

SPORTS: AN ANTHROPOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE¹

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In *Quest for Excitement*, Norbert Elias and Eric Dunning refer to a discussion held among themselves, in the 1950s, about the relevance of treating sports as a subject worthy of the social scientist's interests. At the time, in spite of being already at the edge of retirement, Elias was a lesser-known sociologist who had taken pains to be appointed a professor at the University of Leicester. Dunning, on his turn, was an economics student who had been drawn to sociology by his German master. During the half century since this encounter took place, Elias has become one of the most prestigious intellectuals in the West. His works were translated into several languages, including the above mentioned *Quest for Excitement*, coauthored with Dunning. This book is dedicated to the process of sportification, and has been consecrated as one of the chief works in the sociology and anthropology of sports. Thanks to this and other vital works, discussions on the legitimacy of addressing sports as an object for the social sciences have become increasingly rare. But until the early 1990's, reservations against the study of sports, leisure, body, spectacle and similar phenomenon were quite common. Today, discussions have turned to how to theorize the sports field, and which aspects are most interesting for empirical investigation.

The prestige of well-known names such as Elias, Bourdieu and Hobsbawn, besides Eduardo Archetti and Roberto Da Matta in Latin America – to mention just the most quoted in specialized scholarship – is an authoritative claim for assuaging prejudice against the incorporation of sports among conventional research topics. If such distinguished scholars have dealt with sports seriously, many others felt encouraged to follow their lead. A new, markedly interdisciplinary research field slowly came into being, and is proving to be a promising avenue inasmuch as studies have not been limited to issues brought up by the canonic thinkers. New themes have been and are being suggested, many of them being shaped by society's broader demands (as is the case with studies on soccer) and often by national theoretical traditions. No doubt a lot remains to be done, but an expressive corpus of accumulated knowledge and an extensive bibliography have indeed been made available during the last couple of decades.

¹ This article was written as the introduction to number 30 of *Horizontes Antropológicos* published in 2008.

In tune with this burgeoning field, *Horizontes Antropológicos* offers an issue especially dedicated to sports. Assuming that it may be read by scholars unacquainted with the specialized sports literature, this introduction will briefly chart what is sport and how the social sciences have approached it. Although seemingly obvious, such questions should be clarified, if only to make clear the gap between interest in sports and interest in making sense of them – in other words, the distance between those who love sports and those who look at it from the perspective of the anthropology of sport.

In contrast with disciplines aimed at direct intervention such as biomechanics, medicine, physiology or sports marketing, which are in one way or another engaged in the promotion of the phenomenon itself, anthropology has no commitment to enhancing performances, nor to the organization, jurisdiction, modernization and, above all, the ideology and mythology of sports. Even though the anthropological perspective is also a kind of discourse about sports, and as such is one among many ways of looking at it, the production of discourses interferes less directly in the phenomenon itself. The anthropological perspective is characterized by the analysis and interpretation of phenomena. Its concerns are typically anthropological, that is, directed toward the analysis of meanings pertaining to the practice and enjoyment of so-called sportive activities in their social and historical contexts. Anthropologists are interested in probing into how sports celebrations and celebrities are produced, or to which extent sports players are and are not similar to other media pop stars and national heroes (two types with which the former have a lot in common), and so forth. The legitimacy or significance of such constructions are not judged, even though anthropologists are continuously incited to do so, be it by the media (itself part of the field under analysis) or by colleagues from neighboring disciplines who do not have a clear view of how the topic is approached by anthropology.

The definition of sport entertained here is vital for demarcating the anthropological specificity. Although there are many others, the most frequent definition in contemporary literature, including the studies published here, draws on the work of Norbert Elias. For him, sports are competitive bodily practices invented by the British during the second half of the nineteenth century as a reconfiguration of games, fights, and other local practices. This rendition allows for a relatively precise cut separating modern competitive practices from those belonging to other times and places. Both share some correspondence, but never continuity – as used to be assumed by traditional diffusionist historiography. As has been remarked by both Roger Chartier's introduction to *Sport et Civilisation* (French version of *Quest for Excitement*) and Christian Bromberger's 'sport' entry for the *Dictionnaire d'Ethnologie et Anthropologie*, Elias's definition strongly associates the emergence and diffusion of sports to the context of mid-nineteenth century Britain.

