

# NOTES AND DISCUSSION

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## WHAT IS SPORT?

There is nothing to suggest academic exercise in attempts to define sport. A politics of sport which expects coherence presupposes such definition, and behind this definition stands a whole conception of man. What is sport? The question is well worth being asked, for it is thrust upon us.

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In the most commonplace, everyday conversation—where we must necessarily begin—what is uppermost in mind is the thought of physical exercise and a moment of high emotion. Of what aspects of sport is one aware? There is physical exertion. For example, the sentence, in French, “Le médecin m’a recommandé de faire du sport” signifies “to do exercise.” There is also a strongly emotional state of mind. The French expression “Cette réunion, c’était du sport” means, unmistakably, “it was spirited.” Such metaphors allow us to foresee a possible duality of interpretation whereby we may adopt a medical point of view, reducing sport to nature, or a social-psychological one, analyzing the symbolism of recognition of the individual by the group.

In its correct meaning there are—if one still holds to what

Translated by R. Blohm.

ordinary people say—some possible variations, but this time the matter becomes very serious. We can come up with at least three meanings.

The word 'sport' designates, firstly, *any free open-air activity*. Freedom—we are speaking about free time—is here understood in the sense of liberation from the constraints of the city rather than by contrast to the determinism in a real continuum. Camping, sailing, boating! One does what he likes as he likes. It is the absence of obligation which predominates.

'Sport' next designates a *systematic effort for the domestication of one's own body*, i.e. physical culture and education. Here, in contrast to the preceding case, the notion of discipline occupies the place of prominence. The point is to conquer *oneself*, or to control one's body.

Finally, the word 'sport'—and this is without question its strongest meaning—designates *competition*. The occurrence, in this instance, of the notion of contradiction deserves to be stressed. Sport here acquires an entirely new dimension with the introduction of antithetic values, namely, victory and defeat. This dichotomy has a bearing upon sport somewhat like that of good and evil on moral philosophy or truth and falsehood on logic.

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In conversations this language does not appear in extended order owing to the whims of chance and the inclination of subjective elements. It does obey a logic, and the rules of this logic may be discerned easily enough. In bringing forth successive meanings we are witnessing the development of a definition. Its content of course becomes progressively richer and more precise.

Open-air activity is above all *a peaceful coexistence of man with nature*. In extreme cases man struggles against the elements, but nature in itself is beneficent by repute. She is the value sought; we turn to her again and again.

Going one step further we see that physical education and culture, for their part, recognize man's need to free himself from his most immediate alienation—that toward his own body, in other words, his need to *overcome his natural heaviness*, to confront and to dominate his own nature. The point is to

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educate, to cultivate. At this second level sport represents the human being's effort to differentiate himself from the physical world. The nature of man is such as to be able to step beyond nature.

There remains one final step before we have discovered competitive sport, which is the synthesis and stage beyond what precedes. Actually competition rejects neither the notion of natural surroundings (confrontation occurs in a stadium, on a field... in the realm of the sensible) nor that of a domestication of the body (one cannot win if he does not master himself). However, competitive sport adds to these *the confrontation with the other*. The elements pointed out before remain but are transformed. Everything is restructured. Free open-air activity? Of course, but the freedom at the heart of nature takes on a social significance (there are rules to respect). Beneficent nature? Yes, but the athlete is ready to suffer. Physical education? Certainly, but this health training arranges a traumatic encounter for the body.

Here there arises a twofold paradox. Sport, the first aspect of this paradox, is a free activity. However, we have here a freedom which constrains. One does what he likes while, at the same time, wishing to subject himself to a law, and this law—the harsh law of sport—is a severe and violent guide having the mutual consent of the protagonists. The question here is to spare neither oneself nor the other.

Education, the second aspect of this paradox, leads individuals from the state of nature to that of culture. This is its purpose and, very simply, its being. Yet, the sporting culture which results reverts to the violent confrontation in nature, to the violence of the cultivated man. There is an equilibrium-maintaining return of civilized forms to the crude world of elementary forces.

