

SPORT AND INTERNATIONAL
UNDERSTANDING: SPORT AS
CARRIER OF DEEP CULTURE
AND STRUCTURE

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"Wer immer strebend sich bemüht, den können wir erlösen," says Goethe, in Faust. I like to start with that quotation since the paper itself takes relatively definite stands against competitive sport, and particularly against competitive sports at the international level. So let it be said from the beginning: this is not an argumentation against individual achievement, or collective achievement for that matter, against people doing their best, trying to achieve what has not been achieved before. The problem is whether the method of achievement should be through competition, or through the individual, and the group, working with and on itself; in the field of sports as also in the arts.

Why, then, this negative attitude towards competitive sport? Is that not merely an expression of the envy of the intellectual, himself certainly not good at competitive sport although personally enjoying various forms of bodily exercise such as bicycling and swimming and hiking? Is it not simply an expression of distance from what happens, from the cooperation in competition, the delight at sharing rules, at fair play? And when this even happens across international borders would it not also cement friendships, and even constitute a bulwark against war? More particularly, would this not also apply not only to the participants themselves, but to the other two important categories in institutionalized sport: the organizers and the spectators? Will not fine threads of mutual respect be spun, a web of interrelations, so dense that it may have a protective effect against some of the dangers in our present world?

The position taken is that there may be something to the kind of argumentation referred to above, but that there is an other argument, in the opposite direction, that in my mind carries much more weight. The argument is this: Competitive sport in general and international competitive sport in particular carries a message through its very structure, and that message is more important than anything

else. It is a clear expression of basic aspects of Western culture, precisely in being competitive, in ranking nations, teams and individuals. Western deep structure and culture is a set of firmly entrenched patterns and beliefs, usually unconsciously held and rarely challenged, except from those outside that civilization. Even though the striving for mastery has many good aspects to it it is also underlying a striving for world domination in political, economic, military, etc. fields. In teams sports individualism is overcome in favour of collective and often relatively horizontal (egalitarian) cooperation; but competitiveness comes in again in the competition between the teams. At the same time there is an isomorphism between the competitive sport system and the world system, carried by the notion of national teams.

This will now be spelt out in the following, using an analytical framework of six dimensions for analyzing civilizations in general, and Western civilizations in particular*. The dimensions will be given below, and their implication in the field of sports, or rather translation to the field of sports, become entered upon.

1. The Conception of Space. The Western conception of space is highly center-periphery oriented, with the West in the center. The West, both in its Christian, liberal and Marxist versions, incidentally also in its Islamic conceptualization (but then the word "Occident", somewhat broader than "Western", should be used) sees itself as the origin of what is valid. That which is outside is archaic, to be overcome. The causal force of the social universe is highly concentrated in the West and radiates outward. So also with the sports: the sports currently serving as a basis for competition are mainly Western sports, to a considerable degree with Greek and English origins. The social conditions for the emergence of sports must have been the existence of a leisure class, with time;
*See Johan Galtung, "Five Cosmologies", Proceedings of the Norwegian Academy of Sciences, 1980.

and at the same time some structural/cultural element that makes high-status in society combinable with bodily exercise, even outside the field of military prowess. In short, the radiation of patterns from the West to the rest of the world also holds in the field of sport, and no doubt this has been one factor in the tendency to locate the winners in the West. To take a somewhat contrived example: if sitting in Buddha position, practically speaking without moving, in front of a wall, is a sport, then in all likelihood cultures with hundreds, even thousands of years of experience with meditation might have recruited most of the winners. It does matter to what extent the peculiar and particular type of behaviour engaged in in a competitive sport is internal or external to the local structure and culture. The existence of blacks who fetch gold-medals in the Berlin Olympics 1936 changes nothing of this: a black American is also a part of the West, only a suppressed part.

