*, has written extensively on sport as part of the civilizing process in which humanity from classical antiquity to the present has attained conscience-formation, rationalization of impulses and control of physical violence. Elias convincingly argues that these three thematics or processes constitute the fundamental contribution of sport to human culture. In his brilliant essays on the sociology of sport, he traces the evolution and development of this triadic structure of philosophical concepts from the game-contests of classical Greece through the folk-games of the Middle Ages to the sport-contests of Modern times. In parallel movement with these philosophical formations which are central moments of sport, sport itself has taken on a particular historical configuration with the passage of time. Conceptually, Elias divides sport into various differential categories: high achievement sport and leisure sport. High achievement sport, which is characterised by performances in the Olympic games by both professionals and amateurs, is spectacular and performers and athletes participating in it undergo long, hard and highly specialised training. On the other hand, leisure sport is composed of two subdivisions: spectator sport and active leisure sport. The complex nature of Elias's categorisation is evident in the fact that spectator sport is so for the spectators while it is high performance sport for the performers. Active leisure sport is undertaken by people, either as individuals or in a group, for their own active leisurely enjoyment. Leisure sport is undertaken by people for social and emotional refreshment. It is in modern times that sport has undergone this complex categorisation, whereas in former times the distinction between amateur and professional sport was sufficient to convey its nature.

The fundamental component of sport is the "play-element", which when combined with speed and movement through space and time constitutes the structure of game. Though this element may appear to be insignificant, in fact it has been ambitiously theorized by the Dutch cultural historian, Jan Huizinga, as one of the centrally determining construct within Western cultural history. In his book, *Homo Ludens*, he argues that play-element is a behaviour which involves freedom from restraint, and as such, it has played a critical role in the development of civilization. The concept has facilitated the process of innovation and renovation throughout history, hence the progression in cumulative development of tribal-states, nation-states and city-states from antiquity to the present. Thus for Huizinga the development of human culture is governed by this

concept of play. It must be remarked though, that for Huizinga play-element encompasses a much wider conceptual space and historical range, in that for him this element is present in the creative work of the scientist, painter, poet and the novelist. According to Huizinga the play-element was dominant in its presence in earlier state formations, with the progression of time it has weakened in its hold on societies. By this, he means that in modern societies the elements of systematisation and rationalisation predominate over the element of spontaneity. Huizinga argues further, that modern sport as opposed to ancient sport, has been subjected to grater restraint by the processes of industrialisation and urbanisation. The arts, science and industry have also been subjected to this rationalisation process, which Max Weber had theorized as the fundamental contribution of capitalism to human culture. For Weber it was through the separation of the spheres of science, ethics and art that modernity in its truly philosophical sense could emerge. According to Weber, the subordination of the play-element to philosophical rationality achieved by the Enlightenment philosophers was a great contribution to the development of capitalism. For Weber it was here that the Protestant ethic was so vitally important. The point here lies not so much in questioning the historical realism of Jan Huizinga's theorization of the contribution of sport to human civilization, as much as in noting the importance he accords to sport in assisting in the development of human societies. The historical judgement of Huizinga carries tremendous weight for he was one of the great cultural historians of our century.

Sport as a social and cultural activity combines in its very nature both the elements of body and mind. In long stretches of history, sport has been taken as such, though unfortunately in recent time, the element of body has been thought to predominate over that of intellect. In fact, the very naming of the study of sport confirms this, for it is designated as "Physical education". It is not surprising that Norbert Elias has objected very strongly to such designation. For him it is historically unfounded and objectively unscientific, in that it implies the separation of human knowledge to two irreconcilable spheres: one concerned exclusively with the "mind", and the other exclusively with the "body". For Elias education in relation to sport should integrate both spheres into a composite whole. Indeed, the teaching of sport can only achieve its supreme good if both the intellectual and physical elements or components are combined into a singular perspective. It was Plato himself who initiated the tradition of separating the "mind" and the "body" in theorizing on sport. He believed that perfection and reality can only be known through the mind, while the body was seen by him as an impediment to their being known. Writing to this effect, he said: "And thought is best when the mind is gathered into herself and none of these things trouble her-neither sounds nor sights nor pain nor any pleasure- when she takes leave of the body, and has as little as possible to do it, when she has no bodily sense or desire, but is aspiring after true being?" Continuing further on, he says: "... while

the soul is infected with the evils of the body, our desire will not be satisfied, and our desire is of the truth? For the body is the source of endless trouble to us by reason of the mere requirement of food..." Then astonishingly Plato writes: "Humanistic as well as music should begin in early years; the training in it should be careful and should continue through life. Now my belief is not the good body by any bodily excellence improves the soul, but, on the contrary, that the good soul, by her own excellence improves the body..." The real paradox of Plato is that while he was writing against the body in celebration of the mind, Greek culture of his time was in the process of celebrating the beauty of the physical body which has had few rivals in human history, if any. Perhaps the best equipoise between body and mind has been achieved in supreme form in Zen Buddhism.

