



**AALBORG UNIVERSITY**  
DENMARK

**Aalborg Universitet**

## **Pleasure into Sport**

*on the National Uses of Bodily Culture*

Hedetoft, Ulf

*Publication date:*  
1999

*Document Version*  
Early version, also known as pre-print

[Link to publication from Aalborg University](#)

*Citation for published version (APA):*  
Hedetoft, U. (1999). *Pleasure into Sport: on the National Uses of Bodily Culture*. Aalborg Universitetsforlag.

### **General rights**

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the public portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

- Users may download and print one copy of any publication from the public portal for the purpose of private study or research.
- You may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain
- You may freely distribute the URL identifying the publication in the public portal -

### **Take down policy**

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us at [vbn@aub.aau.dk](mailto:vbn@aub.aau.dk) providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

Center for International Studies  
Aalborg University

Pleasure Into Sport:  
On the National Uses of Bodily Culture

Ulf Hedetoft

Discussion Paper No. 10/99

© Ulf Hedetoft

ISSN 1397-9043

Published by:

*SPIRIT*

Aalborg University

Fibigerstræde 2

Dk-9220 Aalborg Ø, Denmark

Phone + 45 96 35 91 33

***SPIRIT - School for Postgraduate Interdisciplinary Research  
on Interculturalism and Transnationality***

Director: Professor Ulf Hedetoft

*SPIRIT* is an interdisciplinary doctoral school for the systematic study of themes and theoretical issues related to the intertwining of political, transnational and intercultural processes in the contemporary world. It is dedicated to examining - from the combined vantagepoint of both the human and the social sciences - cultural, political and communicative issues on a spectrum ranging from the local dimension over the national and the regional to the processes of globalisation that increasingly impinge on the organisation of life and the structure and dynamics of the world. The thematic issues range from questions of European identity and integration; over transnational processes of migration, subcultures and international marketing; to transatlantic problems or nationalism and religion in Eastern Europe or the USA. What ties them together within the framework of *SPIRIT* is the school's distinctive features: Analysing themes in the context of the meanings and implications of internationality, and taking cultural/communicative as well as political/sociological aspects into account. Considerable emphasis is placed on Europe - its history, politics, social anthropology, place in the world, relations to global issues, and trajectories for the future. On this background research is conducted within four thematic areas:

1. Studies of Identity, Mentality and Culture
2. Intercultural Cooperation in International Markets and Organisations
3. Migration, Spatial Change and the Globalisation of Cultures
4. International Politics and Culture

## PLEASURE INTO SPORT: ON THE NATIONAL USES OF BODILY CULTURE

Ulf Hedetoft  
Aalborg University

“...there cannot be much doubt that the whole thing is bound up with the rise of nationalism (...) the habit of identifying oneself with large power units and seeing everything in terms of competitive prestige.”  
(George Orwell)

### **Prelude**

Is sport a cultural activity, and if so, how? And what are the relations between sport, culture, nation and identity? This article argues that sport is both more and less than the competitive games of bodily culture and the enjoyments they engender for *homo ludens*. Sport is a specific, late-modern organization of such activities, tied to the forging of national identities and of the international system in the course of the twentieth century. This has increasingly meant that bodily culture--as “sport”--has been instrumentally reinterpreted and operationalized in order to serve broader societal, cultural and international functions; “exogenous” functions more or less dramatically alien to the “endogenous” rationality and teleology of playfulness and competing “for the fun of it”. In contrast, today almost everyone seems to agree that sport needs to be taken seriously, because there’s prestige, money, sometimes even the identities and destinies of entire communities and individuals at stake.

This contribution proposes to take a closer look at these transformative cultural-political processes, in and through which playful activities, “games” in their endogenous meaning, become “fair game”, subordinated to interests, ideologies and identities that dominate the modernity of



nation-states in the era of globalization--and become transformed accordingly. It has led to the formation of a dual sport culture, an arena of ritualized and constantly perfected rules and discourses of professional sportsmanship. Sport is both a regular (though highly unorthodox) job and--as bread and circus for the masses--the display of the practical existentialism of national belonging, by athletes as well as spectators. The trajectory of contemporary sport is one that implies an ever more rigorous disregard for the cultivation of the body and of the pleasure engendered by bodily activities; a trajectory where the national uses of gaming in the name of sport lead to corporeal abuses, to play that is less than fair, and sometimes to open violence and killings. This article investigates the salient hows and whys of this process.

### **Is sport culture?**

The answer to this question is disputed and differences of position are linked to more fundamental problems of definition, conceptualization and categorization: to the nature of both "culture" and "sport".<sup>1</sup> If culture is seen in its broadest sense as "ways of doing things", i.e. forms of social practice and interaction, then sporting activities are clearly cultural. If it is conceived of more narrowly, as forms of disinterested, civilizing activities, having their own intrinsic rationale and unfolding in the societal domain of freedom and leisure, then sport in its latter-day form at least may well fall outside the scope of cultural activities proper.

But conversely, this type of argument is also premised on our understanding of "sport". If sport is defined as a blanket term referring to a genetically based, universal type of human activity that can be found in different forms throughout the history of the human species, then the conclusion must be that sport, just like any other distinctly human kind of activity, with its games, playfulness, competitiveness, use of the body etc., belongs to the sphere of culture. On the other hand, if sport is conceived of as a particular historical manifestation of such gaming activities--where what Huizinga (1949) once called the "play element" has been instrumentalized by a social teleology and where an intrinsic rationale has therefore been superseded by an extrinsic one--then it would seem less self-evident that sport can or should be conceptualized as a cultural sub-domain of the larger society--particularly if culture itself is seen as rooted in play, as Huizinga argues. In the grey zone between such polarities we find attempts to bridge the gap by retaining elements of both sides, like Günther Lüschen's definition of sport as a "rational, playful activity in interaction, which is extrinsically rewarded", based on a reading of "culture" as "beliefs, values, norms and signs that include symbols of verbal as well as non-verbal communication" and

---

<sup>1</sup> For different readings of the sport/culture nexus, see e.g. Dunning, 1971, Loy, Kenyon & McPherson, 1981, Mandell, 1984, and Guttmann, 1994--the last of these dealing with the global dissemination of western sport culture through colonial imperialism.

therefore speaking less of sport as a cultural field in its own right and rather of “the interdependence of sport and culture”-- the title of his article (Lüschen, 1967)--and seeing sport as “an expression of the socio-cultural system in which it occurs” (ibid.).

Such definitional exercises have more than exegetic significance. They reflect that “sport” refers to a set of activities that possesses a number of endogenous features, but also a variety of societal and national functions--in other words, that sport is a domain located between *cultural meanings* (ontology) and *socio-political uses* (teleology), and that this domain is structured by a variety of interests represented by a host of actors (individual as well as collective), all trying as best they can to reap maximum benefit from the field. This in turn relates to significant discussions pertaining not only to the area of sports, but also more broadly to other kinds of cultural activity: Are they mimetic, ritualistic, symbolic, compensatory, emancipatory ... ? As regards sport: Is it a mirror held up to society, which in its rules and practices as well as the distribution of different sports within and between (national) societies symbolically and ritualistically mimic collective values and preferences; is it better conceptualized as a domain of leisure-based activities intended to compensate for, *inter alia*, the routinized, stressful patterns of everyday life and the constraints that it places on bodily pleasure; or is it more appropriately defined as a field of individual emancipation and cultural self-realization, a space enabling people to forge a unity of intellectual and bodily needs? And how do such issues relate to historical processes?

This contribution has no intention of dealing with such questions of “culture and sport” in all their diversity and generality. Rather it wants to focus on what it will argue to be a core area in this context, i.e. the dual nature of “sports culture” as practically and teleologically defined by its functional subordination to the nation-state, its international embeddedness, and the construction of its national culture and identity, both diachronically and synchronically. On this view, sport is both more and less than the competitive games of bodily culture and the enjoyments they engender for *homo ludens*. Sport (the activities, their figuration, as well as the term itself) will be understood as a unique, late-modern organization of “playful activities in interaction”, centrally tied to the forging of national identities and of the international system in the course of the 20th century. This has increasingly meant that bodily culture--as sport--has been instrumentally reinterpreted and operationalized to serve broader societal, cultural and international functions: political, commercial, class-oriented, ideological, nationalistic etc.--exogeneous functions more or less dramatically alien to the endogenous rationality of playfulness and competing “for the fun of it”, and functions increasingly offering “extrinsic” rather than just “intrinsic” rewards.

