

SOCIOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE OF SPORT

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Abstract

Sport as a specific form of physical activity plays an important role in cultural, economic and political development of global society. Sport is an integral part of individual forms of leisure, an opportunity for competitive activities, and in growing extent also substitutable part of mass culture. Sport reflects given cultural climate and affects specific forms of process of socialization. Top elite sport is for mass of people available via mass media, regular sportive activities are an effective tool against destructive impacts of sedentary society. Physical activity, physical fitness, wellness and sport form life style of people and are also part of profitable business. Sport is interrelated with important areas of social life, including politics and religion. For sociologists sport is a colourful field reflecting the dynamics of the change in the values, interests and activities of contemporary mankind.

Keywords: sport; culture; physical activity; society; socialization

Introduction

Sport as an integral part contemporary global society. To understand the nature and the direction of the contemporary world, its individual societies and cultures without taking into consideration and giving a proper attention to the role of sport is virtually impossible. The thing is we live in a world where sport is an international phenomenon which is important for politicians and world leaders, which contributes to the dynamics of economic development, which increases global awareness during international sport events and which is an inseparable part of local social and cultural structures,

regions and nations. Thanks to its potential, sport may even contribute to the development of the poorest regions of the world, it constitutes an indispensable component of the mass media presented spectacle, it contributes to the development of tourist industry and is linked in various ways to the range of social phenomena and issues such as health, violence, crime, social differences, work migration, economic and social development and poverty. Sport is not only a platform for significant global sport events and an ever growing economic sector but also an everyday leisure activity performed by masses of people. Sport may become an effective tool used by dictators to enforce their demagogic ideas as well as a symbol of democratic processes and means of international reconciliation. Sporting activities are often linked to political protest in the course of struggle for human rights and social justice. To the same extent it may become a platform for violence, fascism, totalitarianism, individualism and ardent nationalism. For some people, sport may be a goal in itself, an exciting form of relaxation based on the invigorating compensatory effects of leisure physical activities, while for others it is a necessary stereotypical painful way of sophisticated preparation for achieving a high performance, victory and a reward.

In accordance with the values and the orientation of the contemporary post-modern society oriented on the consumption of media-formed images and new experiences, sport becomes increasingly more associated with a commercial sponsor logo on the dresses of athletes, arenas where significant sport events take place and the media coverage of such events. Financial investments in broadcasting licenses, the willingness of countries or cities to spend huge amounts to acquire licenses for organizing global sport events, or the increasing number of professional sports clubs on stock exchanges – all this points to the growing economic potential and power of sport. Sport thus becomes, directly or indirectly, a part of people's lives, both on the level of the ever-increasing professionalization and spectacular commercialization as well as everyday leisure activities of masses.

Sport in its contemporary form is described from various view point

and on the ground of different values. Some take it as a ritualized sacrifice of human energy, for others it is a common means for establishing interpersonal relationships, and still others view it as a compensation of the differences in human life or a form of strengthening their personal identity and individuality. Critics of sport point out with displeasure to the increasing commercialization of sport as a social product generating deliberately intensified aggression on as well as beyond the playground and view this as a euphemistic metaphor of the western culture or predatory capitalism.

Sport as an integral part of the culture of a given society plays an important role also in cultural ideology. Cultural ideology thus provides a systematic view of the day to day logic of people's social life. It is a phenomenon which changes along with the dynamics of social change on the background of collective and personal interests and ideas. It transforms due to the incessant clash of opinions on the meaningfulness and feasibility of particular ways of social development and due to the crystallization of moral attitudes. This fact alone gives sport a sociological relevance. Sport is a set of activities and situations which either accept or challenge a particular ideology. Sport, as a human creation, develops in a broader context of particular ideas relating to the human body and human nature, within certain forms of interpersonal relations, on the background of manifested human potential and efforts, by way of masculine and feminine expressive means, and among discussions on the issues of importance and transience in our lives.

Sport develops in a certain cultural climate and is a result of a socially conditioned value orientation, and formation of behavioural patterns. This fact may bring about a number of pressing questions regarding the importance of sport in person's life and its role in socialization and shaping of individual lifestyle or direction in life. There is increasing demand for an informed assessment of an individually and collectively balanced relation of leisure and high-performance sport. Media are highly interested in covering the impacts on personal life when a career of a sport star or an immortal sport legend comes to an end. And parents, teachers,

couches and sport managers ask with strong emphasis: what exactly does socialization through sport means?