The path opened by Plato was later to be followed by the French philosopher of the seventeenth century, Rene Descartes. He thought the mind the most important far surpassing the importance of the body, for it was through it that knowledge could be attained. On the other hand, he felt the body and the senses were deceptive. Theorizing in this vein, he wrote: "Everything which I have thus far accepted as entirely true has been acquired from the senses or by means of the senses. But I have learned by experience that these senses sometimes mislead me, and it is never prudent to trust wholly those things which have once deceived us... Thus we perceived that thought is a property of mind, and it is distinguished from what is referred to as the body." The Cartesian dualism thus perpetuated the separation of reasoning and intellectual skills from the education of the bodily senses. The predominance of the idealism of the dualists was not to last long, for it was immediately to be challenged by the English empiricists or realist materialists, John Locke and Thomas Hobbes. For Locke the importance of the body lay in the fact that for him the senses were the only true source of knowledge. Ideas (sensations) and complex ideas (reflections) are attainable to the mind through the senses. It was this belief which lead him to encourage physical education-type activities to be instituted in English learning institutions. It was in this context, that he advocated the learning of dancing, fencing and horsemanship. Hobbes was to argue in the same vein writing: "...when we say that a man is a living body we mean not that the man is one thing, the living body another, and the mind as being a third, but that the man and the living body is the same thing...." The importance of the views of Locke and Hobbes is that two hundreds later in England, they facilitated the rebirth of modern sport. For it was in the Victorian England of the late nineteenth century that physical education was made a compulsory part of the school curriculum by Thomas Arnold. The re-invention of modern sport in the England of the last century was to have worldwide repercussions, as will be apparent later in this essay. For the moment it should be registered that today we speak of two revolutions having taken place in the England of the nineteenth century: the industrial revolution and the sport

revolution.

With the accelerated development of modern sport after its revolution in England, it became necessary to articulate the complex structure of sport and the forms of games. This task was to be undertaken by Roger Callois, Though influenced by Huizinga, he was to theorize the structure of games into four categories: agon, alea, mimicry and ilinx. Callois's categorisation is according to the degree of presence in each of them of competition, chance and simulation. For instance, agon covers sports and games in which the player actively attempts to direct the outcome of the contest or game. The primary example here would be chess. On the other hand, alea is primarily characterised by the element of chance. The player is somewhat passive and surrenders to destiny. The examples of alea are lotteries, roulette and dice games. As far as mimicry, it is characterised by the involvement of phantasy and suspension of reality on the part of the participant. Children's games are the primary examples here. Lastly, ilinx involves an element of vertigo. Gymnastic activities, skiing and mountain climbing are examples here. It should be observed that this attempted typologising of sport and games on the part of Callois, though exemplary and original, does not by any stretch of the imagination exhaust the possible permutations of the sport structure and its many complex games. What was truly original with Callois was his bringing of some order to an otherwise chaotic sphere of human life. All these categories converge on the point that uncertainty is one of the fundamental structures of sport.

The work of Roger Callois becomes all the more important when it is seen as a particular study of movement forms associated with sport. For also movement form is what constitutes the central nature of each of these disciplines: dance, exercise and athletics. Each of these disciplines has a different structure, depth and range of movement form. In dance the body is the instrument and physical movement is the medium. Dance is defined by its particularly structured form in relation to line, shape and technique. Body awareness and perfection of technique are essential in dance: hence dance is the most communicative movement form. On the other hand, exercise is closely associated with physical fitness. Though related to sport, exercise form has its own uniqueness and particularity. Flexibility, strength and muscular endurance are essential in it. The aim of exercise is to develop coordination, power, agility, speed, reaction time and balance. Though athletics is usually viewed as sport, it does possess its own distinctness. Some scholars of sport and athletics argue that athletics is defined by the spirit of dedication, sacrifice and intensity much higher than that apparent in sport. Though athletics may be seen as an extension of sport, it is quite distinct from it. It ought perhaps be emphasised that although the mechanics of movement are similar in sport, dance, exercise and athletics, it is the intent of the movement which determines its placement into a particular movement form. It is apparent

from this sketch in contrasts that sport possesses its own uniqueness and particularity, yet it is simultaneously closely related to other movement forms. Because of its complexity, sport does possess many fascinations.

