

*The dynamics of modern sport: notes on achievement-striving and the social significance of sport*

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*1 Introduction*

The subject of this essay is what I take to be, worldwide, the dominant trend in modern sport, namely a trend, at all levels of participation but most conspicuously in top-level sport, towards growing competitiveness, seriousness of involvement and achievement-orientation. Expressed differently, the trend I am referring to involves the gradual but seemingly inexorable erosion of 'amateur' attitudes, values and structures, and their correlative replacement by attitudes, values and structures that are 'professional' in one sense or another of that term. Viewed from yet another angle, it is a trend in which, in countries all over the world, sport is being transformed from a marginal, lowly valued institution into one that is central and much more highly valued, an institution which, for many people, seems to have religious or quasi-religious significance in the sense that it has become one of the central, if not *the* central, sources of identification, meaning and gratification in their lives.<sup>1</sup>

Resistance to this trend has been offered on several occasions, in Britain perhaps most notably in the attempt since the end of the nineteenth century to maintain rugby union as a player-centred amateur sport based on voluntary organisation and an informal framework of 'friendly' matches, that is as a sport in which the rules are designed to secure enjoyment for players rather than spectators, organisation at the club, regional and national levels is undertaken as an unpaid avocation, and there is no structure of formal competition, of 'cups' and 'leagues'. However,

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<sup>1</sup> This essay was written in 1978, and first published in 1979 – that is, some 15 or so years before the rugby union game became openly professional in 1995. For an in-depth study of the processes that contributed to this occurrence, see Eric Dunning and Kenneth Sheard, *Barbarians, Gentlemen and Players: A Sociological Study of the Development of Rugby Football* (2nd edn, with a new afterword, London: Routledge, 2005 [1st edn, Oxford: Martin Robertson, 1979]).

the attempt to maintain such a structure has been conspicuously unsuccessful. Despite strenuous efforts by the game's ruling groups, top-level matches are now played in front of large crowds and several spectator-orientated rules have been introduced. Clubs also compete annually for the John Player Cup<sup>2</sup> and a number of local ones besides, and there is a system of 'merit tables' which are leagues in all but name. Moreover, the national controlling body, the Rugby Football Union, and many top clubs are financially dependent on revenue from match attendances and commercial sponsorship. The RFU also employs a number of permanent officials, and there have been repeated rumours of players who are paid. In short, in this as in other cases, the resistance has been overcome, a fact which suggests that the trend towards growing seriousness and competitiveness or, alternatively, towards the 'de-amateurisation' of sport, is a compelling social process.<sup>3</sup>

To say this is not to claim that resistance has died out altogether. Conflict over the issue of play-orientated, amateur versus achievement-orientated, professional forms and conceptions of sport continues in rugby and elsewhere, hence attesting to the fact that this process is not simply a thing of the past. Moreover, besides being compelling and ongoing, this process was, and is, conflictual, a fact which shows that it is an example of what Elias would call a 'blind' or 'unplanned' long-term social process.<sup>4</sup> That is, it is not the result of the intended acts of any single individual or group but, rather, the unintended outcome of the interweaving of the purposive actions of the members of several interdependent groups over several generations.

I shall now sketch in the outlines of a sociogenetic explanation of this long-term process – that is an explanation of the manner in which it was and continues to be socially or structurally generated – employing the 'figurational' method developed by Elias.<sup>5</sup> Positively, this means that I shall seek an explanation in terms of the immanent structure and dynamics of social relationships *per se*. Negatively, it means that I shall eschew three common kinds of sociological explanation:

- 1 Explanations in terms of psychological or 'action' principles that ignore the patterns of interdependence within which human beings live
- 2 Explanations in terms of ideas and beliefs that are conceptually treated as 'free-floating', that is to say in abstraction from the social settings in which ideas are always developed and expressed
- 3 Explanations in terms of abstract and impersonal social forces – for example 'economic' forces – that are reified and considered as existing independently of the interdependent human beings who generate them.

2 The John Player Cup was a knockout competition in which English rugby union clubs participated each season between 1972 and 1988; several other businesses have since taken over sponsorship of the competition, with corresponding changes of name.

3 For a full documentation and analysis of this process, see Dunning and Sheard, *Barbarians*, 2nd edn.

4 Norbert Elias, *The Civilizing Process* (rev. edn. Oxford: Blackwell, 2000 [*On the Process of Civilisation*, Collected Works, vol. 3]).

5 Norbert Elias, *What is Sociology?* (London: Hutchinson, 1978 [Collected Works, vol. 5]).

## 2 *The 'dynamics of sport groups': a brief review*

The central contention of the previous chapter is that sport groups are a type of social figurations and that their dynamics are best conceptualised as a tension-balance struck between the opposites in a whole complex of interdependent polarities. Viewed sociologically, a sport or game is a 'structure' or 'pattern' that a group of interdependent human beings form with one another. This structure, pattern or, more properly, figuration comprises: (1) the two individuals or teams who co-operate with one another in more or less friendly rivalry; (2) controlling agents such as referees and linesmen; and (3) sometimes, but not always, a greater or lesser number of spectators. However, the immediate figuration formed by those who participate directly in and are present at a game constitutes part of a wider figuration that consists, on one level, of the club organisations that pick the teams and are responsible for such matters as the provision and maintenance of playing facilities and, on another, of the legislative and administrative bodies that formulate the rules, certify and appoint the controlling officials, and organise the overall competitive framework. In its turn this figuration forms part of the wider figuration constituted by members of the society as a whole and, in its turn, too, the societal figuration exists in an international framework. In short, sports and games as social figurations are organised and controlled as well as watched and played. Moreover, they are not socially detached and free-floating, unconnected with the wider structure of social interdependencies but closely, often intricately, interwoven with the fabric of society at large and with the manner in which that fabric is woven into the structure of international interdependencies.