Sport plays an important part in the process of formation of society in many regions of the world. It influences the life around us and for many the life within us as well. We are not, however, able to comprehend accurately enough the distinguishable impact of the sporting and non-sporting socialization experience on the overall standard of living of an individual and society, on the nature of interpersonal relationships and the character of a given culture. The way sport works may and must be examined within a certain social and cultural context only. Usually, sociological interest is centred on gathering information on the opinions of sportsmen and women, the nature of the social characteristics of the world of sport and its impact on ideological, political and economic matters. Sport is more of a platform of socialization experience rather than a source of differentiating socialization results. Sport in itself is not a cause of special changes in person's nature, attitudes and behaviour. It always acts in combination with the effects of the specifics of a given social and cultural setting within a broader context of socialization processes.

Sporting physical activity: conceptual background

In 2011, a Czech Television documentary series "Ta naše povaha česká [This Czech National Character]" focused in its February episode its critical light on the standard of physical education in Czech schools. Teachers, coaches or former top-level sportsmen informed the public on the dropping interest of the youngest generation in physical education lessons, on the declining level of physical fitness of children and youth, on increasing obesity in pupils and students and on the general reluctance of the young to regular physical activity. There is a growth in the number of young people avoiding physical activity and a decline in the interest in sport as a natural form of leisure activities. Laziness manifests itself not only in the aversion to a fitness-focused physical activity but also to active means of transport, walking, regular biking or swimming. At the same time, however, the numbers and the quality of various fitness and wellness facilities and centres, aquaparks or bicycle paths grown. On the one hand, there is a relatively consistent

smallish group of systematically sporting individual who use primarily the commercial sporting facilities; on the other hand, there is a growing number of those who perform any physical activity only when it is absolutely necessary or when pressed by others. A passive, sedentary, consumption oriented style of spending leisure time is more frequent than the active universally harmonising creative forms: even young people view sport more as a top-level mass entertainment spectacle rather than as an integral, indispensable and invigorating form of personal development, development of physical fitness and a way to improve one's health, establish new relationships and achieve an overall personal comfort.

Physical activity in terms of motives, forms and intensity changes considerably, in particular in the context of the phenomenon of post-modern sedentary society. Nevertheless it still plays an important part in people's life even today. Apart from its inseparable connection to physical work, it helps to keep the human body in good health and physical and mental fitness. The human body is a very well adjusted to physical activity and if it is not used it loses muscle mass which is then easily substituted with fat. The 2002 Charter of Leisure states: "All people have a basic human right to leisure activities (including non-sporting as well as sporting physical activities) that are in harmony with the norms and social values of their compatriots". Here, sport is correctly understood as a physical activity practised regardless of the extent of organization caused by a wide variety of motives such as improvement of physical fitness, health, physical and mental comfort, formation of social relations, performance, victory or reward. Physical activity is a form of person's movement in time and space, based on muscle work associated with an increased energy output and assuming, in different contexts, a wide range of forms, including in particular basic everyday form or health enhancing form or form oriented on fitness, performance and skill (Ellis, 2010; Evana, 2004).

Physical activity includes a wide range of activities, such as walking, games, bicycle riding, gardening or jogging or aerobic (Hendl, et al., 2011). Academic literature usually distinguishes between physical activity which is spontaneous and unorganized on the one

hand, and activity which is organized and where emphasis is placed on its frequency, intensity, duration and type, on the other. Physical insufficiency (physical inactivity) may be defined as “individual’s behaviour characterized by a very low volume of common everyday physical activities and an absence of structured physical activities focusing on skill” (Mužik & Vlček, 2010, p. 14). Physical activity is one of the basic physiological needs of humans. This is true despite the fact that the lack of physical activity is usually not felt so strongly like the lack of food or liquids. Right from birth, thanks to the natural need for physical activity, a muscle corset forms which is necessary for proper development of the skeleton and an upright body posture. Moreover, physical activity supports the function of internal organ and healthy mental development. Conversely, the lack of physical activity causes muscle imbalance manifested by an imbalanced development of body proportions, resulting in a defective body posture and orthopaedic disorders, and at a later stage of individual’s development also in cardiac and respiratory complications (Mužik, 2007, p. 137).