Indeed, Elias treats sport as more than a modality of body use. To classify certain practices as 'sportive' implies an acknowledgement of their connection to modern, civilized, disciplined, codified, spectacularized ideas. It is this set of ideas that marks the difference between boxing – a sport – and street fight – only a fight –, even if the bodily techniques involved are quite similar. Boxing has evolved into a sport from other kinds of fight, street fight certainly included. What makes it a sport is the fact that meaning is attributed to the dispute which encapsulates certain ethic and aesthetic values. The rules perform this function; to carry on the boxing example, they prevent the opponents from fighting to death. For Elias, sports, as other activities he calls mimetic, play a central role in the civilizing process inasmuch as they provide spaces for controlled tension in societies which tend to exclude "excitement" from most of its other dimensions. Sports rules therefore do not stand above the society that created

them; they emerge along with enforcement agencies and a proper juridical system – the so-called sports courts or tribunals – that are specific to each sports modality. The public's desire of watching increasingly refined performances demands exclusive dedication from athletes, barring them from pursuing parallel activities, as was the case when amateurism was prevalent. Conventional patronage has declined in the West since its apogee in the Roman Empire – today, the public itself pays the athletes, directly or indirectly. As in all business sectors, a sophisticated market system has been created around this basic exchange. In other words, the space of sports became more complex as it spread in a global scale and intersected with other economic, political, and religious spaces.

It is not possible to grasp the meanings of sports, with their manifold modalities and variations (think, for instance, of the various ways of practicing soccer), without taking the contemporary world's social and cultural complexity into account. Modernity, industrialization, laicization, and parlamentarization (as a mode of arbitrating conflicts based on verbal confrontation rather than war), Elias claimed, lay at the roots of the creation and dissemination of modern sports from nineteenth century England. Since then, sport has become at least partially autonomous. If a soccer team had been formerly compared to work at a factory, today it is the teamwork in collective sports that is used as a metaphor by business administrators, as Alain Erhenberg recalled in *Le Culte de la Performance*. Codification and rules have considerably changed the function and meaning of sports in the nineteenth century, just as mediatization and spectacularization have transformed it further along the twentieth century. Slowly, sports achieved its own sacralization – itself a typically modern movement as in pre-modern contexts (above all, in traditional societies) fights and games were encompassed by other activities which also lent them meaning and significance, such as religious celebrations or preparation for warfare.

When sports first became autonomous during the early half of the twentieth century, criticisms also emerged. They intensified after World War II, when the sports industry flourished along with another phenomenon whose growth was also staggering, namely, the cultural industry. Influenced by certain Marxist currents such as the Frankfurt School, sports critics denounced abuses by certain political leaders, backed by the specialized media and the subservience of athletes and spectators. Such criticisms – at times caustic and at others superficial, for ignoring the complexity of the social phenomenon or for their stereotypical use of certain concepts (such as alienation) – had nonetheless fairly positive effects on disciplines such as physical education and education. In contrast to the engaged discourse of sports commentators and pundits, almost always ready to extol the value of sports, it has become increasingly common to find professional educators concerned about the excesses of the cult of high performance and its sequels: doping, extreme competition, violence, exclusion of amateurs (under the label of 'incapable'), and so forth. In countries such as France and Brazil, a significant number of (especially physical) education researchers have been circulating amidst social scientists. This has been productive for both. Some of the articles published in this issue of *Horizontes Antropológicos* exemplify this traffic across disciplines: besides been written by educators, their bibliographical references are indeed trans-disciplinary.

The appropriation of mass sports shows by sports executives and managers as well as professional politicians, always interested in great spectacles, has indeed influenced the Frankfurt-inspired sociology's position. Criticism of sports has not disappeared; it is being increasingly refined and less prone to blindly iterate previous dogmas such as that enjoyment of sports walks hand-by-hand with political alienation.

For various reasons, among which its focus on peripheral or liminal phenomenon, ethnology has been more tolerant in its treatment of festivities and agonistic games. As shown by Paola Ricciardone's interesting review in *Antropologia e Gioco*, almost every classic ethnography has dedicated some attention to social forms resembling sports, be it for their function or meaning. Common examples include competitive or cooperative games, preparatory exercises for war, bodily suffering (especially those undergone by young men as part of rites of passage), and ludic activities in general.