Hence, almost everyone seems to agree that sport needs to be serious and to be taken seriously, not least within the context of its national uses and the meanings derived from them, because there's money, prestige, even the identities and destinies of whole communities and individuals at stake (whether of the enactors themselves or their partisan supporters). In this sense I agree with Vinokur that sport is "more than a game" (1988), but it must be added that for the same reasons it is also "less" than a game, because the nation-state induced socio-cultural functionalization of "games" in the name of the greater national whole tends to dilute or even to transform some of the intrinsic values and meanings of games. The implication is that intrinsic meaning and extrinsic use, though theoretically at loggerheads, in fact practically merge into different composite entities, where meanings become reinterpreted and reconfigured through the introjection of the externally imposed national logic. The result is, on the one hand, latter-day competitive sport, which constitutes a binary cultural formation: a superimposition of the interests and values embedded in a given national culture (and in the international system as an increasingly hegemonic player in the field) on the intrinsic bodily culture of "gaming"; on the other hand the result is the widely used bifurcation of this domain into "popular" (or "mass") sport and "professional" (or "elite") sport, a distinction that in its organizational confrontation of two types of sport still contains remnants of "intrinsic meaning" as distinct from "extrinsic use".

From correlations between sport, heroism and war; via the ideology of peaceful coexistence of nation-states and political systems by means of sport; over the vicarious confirmation--or identification--of national pride in the sports successes of "our" athletes; on to the singing of national anthems at sports events; and finalizing in the media-disseminated and politically correct underpinning of multicultural ideologies (cf. my discussion of the French use of the 1998 World Cup victory below), such extrinsic, national uses of inherently playful activities are plainly in view. In the following sections, this paper will take a closer look at the cultural processes in and through which "games" are turned into "fair game" for (national) interests, identities and ideologies that dominate late modernity--and become transformed accordingly. Thus, a "sport culture" is engendered as a national arena of ritualized and constantly perfected rules and discourses of professional sportsmanship. Sport is both a regular (but highly unorthodox) kind of job, and--as bread and circus for the masses--the display of the practical existentialism of national belonging, both points implying a more and more rigorous disregard for the cultivation of the body and bodily pleasure, and representing a trajectory where the national uses of gaming in the name of sport increasingly lead to corporeal abuses, to play that is less than fair, and occasionally to open violence and killings (on and off the playing fields of sport).

The provisional answer to the original question--is sport culture?--hence can only be that sport is certainly a cultural activity, but one whose cultural telos is doubly derived from both its intrinsic nature and its extrinsic usefulness in varying symbolic combinations and configurations--out of which those pertaining to the (inter)national context of prestige, glory, recognition and identity must be regarded as paramount. All this is linked with another central question, i.e.

### **Is sport identity?**

In relation to the understanding of sport already laid out--a set of late-modern activities that, in Pierre Bourdieu's words, started as "an elite practice reserved for amateurs" and turned into "sport as a spectacle produced by professionals for consumption by the masses" (1993: 347)--the answer to this question should dwell less on the intrinsic, identity-shaping influences at the level of the individual practitioner of games and physical culture, and more on the collective identity-forming uses to which sports are put within the types of configuration between the ontology and the teleology of sport culture that are constantly enacted and produced by the *habitus*, discourses and interests of nation-states and their nationalisms (as well as by other societal uses to which sports can be put: building character, team spirit and "achievement-orientation", effecting upward social mobility, relieving boredom, counteracting the stress and wear-and-tear of work, or just "keeping fit" for the vicissitudes of contemporary life--most of which lend themselves to further instrumentalization of sport as the co-producer of national identity).<sup>2</sup>

This does not mean that it is *per se* irrelevant to consider the intrinsic and possibly more "authentic" identity-shaping influences of bodily cultures in the light of what personal needs are gratified--and how--and the way in which individuals take advantage of the physical skills and features with which they have been endowed in order to excel at specific games and do "what they're good at". But in the context of this contribution, this aspect of the interdependence of sport and identity assumes a slightly different meaning. It emerges as the necessary, though by no means sufficient, precondition for the transformation of the (national) identity problem in sport, a process whereby professionalized, ritualized and mass-disseminated sports activities become the repository for discourses and sentiments of national belonging and pride at the level of "consumption" rather than "production", and where what matters are the meanings and signs collectively ascribed to such activities in the name of the national. For political actors, the media as well as the national masses, the activities, aspirations and achievements of sports performers undergo an interpretive identity-related exercise, where serving the national interest seems to be paramount and where those who succeed in doing so become heroes and role models for the

---

<sup>2</sup>For interesting recent collections on sport and identity, see Jarvie, 1991, and MacClancy, 1996.

largely "spectating" non-performers of the sports. This parallels the historical transformation process, which Bourdieu aptly-- and seemingly inspired by Gellner's (1983) modernist conception of nationalism--describes as follows: "...Sport, born of truly popular games, i.e. games produced by the people, returns to the people, like 'folk music', in the form of spectacles produced for the people" (ibid.:346). One must add that "the people" has come to take shape as "national peoples", who have not just come to passively accept these spectacles, but to internalize the sports domain as one of the major catalysts of national sentiments. In this way, sport largely becomes naturalized as a marker of the national in the mental-cultural sign system of national "ethnies", becomes the bearer of national (cross-sectional, horizontal, generalized) meaning, and becomes discursively linked as a primary interpretant to complex series of events in matters political, social, cultural as well as historical.

This gives rise to two central questions: Why is it that sport lends itself so well to being used as a vehicle for national identity? And how is it concretely put to use? The rest of this section will try to offer some answers to the former question, while the subsequent sections will address the latter.

Five major factors must be singled out as especially significant in trying to solve the puzzle of the sport/(national) identity nexus: the origin of sport in the games and pleasures of bodily culture; the mass appeal of sports across societal and national divides; the location of sports--at least originally--in the personal realm of freedom and leisure pursuits (increasingly this is only true for the consumers of sports and for those odd individuals who still see themselves as "amateurs"); the competitive element contained in all games and elevated to a higher level by contemporary sports and their (inter)national organisation and rationale; and finally the symbolic and existential potentiality of sport.

1. *The origin of sport in the games and pleasures of bodily culture.* Sport derives from a specific category of the pursuit and gratification of personal needs that in itself possesses an identity-shaping potential, i.e. a potential for shaping and developing character, self-image, and awareness of mental as well as bodily abilities and limits. In this sense, identity is created through a set of pleasurable activities, engaged in freely and for the fun of them; in other words, people live out their physical potentials through play. When activities of this kind are transformed into sport, construed as national and treated as purveyors and repositories of national identity, this is not a gigantic leap, but a social construct in which one form of "identity" is being used as a building-brick for another in the social and national imaginary. It lends credibility and legitimacy to sport--as-national-identity--makes it believable, seemingly "natural". Further it seems to spring from



“people” (their freely determined interests, pursuits and identifications) rather than “state”. It appears a truly national, non-political set of activities and engagements.

2. *The mass appeal of sport.* In the world of sport, nationalism--based as it is on a configuration of cultural and political identifications among its nationals that cuts across sectional, generational and geographical divides--encounters a domain which almost in and by itself possesses these characteristics. This does not mean that sports of different kinds are not frequently distributed in obvious ways across the social strata (compare golf and tennis with boxing and cycling, for example), nor that by and large sport is not still dominated by the male gender. Such valid points cannot detract from the fact, however, that most people take either an active or a passive (spectator) interest in (some kind of) sport, that there are specific sports that do have a mass appeal of their own across such divisions (soccer, American football and basketball, and periodically track-and-field), or that the gender- and class-related specificities of sports are dwindling in significance-- as professionalization increases and sport becomes a money-machine feeding on mass audiences (see later). But the relation also works in reverse: the inherent mass appeal of sporting activities is reinforced by its successful national instrumentalization. In other words, the more the relationship between national identity and sport has been mentally and culturally established--the more pride, prestige and rewards in sports are imbued with national meaning--the more the appeal of sport will tend to expand even further. For instance, many people avowedly uninterested in soccer--not least many women--nevertheless avidly watch certain nationally meaningful matches, partly no doubt due to the general enthusiasm that these generate among national citizenries which on such occasions celebrate themselves as “communities of destiny”.