Discussion of physical activity and motion activity requires in the given context a proper conceptual explanation. A recent formal summarized approach to the issue offers in accordance with the above described background the following concepts:

Physical activity: movement of the body producing skeletal muscles. It requires energy and has positive health effects. Usually it only requires a low or medium level of effort typical for instance for active forms of transportation, walking upstairs, work in the garden, household chores, dancing or manual washing of a car. Conversely, physical passivity does not have any benefits for health and fitness. Even a moderate level of regular physical activity has health benefits. It requires a daily energy output of 150 cal or a weekly output of 1.000 cal (Hoeger & Hoeger, 2011, pp. 6–7). The minimum recommended number of steps is 10,000 a day. Elsewhere, physical activity means any structured or repeated form of motion performed or practised with the aim to improve one’s

fitness (Pink, 2008, p. 3). Physical activity in the form of exercising usually requires a planned, structured and repeated movement of the body for the purpose of improving or maintaining one or more components of physical fitness. An example of exercise is walking, jogging, biking, aerobic exercises, swimming or bodybuilding. Exercising is usually viewed as an activity requiring a vitally intensive effort (Hoeger & Hoeger, 2011, p. 7). Or an individual or group activity pursued for exercise or pleasure, often involving the testing of physical capabilities and taking the form of competitive game. Sport has also been described as a ritual sacrifice of human energy, phenomenon providing a common cultural currency between peoples, a means of compensation for deficiencies in life as well the business rather than sport (Jarvie & Thorton, 2015, pp. 2-6).

Physical fitness: a set of health criteria (endurance of cardiac and respiratory function, muscle strength, elasticity) and performance (skills, speed, dexterity, mental resilience, concentration) linked to the ability to perform physical activities. The ability to adequately cope with ordinary as well as exceptional requirements of everyday life without feelings of exhaustion and with sufficient energy used for leisure and relaxation activities (Hoeger & Hoeger, 2011, p. 19).

Wellness: a permanent and deliberate effort directed at achieving a good health and a high level of physical and mental fitness and quality of life, which includes the physical, emotive, mental, social, environmental, professional and spiritual dimensions. It is a complex of interrelated fitness factors beneficial for health, emotional stability, interpersonal communication, social contacts, respect to environment and professional satisfaction. The criterion of physical wellness is physical fitness going hand in hand with health condition. Emotional wellness reflects the ability to make a balanced subjective assessment of one's own capacities and performance limits. Mental wellness illustrates person's ability to function in harmony with the nature of the surrounding world. The social dimension covers the relation of an individual to his or her family and the closest environment, the environmental dimension reflects the readiness to participate in maintaining a clean and healthy

environment and professional wellness means the ability to perform effectively and competently one's profession in accordance with the principles of team work. The complex of these individual aspects of wellness is reflected at the spiritual level as a feeling of meaningful life (Hoeger & Hoeger, 2011, pp. 13–19).

Sport: An activity leading to physical effort, application of skills or coordination of movements, where the primary aim is activity in itself. There are elements of competitiveness and rules and models of behaviour and conduct which are formally determined and organized (Pink, 2008, p. 3–8). It is a generally practised manner of conduct the purpose of which is to satisfy actual or fictitious needs. The motives for doing sports include joy from physical activity, friendly contact, improvement physical and mental fitness, health and performance, desire to achieve a victory, record or an extraordinary reward (Sekot, 2008, pp. 7–13). “Sport as a social institution may not be isolated or separated from a wider social context. The essence of sport, its organization, goals, functions and structure provide information on the entire society. Sport intervenes into and reflects many levels of society,” (Weiss, 2000, p. 40).