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The third stage of the definition, that of competition, shows itself to be the most interesting because it is at once the richest and the most precise. It requires deepening; however, this is not the place to provide a lengthy exposition. Let us, for the sake of memory therefore, limit ourselves to a dogmatic enumeration of essential features.

*Competitive sport is, first of all, tragedy*, the calling into question of existence, or, more specifically, the immediate presence of violence and the immanence of death. What does this presence signify, and why must there be death in sport? Very simply because one of the adversaries must perish. Of course he perishes only symbolically, being quite content that it be so. Sport does not border on inhumanity. Yet, no one likes to die even symbolically. Besides, we do say, in French, *jouer à mort*. We fight *to the end* to avoid defeat. Such expressions are significant. The individual defends his right to exist.

There is then a second aspect: *the blending of two dialectics*. One can overpower others only by means of a domination of himself. If he is not master of his own body then it is out of the question that he master the opponent. Conversely, by means of the opponent one succeeds in stepping beyond himself both morally and physically. Through the opponent one goes beyond what he is. Without the challenge by the other and the possibility of victory, one would not put himself to the trouble of so painful an effort as that of intense physical conditioning.

There is a third feature: *the free and gratuitous compliance to a universal rule*. Each athlete is, in his sport, both legislator and subject. He chooses the sport in which he participates. He adopts its rules. There is thus self-determination. Moreover, he plays a part in the sporting institutions themselves and has a legal right to participate in their eventual transformation.

Finally, there is a fourth trait: the law that, freely chosen, makes being placed in an artificially tragic situation worth while as a result of the blending of the two dialectics. (The situation is artificially tragic because it is freely constructed from all possible elements with no obligation other than that which it imposes upon itself and no external necessity). *This is the law of contradiction. The principle which brings individuals together in sport is the will to fight*. People assemble, let us remember, to confront one another. This is what is essentially given. What is more, this gathering is not a casual, commonplace, everyday meeting. It is not a contingent occurrence but, to the contrary, a systematic undertaking. The system—for that is what it is—which governs the sporting reality is based upon an infinite possibility of contradictions. There exists in sports rule-making a complete, intricate combinatory system which varies from test

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to test and discipline to discipline but which, in all cases, establishes a hierarchy of performance.

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The attempt having been made to define the internal structure of certain elements which characterize the sporting reality, it would be appropriate to place this phenomenon with respect to its exterior. Within what conceptual bounds does it lie?

What we require is some sort of negative definition. How do we circumscribe the sphere of what is in essence sport? When is sport no longer properly so called? What is the threshold beyond which the notion of sport becomes something else? In other words, with what should it not be confused?

The answer will be given by a comparison of games, sport and war. In this dialectic there are three elements at work. Sport resembles, but is not, war. It is not war because death and violence are therein only symbolized. Nor is sport, despite resemblance, a game. The symbols therein are taken seriously.

As far as war is concerned, the possibility of confusion with sport is perhaps, at first glance, no surprise. Certainly sport allows violence; however, it codifies it. Therefore it is a radical departure from war. Yet, there exists on this point a well known historical precedent, the contest between the Horatii and the Curatii, which forces us to open a question.

Briefly it can be formulated as follows: can one save the expense of war by placing the destiny of the city in the hands of three champions? War could thus be humanized. Is the question, so put, capable of a positive answer?

From a moral point of view the idea is unquestionably noble, but—and this is its least serious defect—it results, as it will immediately be seen, in something hybrid and inconsistent. This contest, in fact, is not really sport (because the competitors face real death), nor is it seriously war.