3. *The location of sport in the realm of freedom and leisure pursuits.* This is the corollary of the two previous points. The links between games, freedom, self-determination and pleasure (as opposed to the discipline and rigours of the workplace) play a significant role in facilitating the instrumentalization of sport for discourses, enactments and symbolizations of national identity. This does not mean that the practice of sport in the late-modern period should be interpreted as pure, disinterested enjoyment, not even at the level of amateur sports as emphatically celebrated by the “Olympic Movement” and the idealist discourse of “fair play” underpinning it. As many commentators have noted, most popular, organized sports have had an instrumental flavour to them from their inception (compensatory, ritualistic, achievement-oriented, even socially mimetic functions)--as partly distinct from elite sports that have, historically at least, been ostentatiously performed (and watched) in a spirit of self-fulfilment and often in denigration of the crude competitiveness of the sports pursuits of the common folk. What it does mean, however, is that

sports are socially situated and culturally defined as extraneous to activities pursued for reasons of sheer necessity and are therefore invested with other identity-shaping potentials, other symbolic meanings. Inversely, the instrumental aspects of modern sport do make it easier to make it conform with the requirements of the national teleology, and they also pave the way for the professionalization of the sports domain--the process through which games, in their form as sports, *factually* re-enter the realm of work, discipline and control and where "competition" acquires another set of meanings, without *symbolically* doing so (see section 6 below).

4. *The competitive element.* The element of competition which is inherent in most forms of bodily culture (with the exception of jogging, work-out and the like) translates smoothly into the international components of the sport/identity nexus: nation-states represent themselves symbolically in this domain, hoping for prestige, victory and glory by means of the competitive endeavours of their athletes, who become individual and collective embodiments of national ambitions at the level of state, but much more so at the level of mass identity: here, sportspeople engaged in international contests defend "the nation's" honour more than "the state's"; in this perspective, they appear as "the people's" diplomatic, but apolitical representatives externally and are broadly viewed as a kind of "people's elite", because they--by and large-- are recruited from the popular masses. It is their successful competitive efforts that make them into popular heroes and thus into role models seemingly larger than life, the most excellent of whom are therefore inducted into various "Halls of Fame". As the nation's practical existentialists (see below), having done real but also symbolic battle with the embodiments of significant "Others", they are sometimes transformed by popular mythology into vicarious emblems of desirable *esprit de corps*, national righteousness and triumphalism, and are generally instrumentalized as vessels of national sentiment and models of socio-economic aspiration.

Of course this should not be taken to mean that the competitive element is only introduced at the level of internationalism. National leagues and other domestic events already organize sports into competitive structures and mentalities prior to this, and can give rise to identity-shaping processes at the level of club, locality, region etc. (Simonsen, 1996). But in most countries, it is the linkage between sport, competition and international events that produces the most affective, permanent and all-pervasive identity structures. The symbolic meaning of this is further enhanced by the fact that in this world of competing sovereigns, the playing-field is much more level than in the reality of military, political or economic competitive processes. Here all stand a real chance, even the

smaller nation-states, who can occasionally enjoy the compensatory pleasure of defeating their bigger brothers.<sup>3</sup>

Such functionalizations reveal the important dislocation of the competitiveness with which we started. Rather than real people pursuing games through competition in order to fulfill their bodily potentials, in contemporary sport semi-allegorical characters pursue sport by exerting their bodily potentials in order to be successful at (inter)national competition, so that others (statesmen, onlookers as well as national communities of media and media consumers) can reap national pride. From being a means, competition transmogrifies into an end, and victory into an all-important goal.

5. *The symbolic and existential potentiality of sport.* These instrumentalizations all spring from a real potentiality embedded in gaming and sport, i.e. that *qua* its status as playful bodily culture, identity-shaping force at the level of individuality, and repository of competitiveness as well as a spirit of collectivity, sport possesses all the necessary qualities for being attributed with symbolic, connotative meaning and for representing national existentiality in its form as deep-seated affectiveness; sacrifice and glory; belonging to an imagined community; ritualized heroics etc.--by competing with and against the international Other in the symmetrical world of nation-states. It adds to the national "benefits" of this domain that, because of its origins in freedom, pleasure and playfulness, it can represent itself as apolitical as well as cross-sectional. This is probably why sport, like no other societal or cultural domain, is widely accepted as a vent for national sentiment and open flag-waving--even in periods and situations when nationalism is otherwise regarded as wholly or partly illegitimate. When nations get embroiled in symbolic battle on the playing-fields of sport--notwithstanding the habitus of pure fun and games with which it is often associated and through which it is legitimized--, such events are not just "harmless" and "innocent", but laudable expressions of natural belongingness and patriotic pride as well as contributions to international peace and understanding. However, as is also the case with the reputed "apolitical" nature of sport (see the following section), reality is a much more mixed bag of blessings. In practice, the ideal shows up as contradictory reality, as paradox: the sporting event is orchestrated meaning, the discourse of friendliness and fun belies and is punctured by real animosity or at least by the seriousness with which actors and spectators approach the event and its outcome, the factual discipline, asceticism and ritualized motions undercut the ideology of freedom in which the event is enveloped.

---

<sup>3</sup> Examples are legion: Scotland beating England at soccer, Denmark Germany, Paraguay Brazil, Canada the United States at ice hockey, New Zealand Australia at rugby, or Pakistan England at cricket.



### **Sport, war and politics<sup>4</sup>**

As is often the case, the overtly political dimension of sports is most visible in anomalous situations, i.e. when this symbolic area needs to be officially flaunted as a manifest symbol of national identity, sovereignty and pride. This was pervasively the case in the former Eastern-bloc countries; also, in Third World countries (e.g. in Africa), sports representation and successes have increasingly come to be used both as a sign--and hoped-for co-producer--of nation-state unity. Full-fledged democracies, on the other hand, have most often tried--though with varying success--to keep "politics" and "sport" separate.<sup>5</sup>

This is different, however, when nation-states are *in the making* or relate to each other within a political context of explicit (national) tension. Two examples--very different in nature--will suffice.

The first relates to a soccer match between the fledgling Palestinian side and France, in Jericho, on October 8, 1993, i.e. shortly after the signing of one of the many peace accords between Israel and the Palestinians in September of that year. The interesting point is that the Palestinian side represented a non-existing, purely "imagined" nation-state, but one that had been given a boost of confidence by the signing ceremony in Washington D.C. Under the headline "Soccer match spurs show of Palestinian pride", *The Boston Globe* therefore reported this event as follows:

"Never mind the White House handshakes or the Cairo conferences, Palestinians made real progress toward self-determination yesterday at Jericho's soccer stadium, where the Palestinian national team, playing on a home field for the first time in nearly 50 years, hosted a French squad. 'This is more than a soccer game. This is the beginning of the state', said peace negotiator Saeb Erakat (...). 'For the first time in our lives', added Nabil Abu-Znaid, a Hebron University official sitting nearby, 'we are today able to carry our national flag, sing our national anthem, and support our national team. This is the kind of event that turns people's minds away from the depression of occupation, toward the optimism of state-building'" (*The Boston Globe*, October 9, 1993).

---

<sup>4</sup> This section constitutes a revised version of my analysis in Hedetoft, 1995, Part I, Chapter IV, section 5.

<sup>5</sup> The basic reason for this effort at separating the two domains is the idealism and pristine character routinely associated with the pursuit of sports, particularly since the beginnings of the Olympic movement, and conversely the power and materialism usually seen to be a feature of the real political world. Hence, sport can be used as a receptacle of all the lofty ideals of state and politics, while at the same time being seen as standing *outside* and *insulated from* this world. Until the recent revelations of Olympic corruption cases, counter-examples (like Hitler's use of the 1936 Olympics) have normally been presented as flagrant and morally aberrant violations of this ideal separation. However, for an interesting incident where the separation was effectively neutralized, see my analysis of the European Cup in Sweden in 1992, in Hedetoft, 1995, Part I, Chapter VIII. For sound analyses of the sport/politics nexus, see Vinokur, 1988, and Allison, 1993.

After a portrayal of the jubilant atmosphere surrounding this event, the article winds up by reporting that Erakat had been asked before the game “whether he thought the locals might emerge victorious”, and had replied “(w)e have won already”. As it turned out, the “locals” did in fact win 1-0, adding a sporting triumph to the political one.