It may be objected that some of this is now changing: that a New International Football Order (NIFO) is even emerging. But this is not yet entirely true. First, the new football nations may not belong to the core of the West, but they certainly belong to the Occident - with South America as a major part of the Occident. Second, to the extent that this is the case it is so obviously a part of Western colonialism with people in the former British colonies now competing quite well with their former masters - even to the point of beating them, but at the same time Western sports as an institution have penetrated and will stand in the way of more indigenous pursuits.

2. The conception of time. The Western conception of time is highly dramatic: there is a point of origin; there is progress, linear or even, if possible, exponential; there is crisis (in the Greek sense of movement, dramatic movement) and after that there is one out of two: catharrsis, or fall. Western life is dramatic life. Sports are

dramatic: everything is hinging on the moment of competition. Heaven or hell, win or fail. To this may be objected that in sports there is always a second chance, there is the same competition repeated next year, or every four years - it is not so einmalig as here portrayed. But this applies to Western life in general: a series of small crises, capped by the big drama, will I make it or not? In the spiritual career of Christianity and Islam this becomes the overriding question for making it to paradise. In the occupational career of more secular systems this becomes the overriding question of making it for a top job in sight during one's own life-time. And in these two major dramas there is certainly Einmaligkeit. And here there seems to be a carry-over to sports: there are many small competitions, repetitive or not. But in the life of a sportsman or sportswoman there also seems to be something called the competition, the big event for which one has prepared oneself. Then it is up or out, like in certain university systems, also very competitive; the basic point is whether one gets tenure or not.

3. The conception of knowledge. Western knowledge is atomistic rather than holistic; it focuses on few but on the other hand very well defined dimensions, many of them even quantitative in the stricter sense of measurement. So also in the sports: human achievement, even top achievement, is operationalized exactly like in physics to dimensions of time, distance and weight and a couple of others; simple, quantitative, divisible into the most minute fractions so that ranking even of individuals and teams that are practically speaking equal in achievement becomes possible. If not unidimensional it is certainly not many-dimensional. The dimensions are somatic, there is a cult of the body. The mental, the spiritual dimensions do not count except for the ability to abide by the rules of the game. Aesthetics and ethics beyond that are out. Through competitive sports and its measurement people, men and women,

are rated exactly the same way as machines. Actually, machines can also be made to compete gradually reducing the human element, substituting computers. The logical conclusion of that is a full scale war, e.g. in outer space. Boxing looks rather similar to this.

4. The conception of relations to nature. Western relations to nature have been characterized by mastery and domination rather than by partnership. Nature is there to be controlled, to be used - with "abused" being right around the corner. The consequence of this is highly visible in the ecological crises of the world today: the decrease of maturity in ecosystems; depletion and pollution. In this field sports plays a minor role, but the inclination is in the same direction. Sports events decreasingly take place in natural surroundings, and increasingly in special places made for the purpose, with an overwhelming amount of concrete rather than just pure, uncontaminated, unmanipulated nature. The sports palace, the stadium, Olympic or not, all these things are anti-nature rather than nature, and have to be so because they are settings in which the unidimensionality of competitive sports can unfold itself under controlled conditions. Pure nature has too much variation in it, too much "noise". This may favour one or the other. Strict, intersubjective evaluation of the achievement becomes impossible with so many unmeasurable, unknown and even unknowable factors intervening. Although human body is nature and nature also is the human body the distance between sports and nature in itself seems to be ever increasing. Again, this is not a major factor in the destructure of nature going on today, but as a process it is located in the same general direction.
5. The conception of interpersonal relations. Typically, the Western conception is vertical in terms of above and below, combined with individualistic, seeing the individual human being as the social atom, the ultimate unit, out of

which social molecules are made. The combination of verticalism and individualism is found in competition. The ultimate form of competition is social Darwinism, survival of the fittest. But between competition in general and social Darwinism in particular there is a continuum described in terms of the number of constraints, or rules that have to be respected in the competitive process. The more circumscribed a competition, the less free it is, the further removed from social Darwinism; the fewer rules, the more is the individual given a green light in exercising all that is in him and her to beat others. (I am talking here about restraining rules, not rules encouraging ruthlessness, e.g., like there must have been among certain SS-soldiers in concentration camps). Rules of fair play, of fair competition are basic to the competitive sports institution; they are, in fact, what makes them an institution. But the same also applies to rules about arms races; arms control is to arms races what fair play is to sports. In both cases achievement, build-up unlimited, is encouraged. There is no such thing as a stop signal, as saying "this is enough, there is no reason why human beings should run faster than this, throw a spear even further, lift more weights". The rules define the process, and the process then goes on without limits.