Socio-cultural context of sport

The last but one day of 2007: Surrounded by the old buildings of the Hradčany neighbourhood in Prague, in the close vicinity of the Prague Castle, another one of the series of closely media-covered cross-country skiing races takes place, which draw the attention of the on-lookers, local residents as well as visitors to this beautiful metropolis. This costly track created artificially for this single purpose from artificial snow transported from the distant Šumava mountains to this unconventional urban space makes some people enthusiastic about and admire this new form of spectacle. For others, however, it is a target of criticism pointing to the abuse of sport for ruthless commercial interests demanding substantial public spending, physical effort exerted just for this one purpose, causing obvious and anticipated environmental problems and downgrading the genius loci of historical public spaces. Leaving possible differences of opinion aside, one thing is clear: the top level sport with increasing force pushes its way to the public field of vision in order to gain as much attention of the medial, the public

and sponsors as possible. Step by step, sport becomes a form of mass entertainment and a public spectacle, affecting with growing intensity the area of community structures, politics, economy, mass culture, mass media, legal system and environmental and civic initiatives.

It is almost impossible to understand the essence and the development of contemporary world and its individual societies and cultures without paying attention to and properly appreciating the role of sport. We live in a world where sport is an international phenomenon which is important for politicians and world leaders, which contributes to the dynamics of economic development, which increases global awareness during international sport events and which is an inseparable part of local social and cultural structures, regions and nations. Thanks to its potential, sport may even contribute to the development of the poorest regions of the world, it constitutes an indispensable component of the mass media presented spectacle, it contributes to the development of tourist industry and is linked in various ways to the range of social phenomena and issues such as health, violence, crime, social differences, work migration, economic and social development and poverty (Schimank, 2005). Sport may be an everyday activity performed by masses of people as well as a political tool for enforcement of demagogic ideas or a platform of reconciliation. Sporting activities are often linked to political protest in the course of struggle for human rights and social justice. To the same extent it may become a platform for violence, fascism, totalitarianism, individualism and ardent nationalism. For some people, sport may be a goal in itself, an exciting form of relaxation based on the invigorating compensatory effects of leisure physical activities, while for others it is a necessary stereotypical painful way of sophisticated preparation for achieving a high performance, victory and a reward.

Almost every government is faced with the imperative to support the building of sporting infrastructure in the interest of public health, education, employment and crime prevention. The political fight and the election scandals linked to the decision-making on where the next Olympic Games are going to take place show that sport really is a significant political and economic

phenomenon, far from the fictitious image of sport as a private activity occurring only at the level of active participants and enthusiasts (Sekot, 2008).

To speak of a cultural nature of sport means to take into account the values historically associated with it and the manner in which it affects the way of life and lifestyle of a particular society. There is a difference in the relationship between culture and sport when one considers, for instance, the Tour de France, the Japanese sumo, jogging in Finland, the bloody cockfights in Bali, the immense mass popularity of football in Brazil or a purposive preparation of Chinese sportswomen for the Olympics.

Carrying out a research in sport usually means the processing of empirical data or writing treatises concerning either individual sports and their levels or sport organizations. The issues studied are linked to wider topics such as gender relations, social inequality, relation to mass media, dependency on economy, impact on human rights, relation to environment, connection to the local and global setting and profession-related mobility. What usually sparks sociological interest in sport is topical issues relating to historical and cultural changes in a society in connection with the development of sport, such as the transition from non-professional to professional approach to sport, the socialization influences of club life, the social background of sports like football or rugby, the sources of violence at stadiums, discrimination, post-colonial sentiments in sport, global versus local levels or the relation between sport and the media.

Undoubtedly, for sociologists sport is a colourful field reflecting the dynamics of the change in the values, interests and activities of contemporary mankind. It is a highly visible cultural and sociological phenomenon the importance of which today greater than ever in the history. It is a phenomenon which we are purposively and globally informed about by the media with unchanging regularity, next to the most significant political events and weather forecasts. Sport attracts publicity. At the same time, however, it continues to lose its importance as a form of harmonizing physical activity practised by masses of population it and becomes more of

a subject passive observation rather than an integral part of everyday leisure activities with personal benefits.

In accordance with the values and the orientation of the contemporary post-modern society oriented on the consumption of media-formed images and new experiences, sport becomes increasingly more associated with a commercial sponsor logo on the dresses of athletes, with arenas where significant sport events take place and with the media coverage of such events. Media houses spend huge amounts of money on broadcasting licenses, sport stars are bought and sold for million sums, cities and regions make huge investments to acquire licenses for holding globally significant sport events, professional sport clubs play an important part on stock exchanges. Sport as a significant socio-cultural phenomenon becomes an increasingly more visible part of people's lives, both on the level of the ever-increasing professionalization and spectacular commercialization as well as everyday leisure activities of mass population (Telama, 2007).