The concept of the dynamics of sport groups refers to games as processes, that is to the fluid, changing pattern formed, as it were 'body and soul', by the interdependent participants as a game runs its course. It is a pattern which they form with their whole selves, that is intellectually and emotionally and not just physically. The concept of a tension-balance is based on an organic analogy. Thus, just as the mobility of an animal limb depends on the contained tension between two balancing yet antagonistic muscle groups, so, Elias and I suggested, the game-process depends upon a tension between two simultaneously antagonistic and interdependent players or sets of players who keep each other in a fluctuating equilibrium. And this tension-equilibrium is best conceptualised as a balance struck between the opposites in a whole complex of interdependent polarities. Among these interdependent polarities – although this was not intended to constitute an exhaustive list – we specified the following:

- 1 The overall polarity between the two opposing teams
- 2 The polarity between attack and defence
- 3 The polarity between co-operation and tension between the two teams
- 4 The polarity between co-operation and competition within each team

- 5 The polarity between the external control of players on a variety of levels (for example by managers, captains, team-mates, referees, linesmen, spectators) and the flexible control which the individual player exercises on himself or herself
- 6 The polarity between affectionate identification with and hostile rivalry towards the opponents
- 7 The polarity between the enjoyment of aggression by the individual players and the curb imposed upon such enjoyment by the game-pattern
- 8 The polarity between elasticity and fixity of rules

It is, we hypothesised, the tension-balance between interdependent polarities such as these which determines the 'tone' of a game, that is whether it is experienced as exciting or dull, or whether it remains a 'mock-fight' or breaks out into fighting in earnest. It is also implicit in our conceptualisation that such a tension-balance is partly a consequence of the relatively autonomous dynamics of specific game-figurations, and partly a consequence of the manner in which such figurations are articulated into the wider structure of social interdependencies.

This discussion must be enough for present purposes to illustrate this conceptualisation. It remains, I think, a fruitful one, yet, in retrospect, it strikes me that it depended partly on assumptions that derive from an amateur conception of sport, from what Elias would regard as a specific 'heteronomous evaluation'.<sup>6</sup> These assumptions, whilst not leading us astray, did, I think, limit our vision and prevent us from developing the analysis further in at least one important respect. In order to show how this was so, it is necessary first to recall our objects in writing on the dynamics of sport groups. In writing such an essay, we were not hoping to contribute simply to the sociology of sport but wanted, rather, to suggest to sociologists more generally that sport groups can serve as a means of illustrating the dangers, firstly of treating conflict and consensus as crudely dichotomous opposites, and secondly of committing the teleological fallacy in conceptualising group dynamics – of attributing 'purposes' to reified social constructs. It was in the context of a discussion of these issues that our dependency on amateur values became arguably apparent. Thus, in a passage where we contrasted sport groups with industrial, administrative and other associations concerned with what are generally regarded as the 'serious' sides of life, we wrote that the 'purpose' of sport groups, 'if they have a purpose, is to give people pleasure'<sup>7</sup> and we went on to mention, as other goals or purposes of the people involved in sport-groups, striving for rewards of a financial or status kind, and providing excitement for spectators.

6 That is to say, from an evaluation that reflected the interests and values of specific groups in the wider society, and that was not worked out autonomously by us specifically for purposes of sociological analysis. See Norbert Elias, *Involvement and Detachment* (Dublin: UCD Press, 2007 [Collected Works, vol. 8]), chapter 1.

7 See p. 201 above.

But we did not discuss the fact that these purposes involve different forms of valency, that is of bonding, or, more simply, of relationships, between the immediate play-group and others. Thus, enjoyment-seeking is, on balance, self-directed or egocentric, whilst reward-striving and providing excitement for spectators are, on balance and in different senses, other-directed. This suggests three things: (1) that these purposes emerge as the principal goal of sport within different patterns of interdependence; (2) that they can, under specific circumstances, be incompatible with one another, and hence, the source of strain and conflict; and (3) that the list of interdependent polarities involved in the dynamics of sport groups can be extended by at least the following two, namely: (a) the polarity between the interests of players and the interests of spectators; (b) the polarity between 'seriousness' and 'play'.

These two polarities are closely interrelated. They are also crucial in the sense that they have ramifying effects on the other interdependent polarities involved in the dynamics of a game. Thus, if players participate seriously in a game, the tension-level will be raised and, beyond a certain point, the incidence of hostile rivalry both within and between teams is likely to be increased; that is the game is likely to be transformed from a mock-fight in the direction of a 'real' one and players are liable to transgress the rules, to commit acts of 'foul' play. Or, to the degree that spectators become seriously identified with the teams they support, they are less liable to contemplate defeat with equanimity and may act in ways that are intended to affect the outcome of the contest. Again, once a certain point is reached, they may even invade the pitch in an attempt to suspend the contest altogether.

### 3 *Some theories of modern sport: a brief critique*

The polarity between the interests of players and spectators, and that between 'seriousness' and 'play', have already formed the subjects of theory-building exercises in the sociology of sport, most notably, from a historical-philosophical standpoint by Johan Huizinga; from a symbolic interactionist perspective by Gregory P. Stone; and from a Marxist standpoint by Bero Rigauer. In his own way, each of these authors argues that the balance between these polarities has been upset in modern sport, and a critical review of what they wrote will provide a basis for demonstrating the superiority of Elias's figurational approach as a means for obtaining a more 'object-adequate' or more 'reality-congruent' analysis of what constitutes a central trend in modern sport – that is, an analysis that accounts for and explains this trend without ideological embroidering or distortion.