6. The conception of GOD. GOD is a three-letter-word; competitive sports are secular, the victories are in this world, the medals are even made of the sort of stuff that is highly perishable according to the Bible, e.g. gold. But the exercise is steered by another three-letter-word, WIN. Gods are usually arranged in a hierarchy, so are "wins". The ultimate WIN is the Olympic one; its priesthood, assuring that the approach is the correct one, is the International Olympic Committee. It is a stingy God, appearing only every four years as opposed to the more generous Christian God appearing twice a year, in the mysteries of the birth of Christ and the Easter Passion.

But a God it is, with a clear position in the total configuration: above and in the center.

And that is the basic point: These six dimensions together with their interpretation in competitive sports constitute a configuration. As such they carry a message, the message of Western social cosmology. Each competitive sports event is a reinforcement of that message. It is an almost ideal typical presentation of what the West is about. As such it is very hard to believe that it does not serve a major socio-psychological and psycho-political function: that of reinforcing and legitimizing the West as an ongoing enterprise. Most important in that connection is the legitimacy given to the idea of beating others; competition rather than cooperation. The softer side of human life, forgoing own victory in order to help others-or simply being unconcerned with victory over others-are tantamount to non-participation. It is like economic competition: one generally does not slow down in order to give one's major competitor a better chance - one may do so for the smaller competitors, but then probably with alliance-formation in mind. And the same with political and military competition, the latter usually referred to as war: the game may be played according to the laws of war ~~etc.~~ also in the class of rules of "fair play"-but within those constraints the game goes on with no holds barred. It is you or me. With teams that are national in their composition, competing against other national teams, the configuration even becomes isomorphic to economic, political and military competition among nations, states and nation-states.

Thus, one may say that competitive sports is liberalism in a very clear, almost undiluted form. Society is seen not even as a social system but as a social set of free-moving social atoms, individuals or social molecules, teams. They bounce against each other; that bouncing may be regulated and stimulated in certain directions, circumscribed

and used to arrive at evaluations. This can be done at regular or irregular intervals, preferably the former. Participation in one such institution may serve as preparation for the other - hence the strong linkage between strong competitive sports on the one hand and business enterprise on the other (golf, tennis) and military organization on the third (more demanding, less elegant sports without upper-class connotations). For a queer but funny expression of this type of mentality see the Guinness Book of Records, the records almost all being held by Westerners. It is an institution crying for rules, "sans fair play le sport n'est plus le sport". For a less funny expression of the same basic principle see the Fortune List of the top five-hundred transnational corporations, or the Jane Book of Fighting Ships, not to mention the various yearbooks of military and strategic balances.

It is also a part of liberalism to make ranking many-dimensional. The more complex the society, the more ranking ladders in vertical, individualist social systems. Many-dimensional ranking systems do not reduce the total amount of climbing, they increase it because everybody is admonished to climb on many ladders, in fact on all of them. But they introduce a new element into the competition: multi-dimensional ranking, the notion that a high rank of one dimension may compensate for a low rank on the other. Sports may be said to have that function: it is a ladder handed down to the lower classes from the leisure classes in which sports originated, with an invitation on it saying "here you may climb, and you may in fact come to the top - even if the major social ladders, those leading to economic and political elite positions, are blocked for you after a couple of rungs have been scaled". Where the compensation is good as a psychological reward, or bad because it leads to rank dis-equilibrium with all kinds of problems, or bad because it mystifies society by giving people illusions about its penetrability, is a matter of

political tastes.

