

Sport and violence

Here, however, we find the first ambiguity inherent in modern sport. It is indeed a codified, or euphemised, area of society in which violence is not like the violence of the ancient games, being more symbolic than real, yet it is also an area unlike any other in contemporary society, one in which people can express passion, despair, fervour, discontent and violence, and can be released from them.

But how should we define violence? Elias can describe sport as helping to channel violence because his definition of violence is limited to its physical manifestations. In this he takes the same line as Chesnais, who denies that violence can also assume moral and symbolic forms and asserts that to speak of violence in that sense is a misuse of language on the part of certain western intellectuals (Chesnais, 1981, p. 13).

To accept such a narrow definition is to overlook the extent of the violence that exists in sport in different forms, and to change how we interpret it. It also means focusing exclusively on visible – and thus “standardised” – violence. But such an approach is surely unrealistic. As Skogan (1990), Roché (1996, 2001) and Debarbieux (1996, 2002) have shown in relation to other areas where antagonisms exist, it is impossible to conceive of violence merely in its most abrupt manifestation, that of assault and battery whether deliberate or not, still less in terms of crime, premeditated or otherwise. The fact is that the most minor occurrences, the least manifestations of rudeness, can generate a spiral of violence within which people’s perceptions of violence differ – depending on whether their viewpoint is that of aggressor or victim, of the weaker or the stronger party, of an inhabitant of western Europe or someone whose country is at war, or on whether they live on a tough housing estate or in a fashionable suburb, on whether they are male or female, young or old and whether or not they have already experienced violence. So significant are these differences that perceptions of violence may reasonably be classed as objective or subjective (Wieviorka, 1999). Bodin has made the point that what we call violence, or at least what is regarded as violence in our modern western societies, would certainly not have the same significance in other places or in other eras. The perpetration and perception of violence are thus conditioned by its social, spatial and temporal context (Bodin, 2001, p. 11).

And if we accept only the limited definition, how do we classify verbal violence? How do we classify demonstrations of racism and xenophobia that stop short of racist attacks? How do we address the role of women in sport at both competitive and management levels? Or the role of people with disabilities? How do we discuss doping or the suspected links between some sports and criminal, indeed mafia, milieus? How can we interpret hooliganism if we do not attempt to understand and identify the multiple incidents of rudeness, harmless “fun” or provocation that lead up to it?

The definition proposed by Héritier would seem better suited to describing and understanding what goes on in the realm of sport, and it is that defini-

tion we have chosen to follow in exploring the relationship between sport and violence. She takes the view that the word "violence" may be applied in all sorts of contexts where situations occur that are marked by violence: not only violent acts, hatred, rage, massacre, cruelty or collective atrocities, but also the "softer" forms of violence perpetrated by economic domination, by the capital/labour relationship or the north/south divide, not to mention the "everyday" violence meted out to people in vulnerable positions such as women, children and the socially marginalised (Héritier, 1996, p. 13).

After all, it is important in describing modern sport not to overlook the essential. As it was gradually organised into an institutional system of predominantly physical competitive practices, each delimited, codified and governed by an agreed set of rules, for the declared purpose of comparing performances, exploits, achievements or physical prowess in order to designate a champion or set a record (Brohm, 1992, p. 89), sport became a "total social phenomenon" which could thus animate society and its institutions in their entirety (Mauss, 1923, p. 274). While sport certainly has a celebratory aspect and an aspect of challenge before an assembled crowd (Jeu, 1993), it also provides an occasion, medium or backdrop for many violent acts. Violence of different kinds results not only from the clashes between individual trajectories, but also from the ways in which these are used for political or economic ends. Sport needs to be seen not merely as something virtuous and praiseworthy (promoting education, health, a sense of belonging, integration and social cohesion) but rather as a more complex social reality.

Violence in sport: from rude behaviour to bloodbath

Examples of rude behaviour³ (arguing with a referee or goading opponents) occur regularly, and verbal and symbolic violence (insults directed at players or referees, or the provocation of rival fans) are commonplace. Female athletes are frequently harassed, sexually and otherwise, although such cases are often deliberately forgotten or hushed up.⁴ Exclusion in one form or another affects many sportspeople: female players who have to put up with unsuitable training or match schedules and second-rate coaching, and the women who find themselves denied posts in sports management,⁵ as well as people with disabilities, the less gifted, and even highly talented athletes if they are out of favour with the powers-that-be. It is reasonable to use the term "institutional violence" in such cases. Of course, the most familiar forms of violence are physical: athletes sustain injury in competition or through over-

3. Minor non-punishable incidents that are not in themselves reprehensible but that ultimately have the effect of harming social relations.

4. Female athletes also need a great deal of courage and patience in order to establish that they have suffered physical or psychological harm. This was evident in 1993 in a case where four members of the French Athletics Federation were charged with raping a female colleague.

5. It is instructive to look at the number of national sports federations in Europe that are headed by women or the number of women with nationwide responsibility for different sports.

training and sometimes careers are ended as a result, as in the case of gymnast Elodie Lussac, who was forced to go on competing when injured; there are cases of doping and deaths of athletes; there are violent clashes between fans; stadium stands have collapsed, killing and injuring large numbers of people; and on occasions incidents between fans have been bloodily suppressed, as in 1984 in Moscow, when 340 deaths resulted. Sport also provides an occasion for, and re-ignites, local, national and international antagonisms. There is opposition in every country between provincial regions and the capital. Sporting encounters between France and Germany are highly partisan, and the levels of ticket sales and airtime for the United States v. Iran match in the 1998 World Cup were out of all proportion to the soccer skills of the two teams involved.

All this being so, it would be hard to deny the existence of the "domestic and external political functions" underlying sporting activities (Brohm, 1992). The evidence is not hard to find. There are extremist movements that have no scruples about parading their ideologies at sports stadiums, which thus become the scene of manifestations of racism and xenophobia. Sports venues can also be turned into arenas for ethnic, cultural or religious conflict. The clashes between Croat and Serb supporters at the European Water Polo Championships in 2003 are one example. At international level, the east-west sporting rivalry of the cold war was surely war-making of another kind, or at least a means of promoting and asserting the supremacy of a political and economic system. The many boycotts of Olympic Games were indicators of these political tensions. Only in such a context can we understand the reaction of General de Gaulle, when he declared, after the debacle of the Rome Olympic Games, "Never again!" or the statement by former East German Chancellor Erich Honecker at a press conference to launch the 1984 Olympics: "Sport is not an end in itself; it is a means of achieving other ends."

Since the fall of the Berlin Wall, however, politics has taken second place to economics. Not all aspects of the commercialisation of modern sport are negative, of course. Top athletes in certain sports have been the first to reap real benefits from the change. But sport has also been affected by corruption (involving, for example, the International Olympic Committee and more recently the President of the Portuguese Professional Football League) and there have been examples of shady ties being forged with mafia-type or terrorist organisations.