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The non-ideal, the idealized, and the ideal views of sport

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Abstract

At the present juncture, the view of sport as an enabler of peace seems to be widely accepted among sports managers. Undoubtedly, organizations like the United Nations and the International Olympic Committee have contributed to this view since they declared that it is a tool to promote peace. This view seems to have removed the now not-so-popular view of sport as a form of war, a view that gained tremendous popularity when in 1945 George Orwell's described it as "war minus the shooting." Even though Orwell's understanding of the practice is now generally unaccepted, the analogies of war used by athletes, coaches, and the media when describing sports seem to suggest that this idea is still present in our societies. Thus, these two views have placed sport on two poles: the non-ideal view and the idealized view. In this paper, I will present that there are intrinsic elements of war and peace in sports contests, however, I will argue that the ideal view of the practice is by avoiding relating the practice with terms such as war or peace, but rather to understand it as what it is, as sport.

Palabras clave: narratives, sport-for-development-and-peace, war.

Abstract

En la coyuntura actual, la visión del deporte como un facilitador de la paz parece ser ampliamente aceptada entre los gerentes deportivos. Sin lugar a dudas, organizaciones como las Naciones Unidas y el Comité Olímpico Internacional han contribuido a esta opinión desde que declararon que es una herramienta para promover la paz. Este punto de vista parece haber eliminado la visión no tan popular del deporte como una forma de guerra, un punto de vista que ganó una tremenda popularidad cuando en 1945 George Orwell lo describió como "guerra sin disparos". A pesar de que la comprensión de Orwell de la práctica ahora no es generalmente aceptada, las analogías de la guerra utilizadas por los atletas, los entrenadores y los medios de comunicación al describir los deportes parecen sugerir que esta idea todavía está presente en nuestras sociedades. Por lo tanto, estas dos caracterizaciones han colocado el deporte en dos polos: la vista no ideal y la vista idealizada. En este documento, presentaré que hay elementos intrínsecos de la guerra y la paz en las competiciones deportivas, sin embargo, argumentaré que la visión ideal de la práctica es evitar relacionar la práctica con términos como la guerra o la paz, sino más bien entenderla como lo que es, como el deporte.

Keywords: Narrativas, deporte por el desarrollo y la paz, guerra.

1. Introduction

In a recent article, Gleaves and Llewellyn (2013: 6), note that for the anthropologist Clifford Geertz sports function as stories that a group "tells themselves about themselves." For them, - through Geertz's lenses – these are texts that reflect social and cultural narratives situated within particular times and places. They say that the function of sports is about creating authentic *meaningful* narratives for individuals and societies in general because these narratives are incorporated into how we see ourselves and thus inform us who we are (p.12). For Gleaves and Lehrbach (2016), understanding sports to

create *meaningful* narratives yields a novel and ethical rationale that upholds positive values that our current situation fails to promote.

Indeed, in the last decades, there have been efforts to remove the now not-so-popular view of sport as a form of war towards a view 'for peace.' However, even though this view is losing popularity in academia, the analogies of war used by narrators, coaches, and athletes, in which negative feelings towards our opponents are fostered - since they are portrayed as obstacles or enemies - seem to suggest that this idea is still present in our societies. On the other hand, the claim that sports enable peace promoted mainly by the United Nations (UN) and the International Olympic Committee (IOC) has contributed to the move from negative views, towards a humanistic paradigm – towards meaningful narratives. Currently, there are numerous non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that use sports as a tool for initiating and facilitating social and moral progress through their various sport for development and peace initiatives (SDP), which are guided by the United Nations Millennium Development Goals and whose main objectives are – among others- to promote gender equality, employability, social integration, social capital, development, and peace among children and youth in diverse contexts (Kidd 2008; Moustakas & Karina 2022). These two views have placed the practice on two extremely different poles: as a form of war, and as an enabler for peace.

In this paper, I will argue that these two views need to be avoided because they limit our understanding of the practice. To do so, I will use Charles Mills' (2005) ethical strategy where he affirms that the best way to realize the *ideal* forms of a phenomenon is by moving away from the *non-ideal* and the *idealized* forms of the phenomenon. By using Mills' strategy, I aim to show that we should not extrapolate the practice in negative or positive terms but try to understand it as it is.