Uses of the body – as common in traditional societies as in modern sports – were the object of interest by Marcel Mauss in the 1930's. Even though sports were not included in this classic – and quite Durkheimian – typology, Mauss's reflections nonetheless suggest that they may fall under the umbrella of his notion of bodily techniques. In *Manual of Ethnography*, Mauss asserted that sport is less a traditional and effective way of making use of one's own body than a particular technical domain to be studied from the perspective of material culture. Even though such debate could still be fruitful, it is more pressing to note that sports, along prophylaxis and bodily aesthetics, are key areas in which technologies of sacralization of the body have flourished. As a marathoner's effort – whose goal is not to build up some material object but to provide a fleeting spectacle, almost a self-inflicted sacrifice –, technologies of palliative care (or perhaps pure waste) reiterate that we are more than practical reason, as Marshall Sahlins would put it.

Moreover, the rise of the social sciences in Brazil has been deeply connected to anthropology's affairs, particularly the discipline's growing interest in urban groups since the seventies. Since soccer is such a pervading presence in the daily lives and imaginary of Brazilian urban working classes, it is no surprise that it has become a focus of redoubled interest. Pioneer studies by Roberto DaMatta, José Sérgio Leite Lopes and Simoni Guedes, among others, paved the way for an expanding wave of thesis and dissertations from the 1990's on. Conflicts between fan clubs, which lay at the origin of European sociological literature on soccer, have also been important in Brazil. Other common themes are relations between soccer and national identity (with a focus on the aesthetical dimensions of “art-soccer”, the country's style of play), and the place of Blacks in this universe. In recent years, various studies have emerged inquiring into the training and transfer of players from Brazil to other countries (especially in Europe) in terms of debates about social and economic advancement, migration, human trafficking, exploitation of minors, and others. Taken together, these connect the anthropology of sports to other characteristic themes in the social sciences.

Horizontes Antropológicos regularly publishes in its *Espaço Aberto* section an interview or a piece by a renowned author. This time we did it threefold. This issue brings an interview with Eric Dunning, whose partnership with Norbert Elias has been mentioned with regards to this productive encounter and to how Elias's perspective is still relevant. Conducted, translated and presented by Édison Gastaldo, Dunning's interview is a *petit bijou* *Horizontes* offers its readers.

We are also publishing first-hand a French translation of Christian Bromberger's “Sportive practices and spectacles from the Perspective of Ethnology”. Bromberger is one of the most influential anthropologists in the field of anthropology of sports. This is a modified version of a conference presented in October 2002 in Toulouse, France, during the First Congrès de la Société de Sociologie du Sport de la Langue Française. His piece, presented here by Arlei Damo, explores the contributions that studies on small-scale societies – the expert niche of ethnology and ethnography – may bring to an understanding of sports phenomena as they spread globally. Bromberger also argues from an inverted perspective, that is, what challenges sports present to anthropology.

To close the *Espaço Aberto* section on a high note, we have chosen a piece by Eduardo Archetti. In this case, it was about acknowledging and paying homage to this lively, generous and sensitive Argentinean anthropologist who adopted Norway as his second home and met an untimely death in 2005, at the height of his intellectual stamina. Given his contribution to the anthropology of sports, we could not fail to include Archetti in this section. Pablo Alabarces was trusted with introducing Archetti to the readers of *Horizontes*. In the article published here, Archetti deals with the *pibe* (boy) and *potrero* (field) as representational building blocks of Argentineanness by means of soccer. It highlights the centrality of representations about the “skilled boy” (personified by players such as Maradona, Ortega, Aimar, Messi, among others), the *potreros* (makeshift soccer fields also used as pasture), and the “creole” style (the way Argentineans represent their appropriation of soccer). This piece is an invitation to Archetti’s oeuvre, which includes a classic not yet translated to Portuguese: *Masculinities – Football, Polo and the Tango in Argentina*.