The same can be done for nations: international competitive sports is a corresponding ladder, handed down from the center countries to the periphery admonishing them to start climbing, maybe you will make it. It is a ladder well utilized by centrally planned countries putting governmental initiative and money behind the training of its sports elites so as to acquire positions in the sports arenas of the world, maybe far above the positions attained in economic, political, military and cultural spheres. It is a way of arriving before arrival. But just as for the intra-societal aspect it may be argued that rather than serving peace, understanding and cooperation this will mainly serve competition as a key institution, the idea of ascendance over others. It will not foster cooperation except among the few organizers who have to agree on the rules and the settings within which this institution can unfold itself.

But social institution can only be understood in terms of its negation. For comprehension it is not so important whether this negation exists empirically or only potentially, in our minds. The question should now be asked: what is the alternative, what would be the type of sports (if that is a word we want to keep) that would deviate from the deep structure and culture of Western civilization as here portrayed?

To start with the dimension of space: a de-Westernization of sports. This goes much beyond the periphery increasingly penetrating the ranks of the winners of sports competition. It is also a question of introducing non-Western sports and activities. The Japanese have a number of those, why should they not just as much as the Western ones be in the limelight of international sports attention? De-centralization can also be obtained by regionalizing

sport, by having competition in regions with a lower level of Western participation - somewhat akin to south-south-cooperation in economic affairs. This is already happening, and there will be more of it as economic, political and military regionalism gains more of a foothold in the present world structure. Structures in different institutional realms tend to be, even have to be to a large extent isomorphic with each other. Predictably this will make the West lose some of its interest in international sports events. They will be "no longer as in the old days", "unrealistic"; a little bit like the United Nations is seen when the West no longer dominates it (merely propaganda).

When it comes to time something might be gained by counter-acting the notion of the sports event. A step in that direction might be to abolish the Olympic Games; arguments to that effect can be heard, they are often said to have overlived themselves. But there is also an other approach, somewhat akin to the British way of abolishing aristocracy by bestowing knighthood on so many that it almost becomes meaningless: organizing even more events, so many that nothing stands out any longer. A more Oriental/Buddhist and less Occidental/Christian time perspective could be engendered if sports were organized in such a way that there really always was a "next time"; it goes on and on. But to the extent that sports are so much linked to precise and forceful mastery of the body achievement is also correlated with youth. It is even institutionalized as a rank compensation for the young over the middle-aged and the old. Maybe the latter two categories could become less marginalized if they were more encouraged to compete in their own age classes, or with handicappeds? Today this is being done in less competitive sports, in the mass events organized in so many countries - maybe that will be something that could also be carried into more formalized competitive sports?

As to the dimension of knowledge or actually epistemology: maybe unidimensional sports should be discouraged? In winter sports, skiing events, multi-dimensionality is institutionalized in various types of combinations, alpine and non-alpine; they may be all said to be snow-country versions of the Greek decathlon. In ski-jumping style plays a certain role: in skating it is an overriding dimension. Maybe the aesthetic dimension should also penetrate into other sports?

As to relations to nature: if sports are essentially well-guided exercises of the body, then lakes and oceans should be marvellous settings for swimming competitions of a much more imaginative nature than merely doing a certain straight distance in the shortest possible time. A much more imaginative form of sport is "orientation"; running in the woods with a map and compass, finding or not finding the hidden treasures of the various posts. Sports organizations should be in the fore-front of the ecological movements combatting the conquest of nature through overwhelming quantities of concrete.

Crucial, however, is the aspect of competition itself. Whether on the individual, team or nation level: as long as much emphasis is put on who is number one, number two or number three competitiveness will remain king. Sports journalism may accentuate this more than it is intended by the organizers, and experienced by the participants, and may in fact be the major culprits when they compose their headlines. Interviews with regular participants, how they experienced the whole thing, what was fun and what was not could be given much more attention. But it may also be argued that in doing what they do the sports journalists have fully understood the nature of the game, and the hunger with which their messages seem to be surrounded bears some testimony to this.