2. Setting the ground

In his article, Ideal Theory as Ideology, Mills (2005) asks us to imagine a phenomenon or object of the natural or social world, X. He says that when describing X, it would necessarily lead us to describe X's most important features or crucial aspects (constitutive nature) and how it works (basic dynamics) - he called this *ideal-as-descriptive* model. While doing this, he notes, we can also produce an idealized model

of X, or as he puts it, an *ideal-as-idealized* model, this would involve, of course, an idealized conception of X. He then says that the problem is that when we think of X and describe it, we tend to omit and abstract away actual features and characteristics of X, its "negative" aspects – what he called the *non-ideal* model. Mills suggests that one cannot create a general understanding of X based only on *non-ideal* and *idealized* models since by omitting the former and making efforts to attain the latter we are abstracted away from realities crucial to our comprehension of the actual working of X. Let me illustrate this.

Let's think of an airplane flight, we can describe the flight and the airplane's constitutive nature and basic dynamics (*ideal-as-descriptive*) – e.g., flight information, trajectory, functions of the cabin crew, security information, aircraft configuration, engine mechanics, etc. At the same time, we can go further and produce an idealized idea of the airplane flight (*ideal-as-idealized*) - e.g., the airplane is environmentally friendly, affordable prices, we receive the best meals and drinks, the plane arrives early, etc., (how we would like X to be). Here, we are not only describing the flight and the airplane's most crucial features and characteristics, - since they are already given - but we are *idealizing* what is rarely achievable. Mills states that the "*ideal-as-idealized model is an extrapolation in the limit of the behavior of X"* (p.167). He also indicates that when we describe any phenomenon, we usually tend to omit tangible facts about an airplane flight (*non-ideal*) – e.g., seats are usually uncomfortable, turbulence during the flight, long lines to leave the plane, toilets are always busy, flights damage the environment, etc. (how we don't want X to be). Mills goes on to say that if we want to attain the ideal behavior of any phenomenon (*ideal-as-descriptive*), we will not only need to theorize the ideal form of it (what makes it ideal) but also, recognize and critically reflect on the *non-ideal* and *idealized* models to identify what prevents X from attaining the *ideal* form.

Now, since in this paper we are not dealing with flying, but sports, I will take Mills' ideas and translate them into my purposes. By *non-ideal* forms, in this context, I mean sport understood as a form of war, and by *idealized* forms, as an enabler for peace. In what follows, I will present that war and peace share an intrinsic relationship with sports, however, I will argue that these labels must be avoided because they contribute

to what Morgan (1994: 67) called the *social structuration* of sports, that is, these two forms of viewing it legitimize ways of pursuing the activity and become the ways of engaging in and valuing it. By considering Morgan's words, sport as a form of war is understood as a violent practice or one that leads to violence. On the other hand, as an enabler for peace, it tends to portray the practice as a remedy or solution to all our social problems, which in fact is a naïve understanding of it since it falls out of the limits of the activity.

3. The non-ideal form - Sport as a form of war

The view of sport as a form of war gained popularity and acceptance when Orwell (1945) described it as "war minus the shooting." Although this view is losing popularity as an external façade, the analogies and metaphors of war used by sports people when describing it is not only vivid in the current context, but the dominant cultural view of sports (Shields & Bredemeier, 2011). Indeed, as many have advocated, I will also state that these metaphors need to be avoided and eliminated since they only reinforce the idea that opponents are enemies, however, my aim here is to recognize that there is a valuable relationship between these two.

In his seminal book *Homo Ludens*, Huizinga (1950) dedicated one chapter to trying to understand the intrinsic relationship between these two disparate practices, athletic games, and war. He assures that the relationship between these two can be found in their ludic elements. Through a historical analysis based on antiquity, Huizinga goes against the general conception that individuals hold about war, as a savage and cruel practice without rules. He asserted that war presupposes the existence of rules, where members regard each other as equals, antagonists, and under the same conditions, for him, war depends on its play quality (p.89). Similarly, Pritchard (2009: 62) maintains that in ancient Greece, war was regulated by widely discussed conventions and viewed as a legitimate way to settle disputes between states. In fact, since the appearance of the League of Nations at the end of World War I, we have a 'law of war' replete with rules and constraints that limit the actions of participants. Today, even though these rules are generally not respected as the basis of war, we use the term 'war crimes' when the parties involved did not "battle" according to the rules (Montagu & Watson, 1983: 198).

Huizinga noted that the ludic characteristics these two practices share are rules, confrontation, bravery, equality, chivalry, and even honor and that without these neither sports nor war can be considered as such. From this perspective, it can be said that the ludic elements they share hold an ethical value. Indeed, when individuals step on the pitch and the battlefield, they must confront one another, under the same conditions, while respecting the rules and accepted conventions established before the match or battle. Furthermore, for Huizinga (1950: 95), the violence expressed in massive assassinations, slaughtering, manhunts, and head-hunting - as war is usually perceived - cannot hold the name of warfare, since these lack confrontation, chivalry, honor and not respecting any rules, that is, through unethical means. For him, participants will fall outside of the sphere of war as soon as they do not consider other groups as equals, as used to happen with barbarians, heathens, heretics, and "lesser breeds without the law" (p.90).