Huizinga's central contention is that, prior to the nineteenth century, Western societies maintained a balance between the polarities of seriousness and play.<sup>8</sup> However, with industrialisation, the growth of science and the emergence of

<sup>8</sup> J. Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1949).

egalitarian social movements, he argues that seriousness began to gain the ascendancy. At first glance, the fact that the nineteenth century witnessed the large-scale growth of sports would seem to contradict his thesis but Huizinga contends that it tends to confirm it since, in modern sports as he puts it, 'the old play factor has undergone almost complete atrophy'. As part of the decline of the play-element in modern civilisation generally, sports have experienced what he calls a 'fatal shift towards overseriousness'. The distinction between amateurs and professionals is, he contends, the clearest indication of this trend. That is because professionals lack 'spontaneity and carelessness' and no longer truly play whilst, at the same time, their performance is superior, leading amateurs to feel inferior and engage in imitative action. Between them, according to Huizinga, these two groups

push sport further and further away from the play-sphere proper until it becomes a thing *sui generis*, neither play nor earnest. In modern social life sport occupies a place alongside and apart from the cultural process . . . [it] has become profane, 'unholy' in every way and has no organic connection with the structure of society, least of all when prescribed by the government . . . However important it may be for the players or spectators, it remains sterile.<sup>9</sup>

But apart from descriptively relating it to a general trend and pointing to what he regarded as the destructive effects of the interaction between amateurs and professionals, Huizinga failed to address himself to the dynamics, the socio-genesis of the presumed trend towards 'sterility', 'overseriousness' and 'profaneness' in modern sport. This issue is tackled more satisfactorily by Stone, who modifies Huizinga's arguments, suggesting that modern sports are subject to a twofold dynamic that results, partly from the manner in which they are caught up in the 'contests, tensions, ambivalences and anomalies' of the wider society, and partly because of certain features inherent in their structure. Only the latter aspect of his analysis need concern us here.

'All sport', Stone contends, 'is affected by the antinomial principles of play and display' – it is orientated towards producing satisfaction either for players or spectators.<sup>10</sup> But 'display' for spectators is '*dis*-play', according to Stone, destructive of the play-character of sport. Whenever large numbers of spectators attend a sports event, it is transformed into a spectacle, played for the spectators and not the direct participants. The interests of the former take precedence over the interests of the latter. Enjoyment from playing becomes subordinate to the production of crowd-pleasing moves. The sport begins to lose its uncertainty, spontaneity and character of playful innovation, becoming a type of ritual, predictable, even pre-determined in its outcome.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. 223.

<sup>10</sup> G. P. Stone, 'American sports: play and dis-play', in Eric Dunning (ed.), *The Sociology of Sport: A Selection of Readings* (London: Frank Cass, 1971), pp. 47–65.

Rigauer's argument depends heavily on Marxist assumptions about the exploitative character of work in capitalist societies, a category that he extends to societies such as the Soviet Union presumably because he believes them to be 'state-capitalist' or 'state-socialist' in character and not essentially different from capitalist societies of a 'purer' type.<sup>11</sup> Modern sport, he argues, is a 'bourgeois' product, a type of recreation initially pursued by members of the ruling class for their own enjoyment. For them, it functioned as a counter to work but, with increasing industrialisation and the spread of sport down the social hierarchy, it has come to take on characteristics which resemble those of work. Thus, like forms of work in industrial societies, Rigauer maintains, sport is coming to be characterised by achievement-striving. This is seen in the striving to break records, in the hours of gruelling training that are employed towards that end, and in the application of scientific methods to the goal of improving performance. Moreover, training techniques such as 'interval' and 'circuit' training replicate the 'alienating' and 'dehumanising' character of assembly-line production. Even in the 'individual' sports, the role of sportsperson is being reduced to one in a whole constellation of trainers, coaches, managers and doctors, a tendency which is doubly apparent in the team sports where the modern sportsperson is compelled to fit into a fixed division of labour and comply with the demands of a prescribed tactical plan. He or she plays little part him or herself in working out this plan.

Their scope for the exercise of initiative is correspondingly reduced. That is even truer of the administration of sports for, increasingly, it is full-time officials and not the direct participants themselves who decide matters of policy. The result, says Rigauer, is a steady constriction of the scope for private decision making and dominance over the majority by a bureaucratic elite.

It follows from this diagnosis that sport must increasingly be unable to function as a means of providing relief from the strains of work. It has become, Rigauer contends, demanding, achievement-orientated and alienating. The belief that it functions as a counter to work survives but it is a 'masking ideology' that hides from the participants its 'real' function, namely that of reinforcing in the leisure-sphere an ethic of hard work, achievement and group loyalty which is necessary for the operation of an advanced industrial society. In this way, according to Rigauer, sport helps to maintain the status quo and to bolster the dominance of the ruling class.

These three diagnoses – that sport is growing more 'serious'; that 'display' is coming to predominate over and destroy 'play'; and that sport is becoming indistinguishable from work – seem, at first glance, apposite as descriptions of a central

11 B. Rigauer, *Sport and Work* [1969] (New York: Columbia University Press, 1981). The theories being criticised here were all written and developed during the Cold War era and before the collapse of the Soviet Union. The essay was also written before the flowering of the sociology of sport in the 1970s and 1980s as represented in the work of scholars such as Rick Gruneau, Allen Guttmann, John Loy, the late Alan Ingham, Jennifer Hargreaves and John Hargreaves. I have endeavoured to tackle the work of such scholars in my book *Sport Matters* (London: Routledge, 1999).