Instead of focusing on who beats whom one could also focus on how every individual, team or nation does relative to last time. Is there improvement? - regardless of how this is measured. The Buddhist idea, also known in Christianity, of improving oneself and not over and above others, and certainly not at the expense of others, could become a major part of the whole enterprise. Linked to this, then, would be cooperation: helping others perform, helping others improve themselves. Intra-personal and intra-team comparison rather than inter-personal and inter-team would be the order of the day. The debate is well-known from school-pedagogy: should grading focus on how an individual does relative to others or does relative to him/herself? The arguments are about the same: in a highly competitive social order it is how you do relative to others that counts, even more than how you do relative to yourself, because social organization links many individuals together, not only one individual to itself, in splendid isolation like hermits. There is something to this but there is also something to the counter-argument: by introducing islands in society of restfulness from inter-personal competition one might make this into a social counterpoint and thereby direct the social order in a less competitive direction.

Two tennis players cooperating in keeping the ball in the air rather than competing in making the other player unable to catch it would be an exercise in cooperation - unless one pair of players starts competing with another pair of players as to who can keep the ball in the air for the longest period. The moment that happens we have actually merely witnessed a transformation from individual competitive sports to team competitive sports.

Iso-morphism between a world of nation-states and an arena of national teams can be broken down by a very simple method: by composing mixed teams. If there were sports on

Mars or Venus, and they had been appropriately colonized by the Greeks and the British and their latter-day followers in defining what constitutes sports such a mixed Earth-team would come natural. The Earth Sports Committee would compose the team, and there would even be Soviet-US joint participation. But why not also try it before Mars and Venus are able to participate? One joint East-West team competing with another joint East-West team ---. People would tend to disaggregate the results, would tend to focus on their own within those teams and try to imagine what it would have been had the teams been "pure". But that may also be merely a transition phase. Later on the enjoyment of sports as such rather than national competition trying to pass innocently as a non-bloody substitute for more destructive pursuits (while our thesis is that it may in fact reinforce the legitimacy of the world nation-state system and stimulate less than restrained competition among the nation-states) might take the upper hand. Within nation-states, e.g. in the field of football, this often happens even if it runs against local patriotism in some instances.

Finally, what would be the three-letter-word that should be written on top of these entire exercise, this mix of cooperation and competition, individualism and collectivism, the purity of the team and the high-level entropy of the mixtures that could be envisaged, the improvement of oneself and the cooperation with others helping them improve themselves? Very simply: FUN. Is that not more important than winning? Look at the facial expressions of people who compete, look at the strain, the stress, not only the perspiration coming out of tough exercise of the body but also the anxiety, aggressiveness bordering on destructiveness! Is it really what we want? Think of the many nasty events associated with sports, doping, tricks of various types, violence and corruption - are these impurities in a system that only has to be purified, or are they actually constituent, natural

components of the system? Could one not instead of that think in terms of some kind of festival of the body, and of the mind, of people having fun doing strange things, running and jumping, throwing balls alone and together, sometimes measuring what they do to compare with oneself and with others, sometimes not? All over the world, in a random order, not pitting nation against nation on the assumption that the winners will mainly be from the center of the world, thereby reconstituting again and again a detrimental and probably also moribund world order? In short, could we not through these events communicate a better image of what the world, international relations and interpersonal relations could be about than that deadly serious school competition known as individual sports, cooperate competition known as team sports and national competition known as international sports?

Conclusion: I actually think that competitive sports at the national level belong to the 1648 Westphalia system of world order and that its decline and ultimate fall is overdue like so many other aspects of that system. If it has led to mass non-serious sports fine - I would like to see some evidence to be convinced that it was a sufficient condition - it was hardly ever a necessary condition. That it can serve to displace some national aggression may be true, but - like for TV violence - the other hypothesis of reinforcement of aggressive inclinations seems more credible. And that gives me the conclusion with which I started.