Even though the title of this *Horizontes* issue privileges the term ‘sport’, the reader will quickly notice that articles in this section all deal directly or indirectly with soccer. This is explained by the fact that soccer is an outstanding sport in terms of its broad diffusion and intersection with other kinds of social facts. For Brazilians and South Americans, soccer is not just a sport, and that is why there are more social scientists studying soccer than any other sport. This is also why it prevails in this issue of *Horizontes*. “Rodar: a circulação dos jogadores de futebol brasileiros no exterior” (*Rodar*: the circulation of Brazilian soccer players abroad) by Carmen Rial is the result of multi-sited ethnography among Brazilian players in different European countries, mainly Holland, Spain, and France. It is also of interest to those working on topics such as immigration, globalization, human markets, among others. Rial went after these expatriated athletes and their families in order to understand the ways their identities are reconfigured while abroad. Major highlights of her analysis are that most of them came from the popular classes (even though not from their poorest strata), and that their displacement from Brazil does not follow the kin and friendship networks so common among other immigrants.

Rial’s player informants show quite peculiar profiles in terms of the broader soccer spectrum. They are successful athletes, even though not always pop stars. Besides earning wages much higher than the national average for both soccer players and other professionals from the popular classes, these athletes make up a select group which recognizes itself and is recognized as endowed with a ‘gift’ – a category that has already deserved significant debate within anthropology. In “O dom de jogar bola” (The gift of playing soccer), Sérgio Giglio, Márcio Morato, Sérgio Stucchi and José Julio de Almeida draw on Mauss and other contemporary contributions to show that the gift is a basic category in the universe of soccer. Its meanings are attached to cosmologies that are broader than those attending to the coldness of technique and of high performance efficacy. Representations of the gift saturate sportive activities with magic and superstition – so argue the authors of “O dom de jogar bola”.

The distance is long however between the acknowledgment of a soccer gift by family and neighbors, and the polishing of such ‘brute talent’ in specialized centers – and talent is indeed one, even though not the only, meaning of the gift. If this process is successful, the polished talent will revert into (sometimes huge) financial gains. This is a dream for many boys and a reality for only a few. And even the latter have all the profession’s peculiarities to deal with, among which an inevitable early retirement. As other professionals whose bodies are the privileged locus of investment from which to make a living (such as prostitutes and models), soccer players live under the specter of

exhausting such capital. From the time they turn 30 on – a time when many other professionals are in fact beginning their careers after various specializing stages – players “hang up their playing cleats”. Not that they wish to “quit the ball”; it is rather “the ball that quits them”, as they like to say. “Difícil reconversão: futebol, projeto e destino em meninos brasileiros” (Hard reconversion: soccer, project and destiny among Brazilian boys) deals not only with early retirement, but with cases in which, pressed by scarcity of supply or excess of demand, athletes are forced to reconvert while still within their projected career – not rarely in its beginnings, as soon as their training is completed. In their contribution, Camilo de Souza, Alexandre Vaz, Tiago Lisboa and Antonio Jorge Soares tackle these questions drawing on fieldwork where they followed the trajectory of two boys, mates at a “soccer school” whose careers ended up meeting different outcomes.

From the players we move to the fans, and from Brazil to Argentina. In “El ‘aguante’ y las hinchadas argentinas: una relación violenta” (The *aguante* and Argentinean soccer fan clubs: a violent reaction”), Pablo Alabarces, José Garriga Zucal and María Verónica Moreira discuss, based on long-term ethnography, the native category *aguante* common among Argentinean soccer fans. *El aguante* is a native term denoting a moral and aesthetic attitude that distinguishes and specifies the way of being of certain fan clubs. They claim to sustain a disposition to fight, be it for the team they support or against fans from other clubs or (even regularly) against the state repressive apparatus. Avoiding the prejudices and stereotypes commonly attached to these fans, the authors seek to unveil the political uses and meanings of such combative attitude. In this sense, the manifestation of *aguante* is understood as a performance aimed at affirming certain belongings which are not limited to soccer. These would include, for instance, a connection between the *aguante* and (popular) class dispositions, or its relation with broader cosmologies such as certain representations of traditional masculinity.