Reflecting upon the latter point, Machiavelli showed in the *Discourses on the First Decade of Livy* how a similar idea was utopian and at the same time politically dangerous. It did not take into account the deepest states of the conflict. Will the vanquished accept as real a symbolic defeat? Will they become wise, rather reasonable, and decide to resolve the conflict peace-

fully after the verdict not known at the outset to occur? It also overlooks the importance of the stakes and elementary psychological factors. There is every reason to fear the initial imprudence—to deliver the freedom of all to determination by the fate of a few—to be a sign of madness and to suspect as a result a madness at least as serious on the part of the vanquished when they accept—according to the terms of the contract—the loss of their city.

War and sport are in fact incompatible with each other, for in sport, in effect, you fight because you agree fundamentally beforehand, while in war you fight because you do not succeed in reaching agreement. Consequently the notions are radically different. In yet other respects the distinction is easy to draw. On the one hand death is symbolic while on the other it is real.

In connexion with the game there is likelihood of confusion. In both cases the effort is ostensibly fruitless and freely made. Then there is the important circumstance of the relationship which the use of words seems to imply: we speak of the rules of the game, the Olympic games, and of the players on a team.

Nevertheless, a closer examination reveals that we have before us phenomena not at all of the same nature. The differences are in fact very striking. Sport is, by definition, fruitless; yet, within its realm of action nevertheless supposes efficacy. Sport is gratuitous in effort; yet, by the free choice of its rules, there is imposed the strictest obligation.

Thus sport favours science and law; the game, by contrast, remains in the domain of instability and fantasy: it finishes as it begins, to the delight of everyone. Lastly, sport differs from the game in so far as it *takes the game seriously*. It begins really to exist as sport the moment immediate physical pleasure ceases, when there is the desire to stop and the opponent also wishes to discontinue but both insist upon pushing beyond the mental, physical and nervous resistance of the other.

That is not all however. Further mention should be made of a second aspect of the relationship of game to sport, by means of which what separates them can easily be comprehended. There is no standard but fancy. The game, in effect—this is yet another of its characteristics—has a predilection for referring things to chance and external forces. Its independent disposition wants to depend only on events. Sport, for its part, fears chance

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above everything else. It is moreover *anti-chance*. The athlete places all chance within his power. He knows the rules. He prepares himself in the knowledge of causes. The fate, if it can still be spoken of in relation to sport, depends not upon external causes but upon the individual himself.

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It is indeed evident that these few preliminary remarks do not suffice to determine the sporting phenomenon in its richness and complexity. They only lay the foundation for subsequent developments. How do we proceed?

In the attempt to go further in the analysis of the sporting reality, use can be made, on methodological grounds, of the idea of tripartition as expressed in the model provided by Cicero in the *Tusculan Disputations*, attributed by him to Pythagoras as confirmed by Diogenes Laertius. The text is well known. Leon, the tyrant of Phlius, inquires with Pythagoras about the function and nature of philosophy, a question quite normal and legitimate prompted by the use of a new word and not without cause, for it was Pythagoras himself who just introduced this neologism. Leon wants then to know to what reality the word corresponds. To that end he could not have addressed himself to a wiser interlocutor.

Pythagoras replies—and it is this reply which concerns us—with the help of the metaphor of sport. Why does one take part in sport? What has just taken place at the Games? The motivations for it are many. Some, he says, attend to contend for a crown. They are the ones most in view. They are not alone however. Indeed others come to buy and to sell, while yet others are content to watch. The latter are the philosophers.

This Pythagorean comparison is not without interest. It makes use of a model hallowed by tradition and conforming to the Pythagorean principle of the tripartition of reality, while preserving its actuality. It suffices to turn it around and to make of the basis of the explanation the thing to be explained. It suffices to apply it to the present. In our time sport still appears under the traits of action, commerce and spectacle. It thereby

retains its ancient structure. In the present the sporting festival taken in its entirety still serves as an element of public life.