What is “normally” just embedded as a naturalized dimension of international sports events, here becomes articulated on the surface level of discourse: “This is more than a soccer game”. In an important sense, all international soccer games are “more” than just sports (Vinokur, 1988), but because this “more” is here equivalent to the “beginning of a state” rather than to the representation of one already established, the confluence of game, politics, sovereignty, identity, flag-waving, and singing in this material representation of community and purpose is openly expressed. Teleology and cosmology, nationalism in its imperative (“we have to be a nation-state”) and subjunctive (“we wish we were a nation-state”) modes, coalesce. The soccer event becomes the signifier for the signified of “identity”, which can here--*like* any normal/normative nationalism--be relocated from the space of hostile confrontation with the Israelis to the symbolics of a “soccer friendly”. The presence of both an official peace negotiator and a university official indicates that, unlike any Western normativity of sport, this event was not embarrassed to pose as political, nor to draw the overt enthusiasm of the nation-building intelligentsia;<sup>6</sup> this one is not “just” for the people, it is for representatives of nation and state alike in their intimate and, here still, politicized linkage. Where *Patriots* in New England, USA, is a local pro-football team, the name divested of its original political implications, the Palestinian patriots here consciously enacted their political togetherness on and around the soccer pitch. For the duration of the game, “sport” becomes at one and the same time a representation of and, microcosmically, the very thing it is meant to symbolize, because this signified (the national community) has not yet been created. However, this anomalous context provides an indication of the almost forgotten meaning content of international sport in more “indicative” (“we *are* a nation-state”) circumstances, and of the depths of empathetic identification and suppressed emotion that it frequently calls forth.

---

<sup>6</sup> On this score, there is a marked difference between Europe and the USA. In the latter, the dividing-line between theory and practice is much thinner, sometimes to the point of vanishing, and sport is hence a consensual form of interest and activity for the masses as well as the elites--reflected in the high profile allotted to sport in the life of universities. A good example was provided by the announcement in March 1994 by George Mitchell, now best known internationally for his role as mediator in the Northern Irish conflict, then a leading democratic senator from Maine, that he would not be running for office in the upcoming elections. Subsequently, his future prospects were seen to lie either in becoming Commissioner for Baseball or a US Supreme Court Judge--the two being assessed as equally prestigious responsibilities by public opinion (in fact he became neither). Hardly an imaginable scenario in Europe.

The second example is from exactly such an “indicative” context. It concerns relations between England and Germany, mediated via a sporting non-event (because it never took place), and triggered by historical memories dating back to WW II. These memories provoked political tension, public debate, outrage and anger, and finally led to the cancellation of the event. Sport became politicized in an effort to depoliticize it. All this took place in 1994, when a soccer match had been scheduled between England and Germany, set to take place at the Olympic Stadium in Berlin, and planned--by the Germans--for Hitler’s birthday on April 20. After the fact, i.e. in light of the debate triggered by this possible coincidence, it was rationalized by German officialdom as an attempt to overcome the German guilt syndrome by neutralizing the Nazi legacy in an atmosphere of friendly sportsmanship and in a place heavily laden with symbols and memories of the 1936 Olympic Games. After the English side had cancelled its participation--apparently on a combination of security reasons and anti-German stereotypes--some hailed this decision, e.g. Hermann Lutz of the German Police Trade Union, because “(s)porting events should not become political issues” (cited in *The Boston Globe*, April 7, 1994). The irony is that not only was the cancellation sparked by political and other extraneous motives, but it also carried in its wake a barrage of reactions that made the match more political than it had ever been--even though it never materialized.

As this case shows, war and sport are often closely linked, so much so that they become discursive vehicles for each other, define each other in terms of both similarities and disparities, and stand to each other in varying relations of denotation/connotation and signified/signifier within the ambit of national identity and its predication on practically embedded definitions of Self and Other. The war/sport nexus is one of the central relational interpretants of modern nations. It has possibly been most pervasive in Britain because of the history of its modern origin (Mangan & Walvin, eds, 1987; Hedetoft, 1990; Colley, 1992)--though it has been far from exclusively tied to that country. In 1945 George Orwell asserted that “at the international level sports simply mimic warfare. [...] (s)erious sport is nothing to do with fair play; [it is] war minus the shooting”. In the same article he maintained that “the serious thing is not the behaviour of the players, but the attitude of the spectators [...] who work themselves into furies over these absurd contests and seriously believe [...] that running, jumping and kicking a ball are tests of national virtue” (Orwell, 1945). Anthony Burgess, the late author and social commentator, much later in the 20th century, reflecting on British hooliganism in Italy surrounding the 1990 World Cup, takes this a bit further by comparing hooligans to tribal warriors who have translated the *latent* (i.e. ritualistic) element in modern sports into *actual* warlike behaviour, seeing sports as no longer

just a diversion from war but as a direct “substitute” for it (Burgess, 1990).<sup>7</sup> And on June 8, 1996, *The Economist* featured an interesting article with the telling title “World war, national decline and the English football team”, in which reference is made to a *Daily Mail* correspondent having written about “political leaders” who on “the most recent Day of Remembrance for the war dead” had “stood head bowed before the Cenotaph [war memorial in London] at the start of a defining week for the team games by which we have come to define our pride and measure of our patriotism”.

In a similar vein, the Danish newspaper *Politiken*, on July 1, 1992, followed up on the Danish European Cup victory that year by reporting that “German soccer supporters are good losers”, and quoted a retired German professor for having sided with the Danes from the very start of the tournament, e.g. because “German Nazi opponents, who went into exile in Denmark during WW II, have told me a lot of good things about the Danes. Having now, on TV, watched this refreshing behaviour on the pitch and the subsequent celebrations among the people, I am going to get serious about visiting Denmark”.<sup>8</sup> Commenting on the same event, a psychologist, Niels Svendsen, in *Politiken*, 27 June 1992, used the Danish soccer victory to reinvent the “wild paganism” of Danishness, the alleged cleverness, belligerence, and courage of the Valhalla Vikings, features subdued for (too) long by self-effacing “Christian ideals”.

And in yet another context, *The Boston Globe*, February 7, 1994, in a front-page article dealing with the US ice hockey team destined to take part in the Winter Olympics in Lillehammer in 1994, described in detail how the players on their way to Norway had stopped over in Normandy to visit Omaha Beach where some 9000 US soldiers had lost their lives on D-Day, June 6, 1944.<sup>9</sup> Here these sportsmen, “(g)aining historical perspective”, are symbolically cast in the role of national representatives (“hockey playing sons of the USA”), like the soldiers in WW II, but, unlike what these did then, the hockey players' game is less deadly. One of the players is reported as reflecting, “(a)nd here I am, just a hockey player, playing a game for fun” (as I have argued, this

---

<sup>7</sup> An interesting German side-slant on the same happenings can be found in an article in *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 6 July 1990, headlined “Es war das reine Chaos” (it was absolute chaos). Here, in a mood of pre-Unification confidence, English hooliganism spurs the journalist to transfer national negatives usually reserved for Germans to these Brits: “der hässliche Engländer” (the ugly Englishman), and “(m)ehr als für die Deutschen gelte für sie, dass England über alles in der Welt steht” (more than for the Germans it is true to say that for them England ranks higher than anything in the world).

<sup>8</sup> Translation mine from the Danish. At this point it may be mentioned in passing that the positivity towards Denmark here ascribed to the Germans reported in the article is mirrored in the data underlying the research reported in Hedetoft, 1995, Part II (see Chapter IV in particular).

<sup>9</sup> The event framing the cinematic celebration of (American) heroism and common virtue in Stephen Spielberg's *Saving Private Ryan* (1998).

is not strictly true); another makes the comparison more overt: “(w)e’re playing hockey for fun - they were playing [!] with their lives”. Hence, “they’re the true American heroes”.

As already mentioned, this “heroism” is one of the important factors configuratively, and ubiquitously, linking the two areas of sport and war as symbols of “nation”. Sportspeople and soldiers are the practical existentialists of national identity; they *enact* nation, “play it out”, because they are construed as having internalized it wholeheartedly. The racism of nationalism--i.e. the ascription of “natural” features to people, features seemingly defining them as ethno-nationals in an organic sense (“blood”; see Hedetoft, 1995, Part I, Chapter I)--is here complemented by the presence of outward, physical stalwartness and its application in a (real or symbolic) national cause. The “theoretical” imaginings of national community acquire a practical focus--and locus. The Other, moreover, is clearly and distinctively demarcated. Nationalism becomes an *enacted sentiment*, with a mission, a space, and an intentionality of its own. Hence, this ever-present sign configuration is far from arbitrary, though the activities the signs feed on are, in their rudimentary nature and instrumentality, as far apart as can be imagined.

