THE COMMUNITY BEHIND SPORT COMPETITION

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Abstract: *Besides the master frame of competition and the opponent dyad that are usually used in speaking about the dynamics of sport events, there is a complementary approach of sport event as gathering of sport community. From the complex repertoire of sport actors' social roles, most studies tend to focused on the differences attached to their competing positions, minimizing the similarities of sport actors as part of the same professional community. Therefore, the aim of this paper is to analyze sport field from the perspective of community dynamics, pointing out those main elements which show that, behind the competitive orientation, there is a clear community feeling among sport actors. There are two types of arguments that are brought into discussion by this study: those regarding spatiality and those related to sport actors' public discourses as an important symbolic resource in defining this intercultural community. The first ones cover the effects of athletes' dual field of play: national teams versus club teams and the emerging category of transnational athletes as a product of sport global market. As for the discursive dimension, sport actors' public discourses reveal significant insights regarding the existence of a global community revived with every new competition. The high level of familiarity between sport actors, the cyclicity of competitions as common experience, as well as the constraints of public exposure have proved to have a great impact on keeping together this type of 'sport community islands'.*

Keywords: *sport community' islands, glocalisation, paradiplomacy, transnational athlete, sport courtesy, social comparison*

1. INTRODUCTION

When speaking about sport, competition seems to be the first aspect that most people think about. Based on Goffman's conceptual field, Birrell outlines the fact that "strategic interaction is the very model for sport, where teams and athletes work to maintain their competitive advantage" (Birrell, 2004: 53). Seen as the defining principle for the dynamics of this social field, competition is also the main element that sport has transferred to other social areas. As a consequence of this phenomenon of *liquid*

boundaries between sport and other social areas, competition became the social master-frame, whether we refer to politics, education, entertainment or business.

Living in these 'competitive times', the tendency is to think in terms of hierarchies or winner-loser logic. However, sport means more than competition. Besides this zero-sum process, which implies that only some can win at the expense of others, sport means also cooperation and convergent forces. The 'win-at-all costs' ethos is just one face of sports' coin. The duality of sport field, as both unifying and divisive (Eitzen, 1999) is, in this context, the approach which best reflects the complexity of sport dynamics.

The prioritization of differences over similarities and, therefore, the leading position of competition among sport values can be related to the overall tendency to

redefine sport as 'social drama' (Craig & Beedie, 2008). However, beyond confrontation, competition and adversity, sport is 'primarily about shared experiences' (Hilvoorde, Elling, Stokvis, 2010). This is why the focus of this paper will be upon a concept that is built on this differentiation-similarity dyad: *community*, as a core element for the dynamics of sport social field.

Beyond rules, records, victories or defeats, sport is all about people. Whether we speak about team or individual sports, there is always a snowball effect that brings people together around the same objective, the same activity, the same sport actor or the same sport event. Thus, the main aim of this study is to approach the sport dynamics as a result of a permanent process of redefining community boundaries or defining sport field as a multilayer structure of communities.

2. SPORT COMMUNITY ISLANDS

2.1 Repertoire of identities. Sport has surpassed its peripheral beginnings, becoming a social field per se in bourdieusian terms. Being part of everybody's day to day life, whether we are a sport hero or an anonymous armchair viewer, nowadays sport really does matter: socially, culturally and economically. Sport has gained and reaffirmed its autonomy in different, but convergent forms: from separate newscast in prime time, to separate cloth section or lifestyle principle. Taking sport as a referential point, every one of us can be defined on several axis: passive or active, neutral or passionate, fan or adversary, 'complete amateur or complete professional' (Krawczyk, 1995). How we socially experience and understand sport is part of who we are and, therefore, is an outcome of the joint between the objective and subjective aspects of everyday life.

Giving the symbolic value attached to sports, 'questions of identity and identification are of critical importance both for the routine functioning of sports and for some of the problems recurrently generated in connection with them' (Dunning, 1999: 3). Every sport event is part o a wider play and every sport actor has his own role on what can be called the *itinerant sport spectacle*. What is really the core of the sports' saga is the permanent alternation between the 'I' and the 'We' part of the performance. Individual choices regarding sport practice or media sport consumption often indicates membership or some kind of affinity towards different social groups. Every 'I' dimension is, to some degree, correlated with a 'we-feeling'. Based on the complex repertoire of identities which defines our role as social actors, a corollary multilayer structure of communities can be thus built up. In defining this 'I' - 'we' structure of identification for the sport field, a dominant model was focused on the micro-macro nature of sport, moving the analysis from the individual, relational and group level, to organizational, cultural and international level (Halone, Meân, 2010).

Defined in terms of similarity, whether we speak about common interests, social or spatial boundaries, community is the most appropriate social reference when addressing the 'we-feeling' that dominates the sport ethos. As A. Cohen pointed out, community should be understand as 'a symbolic construct and a contrastive one; it derives from the situational perception of a boundary which marks off one social group from another: awareness of community depends on consciousness of boundary' (apud Barnard, Spencer, 2002:174). Due to their complex repertoire of identities, individuals belong to a wide range of communities. The aim of this paper is to discuss the dynamics of sport social field in terms of community identification. However, given the multiple dimensions that can be involved in defining sport communities, it should be said that this paper will address only two of them: the spatially and the communicative aspects.