Sport in its contemporary form is described from various viewpoints and on the ground of different values. Some take it as a ritualized sacrifice of human energy, for others it is a common means for establishing interpersonal relationships, and still others view it as a compensation of the differences in human life or a form of strengthening their personal identity and individuality. Critics of sport point out with displeasure to the increasing commercialization of sport as a social product generating deliberately intensified aggression on as well as beyond the playground and view this as a euphemistic metaphor of the western culture or predatory capitalism.

The theoretical and methodological definition of sport is a matter which is frequently complicated by purely practical questions. Anybody, whether a researcher or a layman, can ask question of the following type: Can physical activities so different in terms of the nature of motion, the technique applied and the goal, such as jogging, biking, hunting, darts, car races or diving be subsumed under the heading of sports? Behind questions of this sort, which

often are purely theoretical, sociology sees a wider background of social conditions, organizational settings and social and personal implications which in their ultimate consequence provide much firmer basis for delimiting the category of sport. At least one thing is clear: sport is an activity specific to humans, different from other activities and characterized by specific social dynamics and has unique social consequences. The author of this work is inclined to understand sport in its wider sense, that is, as systematic physical activities which are not performed primarily with the aim to achieve high performance, victory or reward, sport is viewed here as an institutionalized physical activity motivated by concerns for overall fitness, personal experience or desired result or performance. Apart from the inseparable component motion, this definition also stresses the institutional nature of sport. It is stressed that sport is a generally practiced manner of behaviour the purpose of which is to satisfy certain real or fictitious need. That is, sport is not any physical activity but only such an activity which is institutionally characterized and perceived as sporting activity. Hence, the task for sociology of sport is to describe and explain the socially and culturally conditioned position of sport in society, to provide view of the rich spectrum of the relations between sport and society, ask critical questions about the current effect of sport on social life, and focus on the social and cultural contexts of sport (Sekot, 2008).

The relationship of sport and society, often contradictory but definitely highly stimulating for sociology, reflects the variability of basic worldviews, values, political attitudes or ideological background. For some, sport may be the first and foremost aspiration in their lives, for others an indispensable form of passive entertainment and still for others it may be just a marginal aspect of everyday life (Suomi, 2004).

The top level sport may serve different ends in different socio-political contexts. In the recent era of socialism, in a number of its compensatory functions it almost mythologically strived to prove its dominance over capitalism, while for those who represented the state sport also was an “open window to the world” and a relatively great opportunity for a fast material and civilizational rise and

advancement beyond the ordinary colourless reality of most people. Nowadays, what can be observed on the global scale is a certain form of “iconization” of sporting spectacle which, in the interest of maximizing the mass consumption of virtual experiences. Sport also brings new possibilities (global interest in some new sports, mass media coverage of significant sporting events) as well as problems to sport (violence at stadiums, passive consumption of sport, uncritical adoration of sport idols, doping, corruption, selfdestructive physical behaviour). On the other hand, we believe that globally medialized sport strengthens a peaceful intercultural co-existence and contributes to the acceptance of universal values and standards and of the principle of personal improvement (Cashmore, 2003; Cookley 2001).

With increasing intensity, sport absorbs stakeholders who are involved in it without actually doing any sport themselves and for whom it is merely a platform for achieving their particular goals. Contemporary sport as a highly structured social phenomenon integrates a number of components, features and activities in which entities from various fields are involved whose goals may be diametrically opposed to those of the sporting activities in the strict sense of the word. These include entrepreneurs, managers, politicians, lawyers and, in the first place, members of various “organizational teams” who are dependent to a large extent on the success of individual sportsmen and sportswomen, teams or leagues and sporting events. In a world where rationalization of management is required, this undoubtedly is an unavoidable phenomenon. However, its consequences for the cultivation of the world of sport in terms of values attributed to it and values professed by sportspeople themselves will continue to be a controversial issue, particularly in relation to the top level sporting elite.