The linkage between sport and war would seem to place sports on the international map firmly within exclusivist, exceptionalist parameters. However, this is only true where it is “war” that predominates in this cluster, as it did for instance around the turn of the nineteenth century. In the post-war world, on the other hand, the semiotic relation of “dominant/subdominant” has tended to prioritize the political symbolics of “sport” more highly. Thus, it not only becomes the symbolic *location* of “war”, but simultaneously its *dislocation*, its potential dislodgement into the symbolism of friendliness and cooperation. What is impossible in “war”, is realized in “sport”: the merger between, on the one hand, clear demarcations, the distinction between victory and defeat, national partiality and emotionalism; and, on the other, the symbolic recognition of the Other, the enacting of hostilities which lend themselves to being interpreted as “just a game”, amenable to reconciliation and shows of friendliness and good spirits--after the game--though some games are more “friendly” than others, and quite a lot of psychological enmity is frequently whipped up in games that “really count”. The enmity can also turn inwards, however, as in the case of the Brazilian defeat to France in the final of World Cup 98, when the Brazilian media employed funereal language to describe the tragic “massacre” of the Brazilian squad at the game of national pride, one of them (*Tribuna da Imprensa*) referring to “Zagallo’s Waterloo”, and adding that the coach had “lost the decisive battle in the World Cup war” (*Yahoo News*, Sport Headlines, July 13, 1998).



Still, as a political symbolics of nations, sport is a godsend, because of its flexibility of application and official discourse and its ability to construe national emotions in a way not just applauded, but actually organized by the international community; World Championships, the Olympics, transnational sports associations, international rules and regulations etc. all help to orchestrate the area of sport as one of the most significant loci of nationalization and globalization concurrently. This flexibility is rooted in the dual nature of sports as already analyzed, an activity characterized by the universal inclinations of *homo ludens* (Huizinga, 1949) to combine physical activity and amusement, as well as being inherently competitive. Nationalism organizes (symbolically as well as institutionally) the latter in its own interest, allowing for the former to serve as the receptacle of more inter- and sometimes transnational inclinations, necessities, and discourses. Thus, national symbolics--flag-waving, the intonation of national anthems, public celebrations of victorious athletes etc.--are here legitimate (barring "hooligan" extremes), because they play themselves out, symmetrically, within (indeed, *as*) another kind of "united nations": politics in a purer, more harmless, and spatially as well as symbolically delimited incarnation. Sport is thus a decisive (f)actor both in the production and signification of nationalism, because it situates itself at the intersection of "culture" and "identity", between national and international meanings and practices.

### **Sport as a national "category of practice"**

In *Nationalism Reframed. Nationhood and the National Question in the New Europe*, Rogers Brubaker advocates that instead of reifying nation and nationness as objective and preexisting phenomena--"substantial, enduring collectivities"--, we should treat them rather as contingent "categories of practice", as cultural and political forms that are constantly being shaped and institutionalized through events, happenings, and actions based on particular readings of the world (Brubaker, 1996: 21 ff.).

Brubaker's book in no way deals with sport as a shaper of nationhood or "nationness", and yet his theoretical point is eminently suited for an understanding of the complex meanings and functions of sport in the context of nationalism--caught between the taken-for-granted banality of unflagged national identity (Billig, 1995) and the highly situational and flag-waving national meanings produced by *sports events* as a confluence of institutionalization (international organizations), existential practice (national athletes), symbolic space (the territory of sports fields: home, away or neutral) and investors of meaning (political leaders, mass media, and consumers of sports). What this implies is that sport is much more than just a framing field for the maintenance and symbolization of national identity. More importantly, it proactively constructs and instills it through an ongoing, reiterative and recurrent series of highly organized

symbolic enactments, processual events that lend themselves to discursive as well as emotional, collective as well as individual interpretations, and thus enter into a complex web of meaning-related and identity-shaping configurations--depending on interests, contexts and discourses of a political and/or cultural nature at given historical points.

Sports events, like the ones referred to in the preceding section, crystallize and engender national emotions, giving impetus to both "permanent" and "novel" perceptions of the imagined community of nationhood. Billig's powerful analysis of nationalism as a set of collective assumptions, values and reference points that are normatively but unobtrusively present and which largely determine national citizens' readings of the world, need to be complemented by the insight that "banal", commonsense nationalism as a counterpoint needs eventful orchestrations, conspicuous substances and overt framings, through which nationality can be "flagged", celebrated, confirmed and reinvented. The events of the sports domain figure prominently in this category, the more so the less flag-waving and the open rhetoric of national pride and partisanship are legitimated in and by other societal and political domains, and also the less clear-cut political and cultural boundary-markers (such as war) are useful for the protection and promotion of national sovereignty and identity.

Sport, on the other hand, is--or at least seems to be--a more innocuous socio-cultural set of practices, spatially and temporally demarcated, internationally organized and condoned (to an extent where it is almost a regime in its own right), conducted on the basis of well-defined rules (although the rules and their underlying ideals are evident as much in the violation as the observance), experientially useful for masses and elites alike, based on norms of achievement and geared towards winning. For all these (and more) reasons, it is eminently suited both to "be", to manifest and to shape interpretations of the national--normally in a paradigmatically apolitical sense (here the usefulness of sport is comparable to the national symbolics of constitutional monarchy), but far from all situations are normal, as I argued in the previous section. Furthermore, although the prevailing mode of perception is to view sport--de facto or just according to ideal values--as apolitical, international sports events are not just heavily sponsored by state coffers, but--more often than not--routinely lend themselves for use in political or politicized interpretive exercises, where interests of a political nature subject sporting events to creative reframings in the light of the condition of the "national question". France and French nationalism during and in the wake of World Cup 98 is a moot case in point.

As New York Times journalist Jere Longman correctly pointed out, France's World Cup victory and the celebrations surrounding it were "confirmation of just how completely a diffident country

had become smitten with its soccer team” (*NYT on the Web*, July 14, 1998). To begin with there was quite some “indifference in Paris” toward the whole event, even “quite some anti-soccer feeling”. By the end of the day, “France had become so consumed that the celebrations on the Champs-Élysées were being compared to the liberation of Paris during World War II” (*ibid.*). In this sense, therefore, the victory brought national self-confidence, the World Cup providing an occasion and a rallying-point for orchestrating French historical *grandeur* and *indépendance*, in other words for public manifestations of national pride. But in another sense, this particular event --fortuitously situated in immediate conjunction with the celebrations of Bastille Day--helped reframe and refocus the normative terms on which French nationalism was debated. By focussing on the the multicultural, “ethnic” diversity of the winning team, both the domestic and the international media across the board reinterpreted positive, existential Frenchness as no longer just the monocultural, white, universalistic, assimilationist identity that both republican and conservative versions had privileged for years, but now also as the locus of multiethnic cohesion and a new sense of national consensus. In a speech on July 14, President Chirac talked about a France “that wins together” and “for once has distanced itself from internal squabbles and meanness”--according to the President, the victory showed that “France had a soul, or more precisely that it was looking for a soul”, and saluted this new-found identity blueprint as “an idea that makes a country [i.e. France] proud of itself”, echoing de Gaulle’s famous reinvention of French *gloire* in terms of “a certain idea of France” (Jocelyn Noveck, Associated Press, July 14, from *Yahoo News*). The French Tricolore--“bleu-blanc-rouge”--was for a time renamed as “black-beur-blanc”, and the strength of popular enthusiasm was such that even the National Front--having initially maintained that it was “artificial to bring players in from abroad and baptize them as the French team”--found it necessary to present subsided congratulations to the team as a catalyst for France having “recovered its patriotic reflexes, its national anthem and its flag” (*Reuters Press Release*, July 13, 1998, entitled “National Front congratulates French squad--reluctantly”). At the same time, however, Jean-Marie Le Pen in an interview with *Libération*--echoing his previous pooh-pooh’ing of Nazi killings of Jews in WW II --belittled the Cup victory as a “detail in the history of the war that nations pursue on playing fields” (*ibid.*)!<sup>10</sup>

---

<sup>10</sup> As counterpoint, see Hughson, 1998, for an interesting account of an event in Australian rugby where something quite different seems to have taken place: societal multicultural ideologies--manifested in the practice of a multicultural festival in the Sydney suburb of Canterbury in June, 1997--being (according to the media) “marred” by a different practice, i.e. “ethnic” violence flaring up between supporters of Canterbury (of Lebanese origin and waving the Lebanese flag to sport their identity) and supporters of the opposing side as well as the police (for the Lebanese Australians, representing “white” Australian nationalism). The analytical gist of the author is interesting. In the face of widespread public condemnation of the incident and a consensual construction of ethnic nationalism as standing in direct contrast to multiculturalism, he argues that “the suggestion that a collective display of Lebanese nationalism within a suburban sportsground is un-Australian is as simplistic as it is ethnocentric. (...) Rugby league might not have anything to do with Lebanon but it can have much to do with being Lebanese in Australia” (1998:30).