Probably the one country in which this deeply felt fascination with sport is profound is America. There sport has held the fascination of American literature in enthralment. From Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* to Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises* and Faulkner's *Sartoris*, play, game and sport have been among the essential ingredients that define the particular genius and uniqueness of American literature. Why this should be so, that is the intense portrayal of sport in the art form of literature, is not absolutely clear. Perhaps this may have to do with the American mythology of the frontier: a mythology because there was never a frontier since the vast land-spaces belonged to the Amerindians or the Native Americans. The frontier could only be attained at the cost of genocide. Two examples here will suffice to indicate the deep fascination of sport for American literature: Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea* and Faulkner's *The Hamlet*: in both, in one form or another, a solitary sportsman confronts nature or his own nature in the private ritual of hunting or fishing, which in many ways is the test of courage and endurance. It is clear here that we are confronted with the celebration of American Individualism. Though both of them celebrate individualism, or a variation on that theme, it is clear that a particular difference separates them: while the fictional work of Hemingway associated with sport and play usually conveys the manifestations of aggressive sport life, like bullfighting and hunting, the work of Faulkner closely connected with sport is more angelic and humane, for example, children's game and schoolboy heroism. Both were deeply concerned with the public ritual of sport. What the examples of Hemingway and Faulkner make clear is that culture is profoundly impregnated with the serious and comic rituals of sport. In short, sport is an integral part of culture.

What also the example of Hemingway and Faulkner makes clear is that sport is riven with ideological forms and responds to the actualities of history. Though sport is practically present in all human societies known in history, its functionality within a particular society depends on an ensemble of complex factors: the nature of the social system in existence, the particular ideology in dominance, the level of industrialization present, the forms of cultural expression most easily available, and so on and on. Since the element of play is central to any ritual of sport performance, it is through it that ideology penetrates into the structure of sport. Though the nature of sport is relatively uniform and coherent throughout the world, having been regularised through principles, rules and laws, what sport is in the People's Democratic Republic of Germany (East Germany) is different from what it is and signifies in South Africa, or the difference between America and Russia concerning sport. It is in England that the ideological forms

of sport have been intensively studied. This is as it perhaps should be, for it was in England that modern sport was re-invented.

Perhaps the most comprehensive definition of sport that defines it within the totality of society is that which sees sport as a cultural practice . The concept of hegemony, developed by the great Italian Marxist philosopher, Antonio Gramsci, can help to specify sport as a cultural process within social structures. In the main, Gramsci conceptualised hegemony as explaining the contradictory connections and relations between culture and ideology, and those between the spheres of politics and economics. Following Raymond Williams, the brilliant English Marxist cultural theorist, hegemony could be theorised historically formed cultural and political relations between the various classes and their fractions. Hegemony encompasses both the coercive and consensual aspects of enforcement. Within the conceptual scheme of hegemony, sport as a cultural activity and practice should then be related to other aspects of society: including the mode of production, the state, education, the media, the family, ethnic groups and sexual patterns. And within this political context, then sport can be examined for its facilitation of, or resistance to, the economic, cultural, political and social relations of domination and subordination prevalent in class-structured societies. As such sport could possibly be examined for the following factors which influence its nature: the way sport is commercialised and dominated by market relations, nationally and internationally; the way sport could possibly be used to pacify a docile labour force to accept its subordination to the dominant class interests; the way sport possibly inculcates in the dominated classes the ideology of the ruling class; and the role of the state in sport activities. What all these totality of factors and processes in relation to sport indicate, is that its particular nature reflects the social context within which it is located, however, much the various rules of different sport activities may be invariant in all corners of the world. This in itself brings forth the interesting question of how sport activities change, go under transformation, or are simply superseded by new sport activities. The issue of the differential nature of sport in different historical periods is a compelling and fascinating question.