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trend in modern sport. However, elements of value-bias enter each of these analyses, casting doubts on their adequacy. It is, for example, difficult to believe that sports could have managed to sustain their popularity – indeed, to increase it as, in fact, they have done in countries all over the world – if the play-factor in them had atrophied to the extent that Huizinga asserts; or if, as Rigauer contends, they had become as alienating and repressive as work; or again if, as Stone would have it, the balance between play and display had been so seriously upset. It is possible, of course, that forms of compulsion and/or of rewards other than direct personal enjoyment may have played a part in their spread, hence offsetting to some extent the deleterious effects of growing seriousness of involvement. I shall argue that such balancing counter-trends have, in fact, occurred, but Huizinga, Rigauer and Stone pay no attention to such a possibility.

Huizinga, moreover, is a romantic who yearns for an 'organic' society. This is implicit in his argument that the 'democratisation' of sports is the main reason for their 'decay'. He implies that creativity and high moral standards are restricted to elites. His critique of modern sports strikes home, especially in his contention that a 'shift towards overseriousness' has occurred, even if he exaggerates it. Yet apart from relating it to what he regards as a general cultural trend, he makes no attempt to analyse the sociogenesis of this putative transformation of sport, to relate it firmly to its social structural sources.

Similar considerations apply to Rigauer's critique. He makes no attempt to analyse empirically the manner in which the alleged structural correspondence between sport and work has been brought about. Nor does he distinguish between forms of work, forms of sport and different countries in this respect, or make any attempt to determine whether different groups are proponents, on the one hand, of achievement-orientated values or, on the other, of values which stress the pleasure-giving, leisure character of sport. Nor does he attempt to document empirically the changes which, he maintains, have occurred over time in the balance between these values. Instead, he simply paints a blanket picture which asserts that all sports in all industrial countries have developed work-like characteristics and hence serve ruling interests to the same extent.

Although, like Huizinga, he lays stress on the deleterious effects of the democratisation of sports, Stone's analysis is sociologically more satisfactory. Yet there is reason to believe that his analysis of the balance between 'play' and 'display' may not reach to the heart of the matter. Viewed figuratively, this balance is not simply a question of the presence or absence of spectators or, where the latter are present, of the interaction between them and the players, but, more crucially, of the *patterns of interdependence* among the participating groups. Thus, the presence of spectators at a sports event may *induce* players to engage in display but it cannot *constrain* them to do so. The play-element in a sport is more likely to be seriously threatened when players become *dependent* on spectators – or on external agencies such as commercial interest groups and the state – for financial and other rewards. Under such conditions, whether the sport is openly professional or nominally



amateur, the pressures to allow the interests of spectators to assume an important role, for the 'game' to become a 'spectacle', are likely to be compelling.

In fact, in examining the development of modern sport, none of the three – Huizinga, Rigauer or Stone – has dealt satisfactorily with the dynamics of that process. Their theses are, in a sense, curiously impersonal. Each of them postulates a trend connected with industrialisation, but they pay little or no attention to clashes of group interest and ideology. It almost appears in their analyses – this is especially true of Huizinga and Rigauer – as if the old values and forms of sport were fading away without conflict. That such a conceptualisation is oversimplified, whatever its merits as a first approximation to a sociological theory of the dominant trend in modern sport, will, I hope, emerge from a figurational study of this trend.

In what follows, I want to suggest that the growing seriousness of modern sport can be in large part attributed to three interrelated processes, namely, state-formation, functional democratisation<sup>12</sup> and the spread of sport through the widening network of international interdependencies. The first two are, of course, the deep-structural processes, both interwoven with the lengthening of chains of interdependence, by means of which Elias principally explains the sociogenesis of the Western civilising process.

This suggests that there may be a connection between the civilising of the West and the trend towards growing seriousness of involvement in sport; for example the latter may consist partly in the fact that, by virtue of his or her socialisation into the more restraining standards of the more complex and constraining modern system of social interdependencies, the more restrained and more 'civilised' modern individual is less able to participate spontaneously and uninhibitedly in sport than his or her less civilised and more emotionally unrestrained forebears who lived in a less complex and less constraining system of social interdependencies.<sup>13</sup> It seems plausible to maintain that this is so. Yet it remains necessary to spell out precisely what the connections were between, on the one hand, the growing seriousness of sports participation and, on the other, state formation, functional democratisation and the civilising process. It also remains to show how this trend was connected with the international spread of sport, and how reference to these deep-structural processes can provide a more satisfactory account of it than was achieved by Huizinga, Rigauer and Stone.<sup>14</sup>

12 The term 'functional democratisation' was, in fact, coined later by Elias to represent more adequately what he had earlier referred to as 'growing structural pressure from below' and the relatively more equal power ratios within longer chains of interdependence.

13 A majority of these forebears were, of course, subjected far more to the pressures of economic deprivation than is the case with the members of First World societies today.