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Thus, if this methodology is adopted sport would, in the first place, imply *action, a particular action, namely that of the protagonists*. What kind of behaviour is indicated here? It is undoubtedly dialectical in principle for the aim is contradiction (struggle) and a going beyond (domination). There is discord and resolution. The desire is to confront the other and to defeat him. However—and this is a central and decisive statement—this is an infinite dialectic: a highest stage is never achieved once and for all. There will always arise, at some stage and despite all glory acquired, a new adversary. After the quarter finals there are the semi-finals, and once one has the title he is not yet finished: he must defend it. All must be redone over and over again. No one is champion for eternity.

Moreover the gripping and ruthless character of this dialectic excludes, by natural selection as it were, any mediocrity. From this arises the second characteristic of sporting action: *determination*. It is rational (hence analytic) and requires, in order so to be, certain mental qualities. One does not succeed, no matter how or what, by the grace of inspiration, improvisation or unaided good will. Logic and morale are—at the level of behaviour—closely linked. There must be both knowledge and will. It is necessary to possess a definite technique and to use it with determination.

The athlete experiences, in effect, *two kinds of resistance: material and human*. The laws of nature may not be deceived with impunity. The sanction of reality is always harsh. A technique, a science of the game, is needed. Nor can the will of the other be underestimated with impunity. The opponent never conforms to abstract designs based upon responses foreseen in training. He resists. In order to lead him to submission a courage which daunts his own is required. That is, moreover, why sporting activity has such a high educative value (although this is not its real purpose): it teaches the reality of things and persons, respect for the laws governing them, and the joint necessity of analysis and the will to achieve success.



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Sport, in the second place, implies, if we remain faithful to the model selected, the unavoidable presence of commerce. Business appears under multiple aspects and poses numerous difficult and often-disputed problems. Suffice it to say, firstly, that commerce surrounds sport in a prosaic and exterior fashion. *Sport is the occasion and source of profit*. This is a well known fact. Goods are sold as is the performance. Sport is used for advertising purposes. Sport provides a market; it has a clientele.

Here one is certainly right to wonder whether the union of such notions is not to be proscribed rather than described, and whether there is not something almost sacrilegious in this manner of connecting the gratuitousness of the act with the vulgarly interested initiatives of business. Is there here not material for scandal, or, at the very least, indecency? Some risk their lives while others come to earn their living. What do they have in common? On the one hand lies the poetry of strife while on the other—the prosaicness of self-interest. Shall they be spoken of within the same discussion, being thus given a kind of equality?

Yet, the interpretation may be turned around. Sport sells itself. The enfeoffment with money perhaps smacks of decadence; yet, it also testifies to—and this fact could not easily be overlooked—the economically and socially recognized importance of the phenomenon of sport. Morality is not here concerned. Very simply sport is a force to be reckoned with. Before making it an object of scandal, as it is often done (that would already be a value judgement encroaching upon our analysis and hence a presumption), it behooves us to make note of the positive side of this union, to note the political import of the sporting reality (an attitude giving an impulse more to a scientific study) and its economic impact.

Besides, the relation of money to merchandise which has been established in sport is not unilateral, and this is the second point deserving emphasis. Business makes money from sport, but sport, for its part, requires money and business in order to take place and to exist at all. It is subject to material contingencies. It either provides commercial sources of revenue and thereby secures monetary resources or very simply does not

exist. To the life and survival of sport, any sport, and any sports organization, financing is indispensable, and this financing, in the last analysis, always issues from human labour, or, more exactly, productive labour. This condition—not a sufficient one, it is true, but one absolutely necessary in sporting reality—should never be lost sight of; otherwise, we should fall into naive idealism. The gratuitousness of the effort is possible only within the framework of a civilization capable of providing an economic base sufficient for the organization of its leisure activities.

The result is that the structure of sport cannot be detached from an economic base to the extent that it could not be made independent of its own existence and its organizational forms. A further result—by virtue of a corollary—finds sport to be a faithful reflexion of the world around it. It suffices to list the various circumstances under which this reflexion is most evident.