In fact, when Huizinga sees the shared valuable ludic characteristics of these two, he refers to the Greek words *polemos* and *agon*. For Kreft (2014) *polemos*, usually translated as war, and *agon* usually translated as competition, were fair and noble activities, both were in touch and at the same time distant because they share ludic elements but different outcomes. However, when Huizinga says that when individuals enter a practice like war but where they do not respect rules, codes of honor, and lack chivalry, he's referring to *eris*. Kreft (2014) noted that *eris* has a connection with *polemos* and *agon*, but this one is characterized by a lack of nobleness, chivalry, and no respect for the rules, in short, a fight without honor codes. In Greek mythology, the goddess *Eris* is portrayed as evil, or chaotic, and the initiator of the Trojan War.

Kreft's distinction between *polemos*, *agon,* and *eris*, is helpful when trying to recognize that when commentators, coaches, and athletes use metaphors and analogies of war when describing athletic contests, they usually reflect the ethos of *eris* and not *polemos*. Indeed, Orwell (1945) noted that sports have nothing to do with fair play since they are "bound up with hatred, jealousy, boastfulness, disregard of all rules and sadistic pleasure in witnessing violence," that is, Orwell's view depicts the ethos of *eris*. Moreover, Shields and Bredemeier (2011) note that for commentators, players are not athletically skillful, but 'they have weapons' or 'killer instincts;' they don't lose a

contest, but die in battle; they are not contestants, but warriors. Likewise, for Segrave (2002: 57), nowadays teams and players do not win matches, they conquer, kill, murder, destroy, slaughter, bury, or annihilate their opponents. From this view, the players' goals are domination and conquest, and opponents are seen as enemies or obstacles to be eliminated (Shields & Bredemeier 2011; Segrave 2002). To illustrate this, consider the words of Alex Karras, a former American football player who said "I hated everyone on the football field and my personality would change drastically when I got out there... I had a license to kill for sixty minutes a week" (in Montagu & Watson 1983). Karras' metaphorical words - again - echo the ethos of *eris,* since he's describing his athletic experience as a 'license to kill,' that is, disrespecting the rules of football since the practice does not give players a 'license to kill.'

The way sports people use war metaphors – through the ethos of *eris* - to describe it does not necessarily concern if they are a form of war, but rather that it is dangerously misleading participants as language influences the way we comprehend the practice. For Segrave (2002) the use of analogies and metaphors in this way "shape our arguments, organize our perceptions, create our ideologies, control our feelings, and, in the end, construct our public and private selves" (p.56). Similarly, Aikin (2011) emphasizes that although metaphors reflect our perceptions of the phenomena, what matters is their consequences, for him, if sport is like a battle, "we must *arm* ourselves with an *arsenal* and effective *weapons* to *attack* our enemies" (p.253). Thus, the understanding of athletic competitions through the ethos of *eris* contributes to the ways people within the sporting community engage in the practice which can lead to a range of violent attitudes and behaviors (Shields & Bredemeier, 2011). In fact, there is a myriad of examples in amateur and professional where the playing field has become a battlefield, where individuals haven't respected the rules of the game and aim to annihilate their opponents.

I obviously consent with those who have said before that the language of war used when describing athletic competitions needs to be avoided (Segrave, 2002; Shields & Bredemeier, 2011). However, I have noted that these two activities share valuable ludic elements such as nobleness, honor, bravery, confrontation, respect for the rules, and equality, but the way the sporting community nowadays portrays the relationship

between these two refers to the ethos of *eris* and not *polemos.* From the ethos of *eris,* athletic contests are ignoble activities, without honor codes, where individuals can break the rules, and annihilate their opponents, that is, undesirable characteristics that would reflect something that the practice is not. Thus, as Mills (2005) suggests, the *non-ideal* view needs to be avoided because it abstracts us away from our comprehension of the practice.

4. The idealized form - Sport as an enabler for peace

In the last decades, the view of 'sport for peace' has gained tremendous popularity among NGOs through their different sport for development and peace (SDP) initiatives. Undoubtedly, the establishment of the Office of Sport for Development and Peace in the UN in 2001, as well as the IOC's claim that it can bring peace has contributed to the promotion of this view. Below I will agree with their assertions since I will show that the practice shares an intrinsic relationship with peace, as well as social and political values can emerge from it, however, my claim is that this view tends to *idealize* the sport in such a way that it perceives it as a solution for our social problems, that is, extrapolating the limits of the activity.