In this context, it is less important to pursue all the ramifications of this nationalist scenario than to recognize the enormous potential which particular sports events as cultural “categories of practice” possess for resetting--perhaps temporarily only, perhaps more permanently--the terms and the agenda for debating, visualizing and cognitively or affectively imagining central issues of national identity, citizenship and belonging in specific countries. It is impossible to determine whether such reframing processes will have a lasting and deep impact, and thus will trickle down into the deeper sediments of national “banality”, to use Billig’s terminology again. But the fact that this event and the reinterpretive exercises mentioned above received not just national but global exposure and widely came to be regarded as intimately linked to the glory of the French victory, not just goes to demonstrate the social and political uses (and usefulness) of sports events--and not just to prove the independent power of them--but also provides marginalized “ethnic” groups in France with a point of historical reference that their presence and contributions deserve national recognition. In this way, events like World Cup 98 enter a field of social and political contestation, where questions of national identity are constantly being refigured, reimagined and--temporarily--resolved. Thus, categories of practice redefine the cultural, theoretical and political terms on which they themselves are enacted and understood.

#### **The sports dividend: between “real” and “ideal” wages**

One of the central uses of sport is thus the boost it provides for sentiments and identities associated with nationality. It helps maintain, shape and frame nationalism as a paradoxical composite of inward-looking and internationalized structures of national feeling and loyalty --for supporters, spectators and mass national audiences as well. In this sense the interaction of *meaning* and *use* converge around the idealism of nationality, sport and its actors providing the “food that dreams are made of” by means of their vicarious existential heroics in the national cause. Their endeavours, trials and successes (or honourable defeats) constitute the ideal wages for national citizenries identifying with the national and craving representation, prestige and victory as moral fulfilment and just reward of their national loyalty (as regards the violent manifestations of such desires for national “consolation prizes”, see the following section).

However, as the World Cup showed (and also evident in another almost simultaneously unfolding sports event on French territory--the Tour de France '98), this ideal national perspective increasingly plays itself out on an organizational and commercial backdrop, where athletes reemerge as pawns and actors in a different and more cynical kind of game dominated by another nexus: that between international capital, sport and achievement-enhancing techniques, training routines, equipment and artificial stimulants (e.g. drugs, EPO, pressurized air chambers etc.). This professionalization process recasts athletes as the earners of very real wages, subjecting the

conduct of their sport to commercialized interests and harnessing the maintenance of their bodily functions to the dictates of this relation of subordination and instrumentalization. Sport becomes sandwiched between two different categories of practice: that of nation and that of (transnational) business, and for that reason its future trajectory is embedded in the more general problematique of evolving relations between nation-states and transnational and global processes. Sport has turned into a job and a business at a level of transnational proportions that tends to threaten both its national teleology and the bodily well-being--not to mention the pleasures of gaming--of its practitioners. The latter point is obvious and applies not just to the former eastern-bloc regimes or, for that matter, present-day Chinese swimmers etc. With the exception of elite sports like golf, sports invalids (actualized or in the making) are being produced at massive rates in all sports and as an increasingly normal phenomenon rather than an exception. The science and technologies of modern medicine are being more and more tightly hijacked by the professionalization (read: the transnational commercialization) of sports and its concomitant pressures, schedules, discipline and work ethic--countered only weakly by calls for truly ethical behaviour, humane moral standards, fair play and the setting of legal limits to the limitless ambitions of the industry; calls that often amount to little more than rhetorical exercises and paying lip-service to the spouts of moral outrage that routinely follow certain conspicuous violations of the idealism associated with the conduct of sport.<sup>11</sup>

The former point invites slightly more elaboration. The commercialization of sport is a threat to its national teleology because it introduces a series of individual as well as organizational incentives and motivations into the sports domain that do not readily conform with the emotional instrumentalization of sport by the national. Professional sport necessarily tends toward getting maximum value for money out of athletes who earn large salaries. This implies tight scheduling of events, reluctance toward allowing athletes to compete (too often) for "their countries", encouraging them to think twice about representing these countries at all, and so forth. Athletes, for their part, increasingly feel squeezed between the desire to make money (often expressed as "loyalty to one's employer") and the much less lucrative task of national representation and--possibly--winning honour and glory. Furthermore, the international composition of teams (in soccer, cycling, ice hockey etc.) and the increasingly non-national ambitions of individual sportspeople (tennis, athletics, golf etc.) tend toward subordinating the teleology of nationalism

---

<sup>11</sup> For some interesting comments and analyses of these issues, see the special insert in *The Economist*, "The World of Sport", June 6, 1998; comments in a variety of international media on the Tour de France doping "scandal", July 1998 onward; and--for readers proficient in Danish--the interesting and perspicacious series of full-page articles in the Danish daily *Jyllands-Posten*, 26-31 December 1998, on money, media and identity-related issues in the world of English soccer.

in sport to that of other extraneous goals--or at least to reconfigure the sports domain as a field of contestation between two different teleologies.

The point is not that sport is no longer a question of winning at almost any cost, but that the guiding objective and the concomitant organizational principles underlying achievement in sport are different from--and sometimes in opposition to--the existential idealism of the national. The ideal wages of national pride more and more becomes relocated and redefined as a sentiment cultivated by national media, spectators and publics, whereas the athletes themselves gravitate toward the more material end of the wage continuum.

No doubt there still exists a relatively productive interchange between the two worlds of sport--particularly because large-scale international sports events such as world championships and Olympic Games themselves are heavily commercialized and serve both an important function as public relations and interest boosting events for particular sports and as showcases for sportspeople anxious to market their skills in front of large audiences and potential buyers of their services. On such occasions national telos and professional-commercial ethos enter into *mariages de convenance* which are--for a time--mutually beneficial. However, this should not make us neglect the fact that the structural tendency of the two kinds of instrumentalization of games and bodily pleasure are, *eo ipso*, non-convergent, sometimes contradictory. This is evident in the many athletes who publicly voice this conflict as one of divided loyalties, excessive pressure or opposing interests, and who consequently relinquish the honour of representing the fatherland; in scheduling conflicts such as those between the Champions League and the qualifying matches for the European Soccer Championship in the fall of 1998;<sup>12</sup> and in attempts by major European soccer clubs to create a non-national, pan-European super-league in order to maximize the synergetic financial effects of the sport/entertainment/media/business complex. But more than anywhere else it is evident in the structural properties and meaning configurations of sport in the land of modernity *per excellence*, the USA, where the nationalism/business relationship in sport therefore shapes up slightly differently from the rest of the world. A brief note on this will suffice for my purposes here.<sup>13</sup>

Some salient facts: In the USA, national sport is primarily a multi-billion business venture. In the three most important sports (baseball, basketball and football) players are paid extravagant

---

<sup>12</sup> In order to create space and public attention for the Champions League matches (by many top-notch clubs regarded as a precursor to a truly non- or transnational European league), the qualifiers--for the first time ever--were scheduled in clusters, so that national teams had to compete twice in a span of 4-5 days.