14 State formation, functional democratisation and the civilising process can, I think, also explain this trend more satisfactorily than the hypothesis that a Weberian might develop in this connection, for example that there may be a *Wahlverwandschaft* or 'elective affinity' between ascetic Protestantism and serious, achievement-orientated forms of sports participation in much the same way that such a relationship was held by Weber to have existed between ascetic Protestantism and the 'spirit of capitalism'. Such an hypothesis is a priori plausible but runs into difficulties such as

#### 4 *A figurational analysis of the trend towards growing seriousness in sport*

I shall first discuss the amateur ethos and attempt to explain sociogenetically both it and its dissolution, that is the trend towards growing seriousness in sport. I shall then, briefly and in general terms, discuss sport in pre-industrial Britain in order to show why, in such a social figuration, it was possible for groups at all levels of the social hierarchy to have what were, on balance, 'self-directed' or 'egocentric' forms of sports participation, that is why it was possible for them to participate in sport for fun. Next, I shall attempt to show why, with the emergence of urban-industrial nation states, more 'other-directed' sport-forms connected more with achievement-orientation, identity-striving and the struggle for pecuniary rewards came to develop. Finally, I shall discuss what I take to be the growing social significance of sport and the part played by its spread internationally in this overall social process.

The amateur ethos is the dominant sports ideology in modern Britain and, it seems to me, of ruling groups in sport across the world, for example of the International Olympic Committee and its various national affiliates.<sup>15</sup> The central component of this ethos is the ideal of playing sports 'for fun'. Other aspects, such as the stress on 'fair play', voluntary adherence to rules and non-pecuniary involvement, are essentially subordinate, designed to facilitate the achievement of that end – to make sporting contests 'play-fights' in which pleasurable excitement can be generated. The earliest example I have found of the explicit use of this ethos to criticise the trend towards growing seriousness in sport appears in a book by Trollope, published in 1868. He wrote:

[Sports] are being made too much of, and men who follow them have allowed themselves to be taught that ordinary success in them is not worth having . . . All this comes from excess of enthusiasm on the matter; – from a desire to follow too well a pursuit which, to be pleasurable, should be a pleasure and not a business . . . [This] is the rock against which our sports may possibly be made shipwreck. Should it ever become unreasonable in its expenditure, arrogant in its demands, immoral and selfish in its tendencies, or, worse of all, unclean and dishonest in its

that posed by the fact that, in England at least, the ascetic Protestants tried to ban sports and pastimes altogether. In any case, Elias's hypothesis is more inclusive and could, potentially at any rate, account sociogenetically for the Protestant ethic. Moreover, with its dissolution and transcendence, firstly, of the dichotomy between 'the material' and 'the ideal', and secondly of that between 'causes' and 'effects' – with its stress on nexuses or constellations of interacting causes and effects, or, more properly, with its concern with the specifically *social*, that is relational dynamics of social figurations, Elias's approach does not lead to the insuperable methodological difficulties that Weber's entails.

<sup>15</sup> While this was still largely true in the 1970s and 1980s, it is no longer the case in the early years of the twenty-first century.

traffic, there will arise against it a public opinion against which it will be unable to hold its own.<sup>16</sup>

It is, of course, likely that earlier examples could be found, but this mobilisation of amateur values, with their stress on pleasure as the essential ingredient of sport, came at an early stage in the development of the modern forms of sport, above all at a time when professional sport as we know it today hardly existed. It was then possible for some men to earn a precarious living as prizefighters, jockeys and cricketers, but the fact that they were only a handful suggests that Trollope's critique was directed mainly at a trend towards growing seriousness within *amateur* sport. And it is possible that one of his principal targets was what historians have called the 'public school games cult',<sup>17</sup> a movement in the public schools that involved five main components:

- 1 A tendency to appoint and promote staff according to sporting rather than academic criteria
- 2 The selection of prefects, that is the leading boys in a school, principally on the basis of ability at sport
- 3 The elevation of sport to a prominent and, in some cases, pre-eminent position in the curriculum
- 4 The educational rationalisation of sport, especially team-games, as an instrument of 'character-training'
- 5 Participation by members of staff in the organisation and playing of their pupils' games

It is probable that such a movement could have arisen only in elite schools, the majority of whose pupils were not dependent on an academic education for their future careers. But that is less relevant for present purposes than the fact that the public school games cult shows clearly that the trend towards growing seriousness in sport in Britain was, in its earliest stages, a phenomenon connected with amateur and not professional sport and that it did not derive its initial momentum from the conflict between amateurs and professionals adduced by Huizinga. In fact, I should like to hypothesise that the amateur ethos was articulated as an ideology in opposition to the trend towards growing seriousness and that it received its most explicit and detailed formulation when, as part of that trend, the modern forms of professional sport began to emerge.

In Britain prior to the 1880s, the amateur ethos existed in a relatively inchoate form. That is, it was an amorphous, loosely articulated set of values regarding the

<sup>16</sup> A. Trollope (ed.), *British Sports and Pastimes* (London: Virtue, 1868), pp. 6-7.

<sup>17</sup> See M. Marples, *A History of Football* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1954).

functions of sport and the standards believed necessary for their realisation. However, with the threat posed by the incipient professionalisation of new sports such as soccer and rugby, a process that began in the North and Midlands and drew low-status, regionally based, middle- and working-class groups as organisers, players and spectators into the ambit of sports that had hitherto been the exclusive preserve of the 'public school elite',<sup>18</sup> the national ruling class, the amateur ethos began to crystallise as an elaborate and articulate ideology. That is, it was a collective representation developed by the members of one collectivity in opposition to the members of another which they perceived as a threat both to their organisational and playing pre-eminence and to the forms of sport as they wished to see it played. In short, I am suggesting that, even though the public school elite tended to couch their pronouncements in sport-specific terms, claiming to be solely interested in preserving what they regarded as the essential, 'fun-orientated' character of sport, class and regional hostility and resentment over the loss of their erstwhile dominance played an important part in their articulation of the amateur ethos as an explicit ideology. However, if I am right, the social situation in which they found themselves was increasingly uncondusive to the full-scale, unbridled realisation of self-directed, pleasure-orientated forms of sport and that, in articulating and mobilising the amateur ethos in response to the growing threat from below, they were trying to maintain forms of sports participation which they regarded as their right as members of a ruling class and which had, in fact, been possible for ruling and even subordinate groups in the pre-industrial era but which were increasingly impossible for them.