Also doing fieldwork among Argentinean *hinchas* (fans), Gastón Gil discusses the role of club managers in the escalation of soccer disputes. “La pasión según Aldosivi – el ‘otro’ y los combates por la identidad” (The passion according to Aldosivi – the ‘other’ and struggles for identity) presents a dispute between fans of two clubs in Argentina’s third-division league. Their teams’ low ranking does not prevent fans from investing intense physical and mental energy in elaborating strategies to publicly affirm their differences. Gastón Gil goes on to argue that the managers play a key role in mobilizing fanatic groups for disputes which are banal in their motivations but often severe in their consequences, even though managers themselves are rarely involved directly in such conflicts.

In contrast to the other contributions, Enrico Spaggiari approaches community soccer, in some quarters known as *várzea* and in others as amateur soccer. “Ganhar jogo, pagar jogo e ganhar visita: prática futebolística em um bairro rural” (To win the game, pay the game, and receive a visit: soccer practices in a rural neighborhood) probes into the sociability of soccer – an aspect understudied by a research field that has so far been concentrated on its spectacularized or urban manifestations. Drawing on fieldwork in a rural neighborhood of São Bento do Sapucaí, São Paulo State, Spaggiari unearths the local codes guiding reciprocity in the community soccer circuit. The permute of matches, which commits the local team to pay back the visit, is vital not only for the maintenance of such circuit, but to provide leisure in areas that lack entertainment options. In this context, the ludic dimension of events made possible by the permute of matches is equally or more important than the competitive aspect.

Finally, Luiz Henrique de Toledo glosses the football association's rules from the perspective of some of anthropology's classic approaches of structuralist, structural-functional, and configurational inspirations. "Jogo livre: analogias em torno das 17 regras do futebol" (Free play: analogies around soccer's seventeen rules) shows how rules which together account for the stability of the dispute and for the aesthetic configuration of the game by restricting certain uses of the body, have distinct logics which may be grouped according to "anthropo-logic" or "socio-logic" perspectives. In other words, more than a set of codes aimed at leveling the contenders' playing field, rules reflect certain ethic and aesthetic codes. When it is suggested that referees be more rigorous when penalizing foul play, or that new rules be created for that end, an adjustment is being made in the competitive dynamics to certain sensitivity patterns of the broader society. Conversely, when referees are oriented to avoid penalizing for certain infringements so that the game may "flow better" or "be less interrupted", a change in the game's dynamics is being proposed that is consequential for aesthetic patterns – a clear sign that we are increasingly less tolerant toward wasting time. To think about why and for what end sports rules were elaborated may be indeed a good anthropological exercise, as Toledo shows.

The group of papers assembled here naturally does not intend to provide a final answer to the questions raised by sports, but it does aim at contributing to render such questions more complex. The ground gained during the last couple of decades by the increasing quantity and quality of research has guaranteed to sports in general, and soccer in particular, space for debate in national and Latin-American academic forums such as the ABA (Brazilian Anthropological Association), RAM (Mercosul Meeting of Anthropology), ANPUH (Brazilian History Association), ANPOCS (Brazilian Association for Graduate Studies and Research in Social Sciences), SBS (Brazilian Sociological Society), ALAS (Latin American Sociological Association), among others. But there are still challenges to be faced. The first is perhaps the continuance of such forums and of their trans-disciplinary character, without losing sight of dialogue with the disciplines' specificities, including their respective expertises. It is impossible to advance our understanding of a sportive field if its relations for instance to politics, art, religion and the economy are downplayed. A second challenge is to cross national and South-American borders in order to tighten relations with the international production. A third would be to broaden the array of questions, encouraging research on other sports and even on other soccers.

Sports are widely known as an opportunity for fantastic images, captured by increasingly sophisticated cameras. But instead of the realism of such images, we preferred to use as our cover theme Candido Portinari, one of the masters of Brazilian painting. The painting *Soccer* is one among the many Portinari has dedicated to the ludic and festive world of child play. Even if sports have incorporated the lexicon of the market, science, labor and so many other fields customary to adult seriousness, it is worth recalling that athletic performances are aimed at the entertainment, excitement, and sociability of their publics. Few images could better express the idea that sports are an aesthetic production, geared toward the satisfaction of symbolic needs.

Translated by Letícia Maria Costa da Nóbrega Cesarino

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