<sup>13</sup> For an almost classic analysis of some salient peculiarities of American sport, see Markovits, 1986.

salaries. Scheduling is intense--in season, it's normal for clubs to be involved in matches 3-4 times a week. Clubs, like players, are bought and sold regularly, occasionally with the consequence that their home location changes from one city to another. Players are "drafted" from college teams, which--together with subsidiary clubs owned by the greats<sup>14</sup>--provide the feeding line to the major leagues. Clubs cannot be relegated to inferior leagues on the basis of results. It all comes down to financial viability. The national leagues carry considerably more weight and attention than international contests. In fact, the three major leagues (NFL, NHL, NBA) organize their own "domestic" world championships (like the "World Series" in baseball or the "Super Bowl" in football) and players are rarely if ever involved in international matches (with the exception of the basketball "Dream Team" in recent Olympics--and even then only as a giant demonstration of American superiority and a resounding publicity stunt: victory was never seriously doubted, but rather taken for granted). Even the ice hockey world championship--which does table the USA as a contestant--is rarely interesting enough for the best players to compete in, and for this reason the States is usually represented by a team consisting mainly of college players. Add to this that the major leagues in hockey and baseball consist of teams not just from the USA, but also from Canada, and a pattern becomes apparent: here (i.e. in these particular American sports with massive appeal to the media, the public and sponsors) the meaning of business, entertainment, media-accessibility, advertizing and consumption far outweighs that of sport as a provider of national identity, national demarcation and national glory--at least in the sense this has been reflected on so far. Two caveats must be added, however.

The first is that this configuration does not entail that culture, identity, glory, heroics, role-modelling, even nationalism etc. carry no meaning in this American world of sport. The subjection of a national to a commercial teleology rather implies that such elements of the popular functions of sport are maintained *within* the national universe and are almost totally independent of international contests and comparison (instead, the US simulate international comparisons through their own domestic contests: All-Star games, American vs. National Leagues, Eastern vs. Western Conferences ...). The most successful (by result as well as earnings) athletes are heroes and role models for young and old, male and female, black and white alike, because they incorporate the American dream of making it big in sports that are seen to be exceptionally American. Identification, individually and collectively, is formed around such personalities and often connected to locality--in spite of the fact that only rarely does the home-town boy appear on the "local" team and also despite the fact that transfers and changes of players between clubs take place continuously and at soaring salary levels. Thus, American sport at this level is not only

---

<sup>14</sup> In baseball, for instance, the Eugene-based *Emeralds* (Oregon) is owned by the major-league club *The Atlanta Braves* (Georgia).



primarily geared to the worlds of capital, entertainment and mass media consumption, but also to “nationality” in a strangely self-contained and self-assured way, oblivious to the contrastive forging of collective identity in the mirror of internationalism, and true to the hegemonic, agenda-setting nature of American culture. American superiority in these sports does not have to be forged in the crucible of international contests, but is simply taken as the axiomatic point of departure for the celebration of stardom, exceptional personalities and extraordinary achievements.

The second caveat is that although this “international oblivion” (often misleadingly criticized as “parochialism”) is a predominant fact of professional, business-oriented sporting life within the most widely admired and media intensive sports in the States, it is not entirely absent on the lower rungs of the professional sports ladder. Showing the flag is pervasive and meaningful at both summer and winter Olympic Games, particularly in track-and-field, swimming and ice hockey, and since the Olympics is a money-making and PR-related mega-business enterprise in its own right, American cities are always eager to compete for the hostship of the games--and very successfully too. However, even the Olympics, as well as selected world championships and other major sporting events (e.g. the Tour de France, Whitbread Round the World Yachtsman Championship, Wimbledon or the US Open Tennis Championship etc.) in the American context acquire a tinge of situational and somewhat marginal events as compared with the continuous roadshows in basketball, baseball and American football. They are a kind of lip-service paid by the USA to the commonly recognized form that sports internationalism assumes around the world. But it is taken far less seriously in the States, and when push comes to shove and things get significant, the Americans organize events as American and on American soil: Boxing is only genuine in its American form, on American territory and involving Americans; Formula 1 may be OK, but Americans prefer Indy 500 racing; and national sports elsewhere, such as badminton and handball, are hardly known and even less played in the US. Until fairly recently, this was also true for the most popular sport in the world, i.e. soccer, and although the US has now competed twice in the World Cup and the popularity of the game is undoubtedly rising, this is a far cry from positioning soccer as a central sport in the American landscape: it is marginal and relatively uninteresting from the point of view of both people, media and business.

In the US, in other words, the national teleology of sport (in the sense in which this concept has been employed so far) is clearly subordinated to another configuration of culture, society and sport, one in which sport is primarily entertainment for the masses and a form of investment for capital holders. Identity-related questions are connected with locality and pride in the heroes of the home team, but also with nationality in the sense of the pride Americans associate with the

historic traditions of baseball and the preeminent performers of typically American sports. In this sense, the "American sports configuration" is national rather than nationalist, being relatively independent of the forms, situations and imagery that characterize sport as a shaper of national identity around the world--via direct contests with other national representatives. If--as has so often been the case in matters cultural and political--America is a mirror of (post)modernity held up to the rest of the world, showing us the avenue we are all moving down, then the recent developments outlined earlier in this section are only early indications of a much more far-reaching transformation-in-progress of the two competing--and in the USA, almost totally merged--instrumentalizations of games and pleasure: national and commercial.

### **Symbolic conflict, real hurt: The violence of symbols**

In light of the argument so far, let me revert to my original question: Is sport culture, but in the rephrased form of "what has the national instrumentalization of games-as-sport implied for the cultural dimensions of these activities". The brief reply is that the functional, symbolic, collectively organized subordination of gaming to the national telos (by means of different forms of professionalization and disciplining the body) introduces an increasingly important and increasingly evident measure of both necessity, duty and particularly violence into a socio-cultural area which--in its intrinsic meaning potential--implies the direct opposite, i.e. pleasure, freedom and self-realization. The competitive element, which naturally belongs to the domain of gaming, is transformed into a vehicle for the symbolic conflict existing between nation-states (or for the celebration of international ideals of peace and harmony). The joys of winning turn into a moral directive pointing toward honour, heroism and glory. And the cultivation of bodily potentials becomes an instrument for a higher purpose, in turn taking its toll on the body. In this sense, the world of sport is far from "harmless", as it is often imagined to be. It is rather a social domain which clearly illustrates the real impact of the symbolic orchestration of national identities, in the form of violence. The sport/war nexus is more than an analogy. Rather, the imagery of (national) warfare is superimposed on the sports domain, determining collective perception, behaviour and consequences of the role of sports in the national imaginary. This idealism in turn has very real consequences, as evident in the "trinity" of sports violence: violence to the body (subjecting the body to an ever-increasing training discipline, using any means available)--violence on the field (using dirty tricks of all kinds with a rise in sport injuries as a consequence)--violence among and between supporters (different kinds of hooliganism) or, alternatively, violence done by supporters to athletes representing the other side or sometimes even one's own (as a frustrated reaction to defeat and shame). The three forms mutually reinforce each other.

Sport, thus conceived, must be understood--somewhat paradoxically-- as a "culture of violence", where territorially embedded and symbolically demarcated identities not only invest vast amounts of socio-cultural energy, but are even encouraged to do so. The point that I mentioned earlier is important in this context: the legitimacy of sports nationalism. As history shows us, wherever nationalism is legitimate and flag-waving seen to be in a good cause, backed by state institutions as well as by the national citizenry, violence is never far behind. In this light, national sports cannot but be violent and give rise to violence, no matter how thick the coating of international friendliness may be--for what is at stake is national honour, prestige in the international community, respect and recognition. The more the sports domain must bear the (compensatory) brunt of such national aspirations (as other domains fast lose nationalist legitimacy or usefulness), the more violent it will necessarily tend to become. True, not all sports are equally violent, and not all sports are invaded by all three components of the trinity of violence to the same extent. Configurations and levels of seriousness definitely differ--between, say, boxing, tennis, rugby, soccer, golf, badminton, track-and-field etc. To some extent this depends on the innate features of the sports themselves--individual or collective, involving physical contact or not, elite or mass derived etc. But generally it is more useful to reverse the perspective: those sports that are singled out to carry the most significant national ambitions in different nation-states (or among different groups or individuals in different nation-states) also tend to carry most violence (in one or more of the three important senses) in their wake. Soccer in Britain (and most other countries), rugby in Australia, ice hockey in Finland, badminton in Indonesia, football in the USA (in the sense of "national" described above), swimming in the former GDR or in present-day China, are rather randomly picked examples.