Support for this view comes from the fact that many of the 'abuses' that the public school elite claimed to detect in professional sport were at least equally evident in the games cult in the schools they had attended. Further support – although there were symptomatic exceptions such as the Corinthians soccer team<sup>19</sup> – comes from the fact that, in an increasing number of sports, the public school elite withdrew into their own exclusive circles, revealing by their fear of being beaten by professionals that they played in order to obtain the kudos of being recognised as successful sportsmen as much as they did for fun. Of course, this separatist trend was probably, in part, occasioned by the fact that contests between professional and

<sup>18</sup> I have called the late nineteenth-century British ruling class the 'public school elite' in order to signify the role of the public schools in unifying its established, landed and ascendant, bourgeois sections.

<sup>19</sup> The Corinthians were an amateur team, formed towards the end of the nineteenth century and recruited from the public schools and the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge, who were able for a while to hold their own in competition with the professionals. They were a 'symptomatic exception' to the general trend towards exclusiveness on the part of the public school elite in the sense that they were deliberately formed to combat the growing success of professional teams and to celebrate and sustain the cherished amateur ideal. However, in adopting a non-local, non-institutionally specific pattern of recruitment, they incorporated one of the 'abuses' that were held – by the proponents of the amateur ideal – to be destroyed by professionalism. That is, just like the professional teams which were recruited on a national basis, the Corinthians moved away from a pattern of sports representation in which locally and institutionally specific teams, recruited from 'communities' of various kinds, were held to be an essential characteristic of 'true' sport.

amateur teams would frequently have been unbalanced and lacking in tone, owing to the skill discrepancy that usually exists between full-time players who are following their occupation and part-time players who are merely participating in a leisure activity. But that this is not the whole story is suggested by the fact that a further separatist trend by members of the public school elite occurred within the ranks of *amateur* sport. That is, they were unwilling to submit themselves regularly to the possibility of defeat at the hands of working-class amateur teams and, by hiving off into their own exclusive circles, they showed not only class prejudice, but that they took part in sport seriously and in order to win – the success goal had come to take precedence in their hierarchy of sporting values over the goal of participating primarily for fun. Further support for such a view comes from a figurational analysis of sport in eighteenth-century Britain.

The overall social figuration of Britain in the eighteenth century, indeed, the overall pattern of social interdependencies in pre-industrial Britain generally, was one in which there was relatively little structural pressure on groups, whether high or low in the status order, towards success-striving and achievement-orientation, that is towards 'other-directed' forms of participation, in the sporting or in other fields. The relatively low degree of state-centralisation and national unification, for example, meant that 'folk games', the games of the ordinary people, were played in regional isolation, competition traditionally occurring between contiguous villages and towns or between the sections of towns. But there was no national competitive framework. The aristocracy and gentry formed a partial exception in this regard. They were, and perceived themselves as, national classes and did compete nationally among themselves. As a result, a certain degree of other-directed competitive pressure in sporting activities was generated within their ranks. But they were subject, in a general and sporting sense, to effective pressure neither from above nor from below. The level of state formation at that stage in the development of British society was relatively low and, in a very real sense, the aristocracy and gentry 'were the state' – that is, able effectively to use the state apparatus in their own interests. They had established the precedence of parliament over the monarchy and ruled over a society in which the balance of power between classes involved gross inequalities. As a result, there was no effective challenge to their position as the dominant class. The secure character of their dominance was conducive to a high degree of status security on their part and this meant, in turn, that individual aristocrats and gentlemen were, as a rule, in no way seriously threatened by contact with social subordinates. Whatever the context, they knew who was master and so did everybody else – the gross power imbalance between classes led to patterns of deference from subordinates.

Such status-security was extended to the leisure-sphere, including sport. The aristocracy and gentry took part in folk games both in an organisational and playing capacity, and used their patronage to develop forms of professional cricket, prize fighting and horseracing. The type of sports career that grew up under such conditions was based on unequivocal subordination of the professional to his

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patron and total dependency as far as life-chances were concerned of the former on the latter. No threat was posed by professionalism of that type to the interests and values of the ruling class. Professional sport was neither morally nor socially suspect and there was no need to fight against or hide the fact that pecuniary advantage could be obtained from games, whether as an occupational wage or from gambling on the outcome of contests. Above all, whether playing among themselves or with their hirelings, the aristocracy and gentry could participate in sport for fun; that is, their social situation – the power and relative autonomy they enjoyed – meant that they could develop self-directed or egocentric forms of sports participation and that, although they were not constrained to develop the amateur ethos as an explicit ideology, they came close to being amateurs in the 'ideal typical' sense of that term.

If this diagnosis is correct, it follows that the overall social figuration of pre-industrial Britain and, I think one can safely say, of other pre-industrial societies, too, was not conducive to the generation of intense competitive pressure in sporting relations, whether within or between ruling and subordinate groups. It also follows that the sociogenesis of the pressure towards other-directed, achievement-orientated forms of sports-participation has to be sought in the social figuration brought into being in conjunction with industrialisation. What were the connections between these two social processes? – that is, between industrialisation and the long-term trend towards increasing seriousness of involvement and achievement-striving in sport. Briefly, and in anticipation of the analysis that follows, it can be said that the key to this relationship lies in the process that Elias called 'functional democratisation' – in the equalising change in the balance of power within and between groups that occurs contingently upon the interrelated processes of state formation and the lengthening of interdependency chains. But first it is necessary to contrast Elias's approach to the division of labour with that of Durkheim.