*Sport reflects the level of civilization.* Slave labour enabled the Greeks to invent sport, while industrial society enabled the English to invent it anew in the nineteenth century. In both cases the division of labour left leisure activities and power to an aristocracy which could devote itself to endeavours which were free from involvement in the production of goods.

*Sport reflects the local economy.* The economic health of a town can be measured by the athletic success of its teams. One of the consequences of the decline of an industry is the elimination of a sponsor. For example, the combed-wool crisis in Roubaix-Tourcoing led to, among other things, the demise of the professional soccer team.

*Sport reflects the class structure.* There may be found sociological stratifications in sporting activity, based upon the limits of financial self-support of sports organizations.

*Sport reflects subtle changes* in the relationships between various social milieux. The appearance, within the same competition, of associations differing only in the kind of recruitment, or, on the other hand, the introduction of competitions with ideological extensions (*les affinitaires*), the sliding of manpower from one sporting discipline to another, and the evolution in the recruitment of players are all very revealing of discrete but profound movements taking place within societies, and it is unfortunate that sociologists have until now hardly taken advantage of this fine line of investigation.

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In the discussion of the thorny question of the relationship between business and sport there remains a very delicate point to be dealt with, and it is moreover the most colourful. We are speaking of professionalism, again a subject surrounded by controversy. The champion sells his athletic agility and his command of victory. In the opinion of some he thus becomes a kind of mercenary. He is both merchant and merchandise. There is no hesitation to appeal to the moral argument. Resort is had to value judgement, and professionalism is presented as an adulteration of sport.

Yet, is this not once again to move too quickly, to replace realism with utopian thinking? It is firstly not difficult to point out inconsistency in this critique. Given the growing technicality of sporting disciplines, the increase in training time and the necessity of being moved to remote places, it is clear, in the most alarming way, that beyond a certain threshold the development of the athlete passes through professionalism. This is the result of a logical process, and it is difficult to see how such a consequence could be avoided.

Then, passing inquiry could be made into the curious disparity which is apparently claimed to exist between the status of the athlete and that of the artist. What is the source of this strange discrepancy? Why refuse to the athlete what has been permitted to the artist, namely, to earn his living within the framework of his specialty? From competence there always emerges a craft, a profession. What could be more normal? One could not but find suspect the point of view according to which the amateur is preferred over the professional in sport, while exactly the opposite occurs in art. There is, after all, every chance that, in sport as well as in art, the term amateur be synonymous with mediocrity rather than with one-knows-not-what sort of purity.

With that in mind one is certainly right to inquire into the significance of taking a position so far removed from the realities of our time. To respond to such an inquiry would be to embark upon an ideological psycho-analysis of the critique.

To prefer amateurism is tantamount to doing what? It is, to express it graphically, to give precedence to the idealized structure of Olympic competitions over that of the world cham-

pionships, which is deemed too mercantile. In other words, it is to exalt the sport of antiquity at the expense of the sport of industrial society.

Granted, to reject the style of sport originating in industrial society by pointing to its materialism is very noble and liberal, but to make this challenge in the name of a principle which is itself realizable only upon the economic foundation of slavery is not entirely convincing.

It revives, it seems, some nostalgia for the past, a regret of the lack of constancy in concepts, an unconscious but real longing for the reservation of sport as a privilege for the aristocracy and finally, what is yet more serious, a desire to substitute a politico-medicinal ethic (*mens sana corpore sano*, in more obvious terms, means: a military training for right-thinking youngsters) for the deepest spirit of athletics which is free and universal competition. Experience itself in actual fact denounces this anachronism. The Olympic games require of participants the oath of amateurism, but this amateurism is exploited in a colossal business venture undertaken to sustain these games.

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Proceeding still according to our model, we find sport to be, in the third place, a spectacle. It is an aesthetic reality, of interest not only to its participants. It gathers round itself individuals siding with the protagonists.