This configuration of violence ("tribal warfare", as Anthony Burgess called it in the article previously alluded to) in national sports is exacerbated by the rival instrumentalization of sport by business interests, in two senses: first, because these imply a set of additional demands in the area of physical exertion and violence to bodily functions (including the consequences of using artificial stimulants--doping); and second, because the individual athlete's own immediate economic interests-- and not just the more vicarious interest of the national community -- are now directly linked with his or her success in the sports arena. The Tour de France '98, its revelations of the extent to which systematic doping was used in order to maximize performance, and not least the very fact that the French authorities decided no longer to treat even this national sanctity in sports as elevated above the law, is indication of the impact that business and salary interests exert. But it is also an example of the struggle being fought between business and national interests trying to operationalize sport for different extraneous ends--or in the words of the chairman of the Danish Sports Federation, Kai Holm: "There's a fight being waged between those

who have been elected to administer sport as a concept, and those who just try to capitalize on sport". He goes on to identify the link between business, TV interests and the use of drugs, and points to an American example: "...the participation of the American Dream Team in the basketball tournament of the Olympic Games. There is no form of doping control in the American basketball league. An injured player will routinely and openly be administered a cortizone injection during the match. The Dream Team is one of the initiatives that over time will be able to eliminate our fascination with the Olympics" (*Jyllands-Posten*, November 29, 1998; my translation). Consequently, this defender of the "concept of sport", i.e. its national-cultural instrumentalization, dons the cloak of fair play: "if one cannot believe in fair competition, one loses interest in sport", hence it is now time "to step forward to signal some ethical limits to developments" (*ibid.*). Apparently, these limits to the culture of violence in sport should be drawn where its declining usefulness-- represented by transnational business--for the national teleology becomes visible.

However, rather than presenting one extraneous teleology as the true "concept" of sport and the other as its quasi-barbaric--American--violation, it is more illuminating to note, first, that both are responsible for the uses and abuses of bodily pleasure in contemporary sport, and second, that the interesting difference between them on this score is that where one configuration tends to locate a massive amount of the violence perpetrated in "the crowd" (spectators, supporters, national publics)--since this is the ultimate locus of the national pride represented by athletes--, the business configuration tends toward barbarizing the athletes and the sports arenas--since it is very much the identity and interests of the sportspeople themselves that are at stake here. It is noticeable, for instance, that American sport displays a relatively low level of "hooliganism", but quite a lot of brawling and infighting among players (particularly in baseball and football). For audiences, professional, business-dominated sport tends to be seen more as a spectacle and an entertainment event than a repository of existential, permanent and organic (ethno-national) identities.

In both modes, *mutatis mutandis*, contemporary sport emerges as a culture of symbolic (leading to very real) violence: a culture of serious, stylized, even ritualized identities in conflict, consisting of different forms of instrumentalization, invested with societal uses and expectations that have little if anything to do with the activities of bodily cultivation *per se*, and a culture which therefore always contains its own potential negation as a pattern of enjoyable practice and enlightened and humanizing interaction--in the form of more or less openly contradictory or at least paradoxical forms of manifestation: money and heroics vs pleasure, achievement vs process, exogenous vs endogenous rewards, elite vs mass sport, vicarious vs personal satisfaction,



discipline vs corporeal needs, hostility vs competition, violence vs cultivating the “skills of the trade”, and so on.

As a national category of (heroic, existential) practice, this violent, opposition-riddled sport culture not just frames, shapes and flags national identities in the most legitimate, apparently harmless and popularly condoned form imaginable; but it also freezes--rather than frees--the social, playful imaginary in a contrastive, aggressive mould, embedding it into a totalizing societal teleology, while simultaneously retaining the lure of liberty, individuality and escape from social or political constraints. Sport may be “war minus the shooting”, as Orwell indicated, but to the popular masses of nation-states it nevertheless still appears--and appeals--as a myth-making and emotionally liberating social and cultural arena. The enormous fascination of sport--and its identity-forming capacity--is embedded in this dialectic between ritual violence and mythological freedom.

## REFERENCES

- Allison, Lincoln, ed., 1993. *The Changing Politics of Sport*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Billig, Michael, 1995. *Banal Nationalism*. London: Sage.
- Boston Globe, The*, October 9, 1993; February 7, 1994; April 7, 1994.
- Bourdieu, Pierre, 1993. "How Can One Be A Sports Fan?", in During, Simon, ed., *The Cultural Studies Reader*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Brubaker, Rogers, 1996. *Nationalism Reframed. Nationhood and the National Question in the New Europe*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Burgess, Anthony, 1990. "Yob'en er vor tids stammekriger", *Politiken*, June 24.
- Colley, Linda, 1992. *Britons. Forging the Nation 1707-1837*. New Haven & London: Yale University Press.
- Dunning, Eric, ed., 1971. *The Sociology of Sport. A Selection of Readings*. London: Frank Cass.
- Economist, The*, June 8, 1996; June 6, 1998.
- Gellner, Ernest, 1983. *Nations and Nationalism*. Ithaca & New York: Cornell University Press.
- Guttman, Allen, 1994. *Games and Empire. Modern Sports and Cultural Imperialism*. New York, NY: Columbia University Press.
- Hedetoft, Ulf, 1990. "War, Race, Soccer, Immigration: Observations on the systematic configuration of English and alien characteristics in Great Britain at the turn of the 19th century", in Røgilds, Flemming, ed., *Every Cloud Has A Silver Lining*. Copenhagen: Akademisk Forlag/Department of Cultural Sociology.
- Hedetoft, Ulf, 1995. *Signs of Nations. Studies in the Political Semiotics of Self and Other in Contemporary European Nationalism*. Aldershot: Dartmouth.

Hughson, John, 1998. "The 'Battle of Belmore': multiculturalism comes to the Rugby League", *Current Affairs Bulletin*, Department of Adult Education, University of Sydney, April/May, 1998.

Huizinga, Johann, 1949. *Homo Ludens. A Study of the Play-Element in Culture*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.

Jarvie, Grant, ed., 1991. *Sport, Racism and Ethnicity*. London: Falmer.

*Jyllands-Posten*, November 29 and December 26-31, 1998.

Loy, John W., Kenyon, Gerald S., and McPherson, Barry D., eds., 1981. *Sport, culture and society: a reader on the sociology of sport*. Second and revised edition. Philadelphia: Lea & Febiger.

Lüschen, Günther, 1967. "The interdependence of sport and culture", *International Review of Sport Sociology*, no. 2, pp. 127-139 (Warsaw).

MacClancy, Jeremy, ed., 1996. *Sport, Identity and Ethnicity*. Oxford: Berg.

Mandell, Richard D., 1984. *Sport. A Cultural History*. New York, NY: Columbia University Press.

Markovits, Andrei S., 1986. "The Other 'American Exceptionalism': Why Is There No Soccer In The United States", *Working Paper Series* no. 1, Center for European Studies, Harvard University.

Mangan, J.A. & Walvin, James, eds, 1987. *Manliness and Morality*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

*New York Times on the Web*, July 14, 1998.

Orwell, George, 1945. "The Sporting Spirit", in *Collected Journalism and Letters of George Orwell*, vol. IV (1945-1950). London: Penguin.

*Politiken*, June 27 and July 1, 1992.

*Reuters Press Release*, July 13, 1998.

Simonsen, Peter, 1996. *Identity & Football. Football as a Repository of Collective Identity*. Unpublished Master Thesis, Department of Languages and Intercultural Studies, Aalborg University, 1996.

*Süddeutsche Zeitung*, July 6, 1990.

Vinokur, Martin Barry, 1988. *More Than A Game. Sports and Politics*. New York, NY, Westport, CT and London: Greenwood Press.

## Discussion Papers Series

Copies of the Discussion Papers are available for DKK. 25,- each.

1. Mark Juergensmeyer  
*The Limits of Globalization in the 21st Century: Nationalism, Regionalism and Violence. 1997*
2. Ulf Hedetoft  
*The Nation State Meets the World: National Identities in the Context of Transnationality and Cultural Globalisation. 1997*
3. David Mitchell  
*New Borders for Education: Redefining the Role and Sites of Education in the Future. 1998*
4. Robert Chr. Thomsen  
*An Alternative to Canada? A Comparative Analysis of the Development of Regionalism in Scotland and the Atlantic Provinces of Canada. 1998*
5. Flemming Christiansen  
*Hakka: The Politics of Global Ethnic Identity Building. 1998*
6. Madeleine Demetriou  
*Towards Post-Nationalism? Diasporic Identities and the Political Process. 1999*
7. Peter Mandaville  
*Reimagining the Umma: Transnational Spaces and the Changing Boundaries of Muslim Political Community. 1999*
8. Wolfgang Zank  
*The Complexities of Comparative Advantages. 1999*
9. Riva Kastoryano  
*Transnational Participation and Citizenship. Immigrants in the European Union. 1999*