### 5 *Industrialisation and the development of achievement-orientated forms of sport*

According to Durkheim, the structure of industrial societies is characterised by high 'material' and high 'moral' or 'dynamic' density – that is, by a highly concentrated population and a high rate of social interaction between individuals and groups.<sup>20</sup> He believed that the competitive pressures generated in such a society would be reduced and perhaps eliminated by the division of labour. The division of labour, he suggested, would have that effect in two main ways: by creating 'bonds of interdependence' and by siphoning competitively generated tensions into specialised occupational spheres. However, his analysis contains a fundamental flaw that derives from his failure to recognise that functional interdependence or division of

20 Émile Durkheim, *The Division of Labour in Society* [1893] (New York: Free Press, 1964).

labour does not lead necessarily to harmonious and co-operative integration but is conducive, even in its 'normal' forms, to conflict and antagonism. In short, his concept of the society based on 'organic solidarity' is Utopian. A more realistic concept of interdependence is that proposed by Elias.

According to Elias, the long-term social transformation usually referred to by terms denoting specific aspects such as 'industrialisation', 'economic growth', the 'demographic transition', 'urbanisation' and 'political modernisation', is in fact a long-term transformation of the total social structure.<sup>21</sup> And, he contends, one of the sociologically most significant aspects of this total social transformation consists in the emergence of longer and more differentiated chains of interdependence. That is, it involves the emergence of greater functional specialisation and the integration of functionally differentiated groups into wider networks. Moreover, concomitantly with this, there occurs, according to Elias, a change in the direction of decreasing power-differentials within and among groups, more specifically, a change in the balance of power between rulers and ruled, the social classes, men and women, the generations, parents and children. Such a process occurs mainly because the performers of specialised roles are dependent on others and can, therefore, exert reciprocal control. The power-chances of specialised groups are further enhanced if they manage to organise, since they are then able to disrupt the wider system of interdependencies by collective action. It is in ways such as these, according to Elias, that increasing division of labour and the emergence of longer chains of interdependence lead to greater reciprocal dependency, and, hence, to patterns of 'multipolar control' within and among groups – that is, to an overall social figuration in which specific individuals and groups are subject to increasingly effective pressure from others. Such pressure is effective because of the reciprocal dependencies involved.

The relevance of this deceptively simple theory for the present analysis is manifold. Inherent in the modern structure of social interdependencies is the demand for inter-regional and representative sport. No such demand arose in pre-industrial societies because the lack of effective national unification and undeveloped means of transport and communication meant that there were no common rules and no means by which sportspersons from different areas could be brought regularly together. At the same time, the 'localism' inherent in such societies meant that play-groups perceived as potential rivals only groups with which they were contiguous in a geographical sense. However, modern industrial societies are different on all these counts. They are relatively unified nationally, have superior means of transport and communication, sports with common rules, and a degree of 'cosmopolitanism' which means that local groups perceive as potential rivals, and are anxious to compare themselves with, others which are not geographically adjacent. Hence, such societies are characterised by high rates of inter-area sporting interaction, a process that leads to stratification internally in specific

21 Elias, *What is Sociology?* pp. 63–4.

sports – to a hierarchical grading of sportsmen, sportswomen and sports teams with those that represent the largest units usually standing at the top.<sup>22</sup>

In its turn, this means that the reciprocal pressures and controls that operate in urban-industrial societies generally are replicated in the sphere of sport. As a result, top-level sportsmen and women cannot be totally independent and play for fun but are forced to be other-directed and serious in their sports participation. That is, they are unable to play just for themselves but constrained to represent wider social units such as cities, counties and countries. As such, they are provided with material and/or prestige rewards and facilities and time for training. In return, they are expected to produce a 'sports-performance' – that is, the sort of satisfactions which the controllers and 'consumers' of the sport demand, namely the spectacle of an exciting contest that people are willing to pay to watch or the validation through victory of the 'image' and 'reputation' of the social unit with which the controllers and/or consumers identify. The sheer numbers of people involved and the local, regional, national and international competitive framework of modern sport work in the same direction. They mean that high and sustained achievement-motivation, long-term planning, strict self-control and renunciation of immediate gratification – in other words constant practice and training – are necessary in order to get to, and stay at, the top. They also necessitate a degree of bureaucratic control and hence lead to the subordination of sportspersons in yet another respect.

In each of these ways, the social figuration – the pattern of inter-group dependencies characteristic of an urban-industrial nation state – generates constraints which militate against the practical realisation of the amateur ethos with its stress on enjoyment as the central aim of sport. Or more properly, it generates constraints which militate against the realisation of immediate, short-term enjoyment, against each sporting contest as an end in itself, and leads to its replacement, both for players and spectators, by longer-term goals such as victory in a league or cup, by satisfactions more centrally concerned with identity and prestige. Moreover, such constraints are not confined to top-level sport but reverberate down to the lowest levels of sporting achievement. That is partly because top-level sportsmen and women form a media-promoted reference group who set standards that others try to follow. It is also partly a consequence of the pressures generated by competition for the material and prestige rewards which can be obtained by getting to the top. However, it is by no means only due to pressures that are generated solely within sport but also, and perhaps more centrally, a consequence of the deep-rooted and pervasive anxieties and insecurities arising more generally in a society characterised by multipolar pressures and controls, and in which props of identity and status connected with traditional forms of class, authority, sex and age relations have all been eroded by functional democratisation – that is, by the equalising process which, according to Elias, is inherent in the division of labour.