4.1 Intrinsic elements, external outcomes and the idealization of sport

Reid (2004; 2006) points out that by looking at the nature of athletic contests we can find three elements related to the modern perceptions of peace. First, she identifies that the Greek concept of *isonomia,* or in modern terms equality before the law is part of the essence of sports and a peaceful society cannot be achieved without this. *Isonomia* is visible in competitions because participants enter the contest under the same conditions, are judged under the same rules, and social or economic hierarchies are irrelevant. Reid's second element inherent in these two arenas is mutual respect. In athletic contests and in a peaceful society, individuals must hold an attitude of mutual respect; without it, they cannot take part in them. For her, in competitions, even if participants want to beat at "all costs," or damage their opponents, the rules only allow them to win the contests under the established rules, and if they damage their rivals they would be sent off. Finally, her third element refers to the voluntary willingness to accept the laws and affirms that this one is akin to the classical concept of the social contract. In sports,

she notes that by agreeing to the contract, participants recognize and acknowledge that they won't harm the other and won't receive any damage. Reid stresses that submission to common rules is essential to sports and peaceful societies, and if one refuses to comply with the contract, one is only interested in power.

Along the same line, but through a sociological approach, Christiansen (2012) has concluded that sports can foster four social and political qualities relevant to our societies – towards peace. First, he affirms that it facilitates social capital because groups are built around horizontal and cooperative relationships. For him, these relationships *"are sustained through a dense network of social interaction and reciprocal obligations that build common identities along with mutual respect and affection"* (p.75). Second, he sees sport as an ideal venue to test the trustworthiness of others, which leads to the development of generalized trust among members of society. Third, he maintains that the practice cultivates political efficacy and develops political skills because the practice promotes the active participation of individuals in collective decision-making processes. Finally, he observes that sport cultivates self-disciplined individuals since it inculcates a predisposition - and not a compulsion - to obey rules.

The approaches of these authors demonstrate that from an intrinsic perspective, sport is related to peace, and from an extrinsic one, social and political values can be fostered through it. Indeed, several organizations have recognized this relationship, however, there are numerous examples in athletic contests where violence has prevailed and not peace. In fact, Giulianotti (2004) affirms that athletic competitions have fostered acts of violence since they have intensified nationalism, sexism, racism, and xenophobia. Furthermore, I hold that this view needs also to be avoided because it tends to idealize the practice expecting it to be the solution to social problems.

Consider the following *sport-for-development-and-peace* initiatives. Giulianotti (2004: 357), for example, has called 'sports evangelists' those SDPs initiatives that work outside Western countries. He emphasizes that these initiatives are better understood as a form of neo-colonial repositioning because first, there's little convincing evidence that these initiatives have achieved their social purposes, and second, he notices that Western visions of sports have been imposed in developing

countries. For him, Western sports have crushed indigenous cultural identities and practices, and these initiatives reinforce this dominance (p.358). Similarly, Hayhurst et al., (2016) complain that SDPs working in indigenous communities only serve the purposes of neoliberal capitalism. They are against the way these projects utilize sports because they serve as a biopedagogical apparatus through which norms and ideologies related to eurocentrism, neoliberalism, and 'healthy living bodies' are disseminated and perpetuated (p.550). They criticize SDPs working in indigenous communities because they install the individual, efficient, and commodified mindset of success (proper of the neoliberal logic), as opposed to a collective one (proper of indigenous communities). For them, neoliberal logic is incompatible with solidarity-focused, collective forms of social justice – the very essence of what SDPs claim to do (Hayhurst et al., 2016).

Also, consider the Football3 methodology developed by Street Football World which is likely to be the most used SDP methodology globally (Moustakas and Karina, 2022). This methodology suggests that in order to progress gender equality, the game must change and add two specific rules: 1) a girl's goals count double, and 2) a girl must score first for the other goals to count. These 'positive discriminatory 'rules fit into what English (2017: 3) called 'orthodox masculinities' since organizers hold sexist beliefs and attitudes [e.g., women are athletically inferior or powerless]. If organizations adopt these rules, an essential element related to peace – equality before the law -would be eliminated. The adoption of these rules would, indeed, perpetuate the domination of males over females since they assume that there is something natural or true about gender, such as men play better than women, women need help, or women are not as good as men. Therefore, the way this SDP changes the game to progress gender equality is counterproductive to its own goals.