Undoubtedly the sporting spectacle does not agree with everyone's taste, so we again experience the heat of debate over such subjects. The essence of the objection is well known. Some willingly discredit those things from sport which they summon by procuration.

However, we again must respond that facts are facts. Out of concern for realism, questions must be put concerning the motivations driving the spectator. Since, by the medium of television, some millions of people watch the world soccer championships, the phenomenon obviously deserves consideration. It would be absurd to ignore it, for these spectators cannot simply be written off.

Now, what is the aesthetics of sport?

It represents a complex whole, formed from several different

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levels. There are, first of all, the derivative aesthetics of which the most immediate level is that of the contemplation of movement and form. With that, the aesthetics of sport, in its most exterior texture, becomes intimately joined to the spectacle of dance. One is content simply to follow the gesticulatory evolution, for it is enough to watch and to admire the grace and style. We find also a moral level: to be a good loser, to resort to fair play, or to make tasteful gestures is to please the public. They applaud and esteem. There is also a rational level to be found. It consists of the appreciation by the connoisseur, or the technician, of the ability of the protagonists to resolve practical difficulties.

Admittedly we have not yet captured the essential feature, which consists in the dramatization of the conflict. In its deepest essence, the other aspects in some sense gravitating toward it, the aesthetics of sport is tragedy: it is the staging of violence and death. Here we are at the heart of our subject.

It is a tragedy, yet more tragic and true a tragedy than any of the theatre. The actors themselves are, at the height of the competition, in doubt over what the final outcome will be. Tragedy in theatre is never anything other than the opposition between the finite self and the infinite self of the hero. It is a choice between life or an ideal. Tragedy in sport opposes two finite selves each of which wants to impose its infinite will upon the other. Ideal clashes against ideal. Tragedy in theatre depicts a fate which can be altered by no one, while tragedy in sport depicts one free will confronting another.

Thus it may be seen how great numbers of people, who are not necessarily cultivated—sport is distinguished by mass concentration upon its spectacle—and who are many times unaware of the game which they are watching, nevertheless understand from the outset the essence of what they are seeing: the free confrontation with death in symbolic situations.

Thus it is explained how sport is accepted as a genuine, living and universal culture.

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Action, commerce and tragedy—these are the components of the sporting reality as perceived through the model which has

served as the guiding thread of our discussion. All of this holds together and constitutes a whole. What is sport? It is *a challenge taken on before the assembled crowd*.

A new kind of sociability arises. It is *a festivity*. It is *the game of society* in the noblest sense of the term.

Yet, society in fact also plays with itself, introducing by subterfuge as it were *the ruse of a two-fold sociability*.

On the one hand, each sport is a universe having its own population, administration, patterns and laws. It places its members in opposition to one another, but, in order to oppose the one to the other systematically, it assembles and unites them. There are thus athletic societies within the society. An imaginary world which is better ordered than the real one is invented.

On the other hand, sport plays a part in the life of the city. It expresses in its own way the creed of the place. It is also a diversion from violence. In short, it performs a catharsis, a purification. Individual passions are objectified by the transfer to symbolically performed death and voluntarily codified violence. Sport is, in every sense of the term, an encounter both between the protagonists and between the rest of the city.

In a word, sport is a very powerful factor in social integration.

These remarks would invite additional prolonged discussion. Inquiry would first have to be made into the reason for, and nature of, the cohesion present in the sporting universe. The answer would undoubtedly be found in the area of religious thought. Sport has every element of *a counter-religion*. As in religion the point is to save one's soul; however, unlike the situation in religion, one's soul can be saved only at the expense of the other's. Questions would then have to be raised concerning the relationships between sporting society and political society. Sport has every element of *a counter-society*. Its law, as Anacharsis once observed, misconstrues civil laws which prohibit violence. In this way it is inconsistent with all that remains of society. Its condition in light of this fact is uncertain. It tends to assert its autonomy. Being an ideological stake, it cannot resist attempts at restoration of which it is inevitably the object.