<sup>22</sup> There are occasional exceptions such as the Greenbay Packers American football team in the 1960s.



## 6 *Suggestions regarding the growing social significance of sport*

So far, I have provided the outlines of a figurational explanation of the trend towards increasingly serious involvement in sport. The related development in the course of which its social significance has grown remains to be discussed. This is a complex issue and can only be touched on briefly in the present context. Apart from the changing balance, ideological as well as factual, between work and leisure, a process which has increased the social significance of leisure activities generally, a constellation of at least three interrelated aspects of the emergent modern social figuration can be singled out as having contributed to the growing social significance of sport:

- 1 That sport has developed as one of the principal media for the generation of pleasurable excitement
- 2 That sport has come to function as one of the principal media of collective identification
- 3 That sport has come to form a key source of meaning in the lives of many people

Elias and I have suggested elsewhere that sport is a mimetic leisure activity in which pleasurable excitement can be generated and that, in this respect, it performs a deroutinising function.<sup>23</sup> There is, however, no society without controls and routines or, as Elias has put it, no 'zero-point' of civilisation. In that sense, the need for deroutinisation is probably socially universal. But urban-industrial societies are highly routinised and civilised, characterised by multipolar pressures and controls. Accordingly, their members are constrained continuously to exercise a high degree of emotional restraint in their ordinary, everyday lives, with the consequence that the need for deroutinising leisure activities such as sports in such societies is particularly intense. However, this deroutinising process, this socially permitted arousal of emotion in public, is itself subject to civilising controls. That is, sport is a social enclave, both for players and spectators, where pleasurable excitement can be generated in a form that is socially limited and controlled.

Nevertheless, the excitement generated can be intense, especially at top-level sports events which attract large crowds and, *pace* Huizinga who argued that sport has become 'profane', it is probably this that forms the experiential basis for the widespread perception of sport as a 'sacred' phenomenon. Durkheim argued that the collective excitement or 'effervescence' generated in the religious ceremonies of the Australian aborigines formed the principal experiential source of their idea of a 'sacred' realm,<sup>24</sup> and it seems not unreasonable to suppose that the generation

<sup>23</sup> See chapter 2.

<sup>24</sup> Émile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* [1912] (London: Allen & Unwin, 1976).

of 'collective effervescence' in sports events lies at the root of the fact that it is common, at least in Britain, to refer to football and cricket pitches, especially those used for representative matches, as the 'sacred' or 'hallowed' turf. Indeed, it would probably not be going too far to suggest that, at least for some groups in present-day society, sport has become a quasi-religious activity and that, viewed from a societal perspective, it has come to some extent to fill the gap in social life left by the decline of religion. An extreme but none the less indicative example of this quasi-religious character of modern sport is provided by the fact that it has apparently become a tradition in Liverpool for deceased supporters of Liverpool FC to have their ashes strewn on the Anfield pitch; they seem to wish to remain identified even after death with the 'shrine' or 'temple' at which they 'worshipped' during life. But even short of this extreme, it is clear that playing and/or watching one sport or another has come to form one of the principal media of collective identification in modern societies and one of the principal sources of meaning in life for many people. In short, it is by no means unrealistic to suggest that sport is coming increasingly to form the secular religion of our increasingly secular age.

It is probably the inherently oppositional character of sport – that is, the fact that it is a struggle for victory between two or more teams or two or more individuals that accounts for its prominence as a focus for collective identification. This means that it lends itself to group identification, more precisely to 'in-group' and 'out-group', or 'we-group' and 'they-group' formation on a variety of levels, such as the levels of city, county or country. The oppositional element is crucial, since opposition serves to reinforce in-group identification – that is, a group's sense of 'we-ness' or unity is strengthened by the presence of a group who are perceived as 'them', the opposing team, whether local or national, and its supporters. Indeed, within the context of domestically pacified nation states – that is, in societies where the state has established an effective monopoly on the right to use physical force – sport provides the only occasion apart from war on which large, complex and impersonal social units such as cities can unite. Similarly, at the international level, sporting events such as the Olympic Games and the soccer, rugby or cricket world cups provide the only peacetime occasions where whole nation states are able regularly and visibly to unite. The international expansion of sport has been predicated on the growth of international interdependence and the existence, with several notable exceptions, of a fragile and unstable world peace. Contests such as the Olympics allow the representatives of different nations to compete without killing one another, though the degree to which such contests are transformed from mock-fights into 'real' ones is a function, *inter alia*, of the pre-existing level of tension between the particular nation states involved. And, of course, it is in order to participate effectively at this highest level of sporting competition that the highest levels of sustained achievement-motivation, self-control and self-denial on the part of sportspersons are required.

Finally, the social pressure on sportsmen and women in countries all over the world to strive for success in international competition is a further source of the

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destruction of the play-element in sport. That, together with the increased national prestige that success in international sport can bring, has substantially contributed to the tendency towards the involvement of the state in sport that Huizinga deplored. It has been argued that sport is a viable substitute for war; but such an idea involves viewing it as an abstraction, as something independent and apart from the figurations of interdependent human beings who take part in it. That is the crucial issue: whether the figurations formed by interdependent human beings, in sport and elsewhere, are conducive on balance to co-operation or friendly rivalry, or whether they persistently generate serious fighting. That is a subject on which sociological research has hardly yet begun. There is, however, at least one notable exception: the work of Norbert Elias on which I have tried to model this chapter.