In fact, it seems that the examples given above can fit into what Bernard Suits (2005) called the attitude of 'radical instrumentalism,' that is, the prevailing view that all activities - including sports - are essentially instruments, valuable depending on their external outcomes, and implicitly stating that these have no inner moral worth. Lopez Frias (2017) states that this attitude in modern societies has permeated the realm of sports and can have detrimental effects on it since by changing the rules of the activity in the name of "progress" the practice can lose its internal values. Thus, although the

practice shares intrinsic elements with peace and contributes to the promotion of political and social values, organizers must not *idealize* the practice because they would fall into a sort of radical instrumentalism. Further, they must accept that even though sports can help, they cannot solve our social issues, also the way these initiatives have changed the rules of games can be detrimental to the practice and counterproductive to their goals. In Mills' (2005) terms, viewing sport as an enabler for peace is an *idealization*, one that does not let us accept its limits, and moves us away from our comprehension of it.

5. The ideal model – Sport as sport

Although sport can be labeled as a form of war, or as an enabler for peace since it shares intrinsic elements and characteristics with both, this, however, does not limit sports to any of them. The sports community must not approach the practice as war nor peace, but rather as a place where human interaction exists and where individuals will define what the practice is while they engage in it, in other words, it is a place for *possibilities*. In athletic contests, we interact with people, but there is always uncertainty about what those interactions will bring (Hochstetler, 2003). McLaughlin and Torres (2011) understand this interaction as an intersubjective experience since this concept tries to explain the relationship between the self and others. To enter a sports competition is explicitly to be in a relationship with others. Indeed, intersubjectivity tries to elucidate that our self-existence in this world is determined and influenced by the constant interaction with many 'others', and at the same time those 'others' are influenced by the interactions with the 'self' and many others.

By drawing on the works of Merleau-Ponty, Russon, Levinas, and Sheets-Johnstone, McLaughlin and Torres (2011: 275) affirm that the substance of our lives is to be found in our dealings with other people, for them, our engagement with others constitutes our identities of 'who we are' and 'who we can become.' Furthermore, they pointed out that the body is the basis of our intersubjective experience because the meanings we create with others are articulated first and foremost through our moving bodies, and through bodily movement we discover ourselves and others (p.274). Indeed, in an intersubjective sphere such as athletic competitions, the constitutive elements of sports

explicitly establish a relationship of responsibility and mutual recognition towards the 'self' and 'others.' However, even if intersubjectivity has an ethical significance, and the rules of the contest define how individuals should behave, this does not mean that individuals will behave "ethically." Parry (2012) sees that sports function as laboratories for value experiments, for him, even though these are grounded on a moral basis, they're in fact spaces for *possibilities*, where virtues or vices can appear. Thus, to understand sport as it means that the sports community must avoid 'labels' and acknowledge that it is a place where human networks of communication and contact are forged and different *possibilities* can emerge.

6. Concluding remarks

I concede that it might sound absurd that a practice like sport shares characteristics with two seemingly different and opposite activities. In this paper, however, I have presented that sports share valuable ludic elements with war, as well as an intrinsic relationship with peace. But if the sporting community approaches the practice through these two 'labels,' participants can turn the practice into something that it is not, and organizers expect sport to be the solution to our social issues. In fact, my approach has moved from the characteristics that constitute sports to the way participants and organizers engage in it through these two labels. By using Mills' (2005) strategy, I have stated that the *non-ideal* and *idealized* views of sport need to be avoided because they abstract us away from our comprehension of it and define the ways of engaging in and valuing the practice.

First, it is problematic to use metaphors of war when describing athletic contests because they currently reflect the ethos of *eris* and not *polemos.* Through this approach, participants tend to turn the practice into a battlefield without confrontation and codes of honor, something that the practice is not. Second, although organizations have understood the relationship between sports and peace and have noticed that social and political values can be fostered through it, this narrative has idealized the practice in such a way that now NGOs want to 'fix' society through sports, something that it would fail to do, and as I showed, their actions in fact can be counterproductive to its goals. Finally, I have presented that the ideal way to understand sport is as what it is.

Individuals must acknowledge that it is a place for an intersubjective experience, that is, a place where human interaction exists and functions as laboratories for value experiments. From an intersubjective lens, sport is a place where different *possibilities* can emerge. I agree with Weizsäcker (in Hoberman, 1988: 202) who said that *s*port will be able to preserve its humanizing influence and contribute to human dignity only if we recognize its own inner laws and accept these limits. Thus, the sporting community should not extrapolate sport with terms such as war or peace but try to understand it as its own entity.

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