What the outstanding work of Norbert Elias on the sociology of sport reveals, is that the difference between ancient sport and modern sport is governed by the political ethos which both sport forms reflect: in antiquity it was the gladiator and warrior ethos, which was then prevalent in those societies, that determined the nature of sport activities in those times; in contrast to this, modern sport is governed by the English tradition of fairness and the bourgeois veneer of equality. What these contrastive ethos indicate, is the enormous physical violence which was then prevalent in ancient social formations; in modern sport, it is the relative absence of violence which is characteristic. In a remarkable essay, "The Genesis of Sport as a Sociological Problem", Elias surveys the changing

morphological structure of sport, especially in Greek antiquity. Elias seeks to answer the paradox or contradiction of the coexistence of the high philosophical and cultural values in the sciences and the arts, and the crudeness of physical violence present then in sport. The thesis that is advanced by Elias is that of the disparity in the level of violence tolerated within social groups and between social groups. It is from this disparity that a double morality or split results. This level of physical violence evident in sport activities of antiquity was in accordance with the socially permitted levels of violence, hence it was in accordance with the norms of those societies. In other words, the ancient sport and ancient Olympics emerged at a particular time before the patrician classes had consolidated its hold on political power, that is, before it had imposed completely its hegemony on the whole of society. In contrast, modern sport and modern Olympics emerged in England when the bourgeois class had already attained absolute political, cultural and economic power within society.

The introduction of sport culture into ancient Rome was through the Etruscans, who had great admiration of Greek love of sport, especially Greek athletic programme. The Etruscans, following on the footsteps of the Greeks, used sport as public entertainment, and the Romans undoubtedly benefitted from this. Of the three sport activities which the Romans adapted from the Greeks and Etruscans, two, gladiatorial and wild beast shows were to prove popular, while the third, athletics, never took hold in the Roman world. The paradox of the failure of adaptability of athletics into the popular culture of the Roman world, is that in contrast to this, it held a deep fascination in the literary imagination of many Roman writers. Terence, by the way, the one great black writer in the Roman empire, and Plautus, have written fascinating prose and poetry on the nature of Greek athletics. It was Nero, who had unbounded enthusiasm for Greek Olympic Games, who in A D 60 instituted the Neronia Greek festival in Rome. This festival included athletic and equestrian events and also the arts, music, drama and rhetoric. Tacitus was among those hostile to the introduction of Greek sport culture into the Roman world by Nero, a man who unfortunately exercised tyranny on the majority of the Roman plebeian population. While athletics was popular in the ancient Greek world, in the Roman world it was never able to replace the popularity of the gladiatorial shows and chariot-racing. But athletics has proven to be popular throughout the whole millenia of sport history. It was the sport activity that was to prove popular and fascinating in the revival of Modern Olympics at the end of the nineteenth century.

The revival and genesis of modern sport culture in England poses the historical problem of explaining what accounted for its emergence in the English social structure and not anywhere else. Norbert Elias believes the explanation to be in the nature of the particularity of the English ruling elite. A more appropriate answer would seem to be in the need to impose a certain social ethos of accepting

the hegemony of English culture on the part of peoples in the then existing British colonial empire. The fast diffusion of modern sport inventions, soccer, rugby, cricket and others, would seem to indicate the penetration of English colonial ideology within colonized societies. Not all these inventions have survived the withdrawal of English colonial hegemony. Nevertheless, soccer has been expanded into a world-wide phenomenon, which has no comparison with any sport phenomenon which took place in the Roman empire or in the Greek empire. Cricket, the English elite's favourite sport, has not had much favour with the rest of the world. American football is merely an adaptation of English rugby sport. There would seem to be an incidence and correlation between the existence of an expanding colonial empire and the diffusion of sport culture. The existence of Western empires, Greek, Roman and British empires would seem to confirm this observation. The Austro-Hungarian empire in the nineteenth century and the Polish Commonwealth in the sixteenth century would seem to contradict this view. But these were really imperial fiefdoms, not really expanding colonial empires. The British, Greek and Roman empires at the time of their dominance were really the center forces of human history. As economic forces and institutions, they were in the process of 'civilizing the world'. Though these empires were despicable, and rightfully so, to the people and nations they colonized, they incontrovertibly contributed to the development of human civilization, in however contradictory a form.

The English imperial power in the nineteenth century, which pioneered the capitalist industrial revolution and the modern sport revolution, likewise contributed to the civilizing process of sport culture. For one, it brought closer together, through sport culture, complex and different national cultures. The English imperial power, through sport, introduced into many corners of the world new capitalist culture of modernity. That it also mercilessly exploited those cultures is beyond doubt and dispute. This is the famous dualism that Marx in the Communist Manifesto was to speak of: the civilization and barbarism of capitalism. Secondly, sport culture humanises the retrograde aspects of national cultures, be it racism, sexism, or chauvinism. Humanising them in the sense of eliminating them. Thirdly, it promotes tolerance and understanding between nations and different cultures. As such sport culture has enormously contributed to the development of human civilization.

Truly, sport culture is a civilizing process as Norbert Elias has named it.

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