Sport is almost fatally linked to the culture of a given society. It is a manifestation of the specific images, ideas, values and perspectives through which people assume their positions and find their place in the world, explain to themselves how the world works, and assess for themselves the importance of the things surrounding them. They consider what is and what is not right and natural,

advantageous and disadvantageous, what may bring material profit or “merely” joy from healthy physical activity. Cultural ideology thus provides a systematic view of the day to day logic of people’s social life. It is a phenomenon which changes along with the dynamics of social change on the background of collective and personal interests and ideas. It transforms due to the incessant clash of opinions on the meaningfulness and feasibility of particular ways of social development and due to the crystallization of moral attitudes. This fact alone gives sport a sociological relevance. Sport is a set of activities and situations which either accept or challenge a particular ideology. Sport, as a human creation, develops in a broader context of particular ideas relating to the human body and human nature, within certain forms of interpersonal relations, on the background of manifested human potential and efforts, by way of masculine and feminine expressive means, and among discussions on the issues of importance and transience in our lives.

In the course of its history, sport also developed in accordance with the given logic of the relationship between sexes, that is, the respective positions of men and women in the historical context of the relation between society and sport. This issue, which is particularly important in the Anglo-Saxon society, is connected to the role of masculinity, or rather male dominance, in sport where women traditionally are in a subordinated position to men in many respects. This fact alone is reflected – through dominant cultural ideas – in the common expressions used to evaluate physical activities: a child who correctly throws a ball receives a positive evaluation of “he plays like a big man”, while in the opposite case the phrase used, with a pejorative meaning, is “he plays like a girl”. As a consequence of a historically based opinion on physical and sporting skills and fitness, men are usually attributed high performance sports, which are considered unnatural or unsuitable for “real” women. Nevertheless, even in this respect the ongoing development of cultural ideology challenges the traditional view on what is natural and suitable for women in sport.

The same applies to a similar extent also in relation to class, ethnicity or race in sport which, if actively practiced, may serve as an effective educational tool positively forming one's character, as is the opinion particularly of the contemporary Czech pedagogy, despite the fact that sport is linked to the dominant culture and ideological system through various, often conflicting relations and dependencies. The power of a given cultural environment, which from a global perspective looks diverse, is so great that it is hardly possible to unequivocally generalize the sources, manifestations of sport and its consequences on society.

Sport is interrelated with important areas of social life. Frequently, the family has to adjust to the training and sporting schedule of its members and, on the other hand, watching sport events on TV may upset or totally disrupt family life. Or if practised together by all member of a family, sport may strengthen their relationships and add to them a new socialization dimension which would otherwise remain undiscovered. The relation of sport and economy reflects the increasing influx of money to the top-level high-performance sport, particularly in rich countries. The construction of magnificent sport arenas, considerable sums expensed on sport equipment and gear, sport sponsorship, sports betting and first and foremost the enormous and ever-increasing income of sport stars is a phenomenon which is inseparable from the cultural domain of which the Czech Republic is part as well. International corporations sponsor Olympic Games with the aim to associate a product such as Coca-Cola or Nike with the lifestyle of a consumption-oriented society for which a spectacular sporting event is a form of entertainment and excitement and a platform for better sales of globally distributed products. Also the domain of sport and mass media augments the culturally embedded and ideologically focused effect of sport as a form of entertainment and a platform to produce globally assumed consumption-oriented values.

In relation to politics, sport frequently evokes feelings of national pride and national identity and in many countries sport achievements are used or abused to increase their prestige in global political relations. Sport also plays an important part in education. It

has become an integral part of school life for millions of students around the world, whether in the form of PE lessons or school or university competitions, leagues and races.

The relations between sport and religion point to a frequently contradictory attitude of individual religions to physical activities and sport in generally, the role of church in sport sponsorship or the declared religious motivation of top-level sportsmen and women, which is often disputable.

The roots of the practical thought impulses for sociology of sport usually come out from the common everyday needs of sport, not from the general theoretical background of sociology itself. In our cultural environment, sociological works are often written by kinanthropologists or kinesiologists (kinesiology is a science studying human movements) or within the domain of sport sciences rather than sociology. This applies particularly for Czech science which, just like the Anglo-Saxon science, prefers practical research or educational projects focusing on motor skill development, physiology of exercising and physical performance training to the study of historical, social or philosophical aspects of the relationship between sport and society.

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