2.2 Spatial and symbolic boundaries of sport communities. Whether we speak about classic communities or we refer to a more fluid concept of community, we came across a problem of spatial boundaries and connections. In addressing this dimension of sport communities the local-global axis is

probably the most important one. Today, sport offers input and, at the same time, is itself an output of the globalization process, building bridges on different levels of interaction: individual, group, regional and international. Part of a wider phenomenon of 'cultural globalization' (Jarvie, 2006), sport has become a powerful tool in increasing the similarities between people all over the word. Due to its universal system of values and rules, sport had a strong contribution to the hybridization of cultures, growing into a culture itself: the sport culture.

On a micro-macro scale, if we focus on the macro extreme, we can speak about the existence of a global sport community, transnational and non-territorial. This is the maximum level of integration and the most flexible type of boundaries, bringing together all those people who are involved in this area of activity. Coaches, athletes, referees, journalists, fans, managers or sponsors, they are all part of this *community of action*. Surpassing space and time constrains, this can be understood as a *network community* – a newborn concept based on the 'network society' model framed by Castells (1996). All these sport actors are somehow interconnected and play their particular role on the global stage of sport.

When we get to regional or national level, we find ourselves in front of a new master frame: sport as a substitutive form of war. It is now all about power, strategies and politics as nations moved their fights on the symbolic battlefield of sports. The representational mechanism is thus activated as the 'we' reference is more clear: everybody is part of a larger region or a nation that he wants to outperform the others. Is a matter of 'we' versus 'them' confrontation and differentiation. Competition between nations on the sport battlefield is able 'to arouse strong emotions in a direct manner and, in a less direct way, to create a sense of belonging and national pride' (Hilvoorde, I., Elling, A., Stokvis, R., 2010: 92). Even the official statistics outline these regional and national boundaries of sport communities when they compare Europe versus America medal index, Scandinavian versus Latin track records, USA versus Russia titles and so on. For many years now, sport has become more than a game and athletes took on the corollary role that came along with this 'paradiplomacy' function of sport (Xifra, J., 2009). These dimensions of sport communities are the most politicized one, as they are based on national identities and geopolitical similarities. Although, on the field, the competition seems to be only between athletes or teams, beyond this performance lays a symbolic confrontation between nations and socio-political models. The symbolic capital of these sport communities contributes to drawing out a 'soft power' (Nye, 2004) map of the world.

Another community anchor at the global level is correlated with every sport discipline: football community, handball community, tennis community, rugby community etc. Sharing a particular system of rules, specific role models, different competition designs, these sub-discipline sport communities enter another symbolic competition in trying to gain followers, supporters, sponsorship or media coverage. Popularity is the main capital that these communities are looking for. However, affiliation to a specific sport is, in this case, more important than national identity, as we speak of transnational, non-territorial communities.

The last dimension on this global-local axis is the organizational one, or the sport club communities. The core principle that keeps these sport communities together is the identification with a sport club brand and a clear spatial delimitation. Beyond the global ramification of today's sport clubs and the overall principle of 'imagined communities' (Anderson, 1983/2006) that best fits the sport world, there is a clear hometown community as a hard core of every sport club. Members of Manchester United football community can be found all over the word, but Manchester remains the incontestable hard core of this sport community. The deepest feelings of belonging and highest level of involvement come with the smallest distance towards the main stage of sport club's activity. This local profile of sport communities is more

prominent when it comes to national competition, where it becomes the strongest principle of differentiation.

This model of global-local sport communities is based on a Matroska doll principle of concentric layers. However, this model is too static for explaining the sport dynamics. In reality, sport actors find themselves in front of a phenomenon of *overlapping communities*. The communities' boundaries are fluid and, in the end, community identification is circumstantial. It all depends on what community referent is activated by a particular sport event. The same polo player for example could relate to its club community on the National Championship stage, to its national community during a World Championship or to the polo community when comparing to other sports' activities. Moreover, sport actors have to cope with contradictory situations generated by the globalizing frame of sport; for example FC Barcelona's hero is not a Spanish football player and French teams become stronger by athletes' exchanging or amending their original national citizenships. Beyond its recreational and entertaining dimension, sport raised as an industry aligned with the consumer society's principles. Therefore, sport has become a resourceful labour market where being competitive transcends national borders. The 'citizenship of convenience' (Campbell, 2011) and the increasing phenomenon of sport migration define a professional sport field dominated by transnational sport actors. This is why it can be said that in defining sport communities, hard criteria like physical space and national origin are not enough. Sport communities are all about shared emotions and common competitive interests. The nation-based sport model is now old-fashioned and it cannot cope with the globalizing pressure of sport dynamics. So, instead of a static model of concentric spheres of sport community belonging, it is more suitable to speak about a matrix representation of what can be called *sport community islands*. If we intercross the community dimensions we come up with a netting

structure of these *sport community islands*.

Part of so many sport communities, juggling with different 'we-ness' referents, sport actors came across a sort of d symbolic 'dissociative identity disorder': today competing together as members of the same sport club, while tomorrow they can compete against each other in different national or regional representative teams. What really matters is the ability to switch between the active and the passive community identification.

Sport mega events like Olympics, World or European Championships and club competitions contribute to the emergence and consolidation of *sport community islands*. They provide the perfect gathering design and activate those shared emotions that bring people together. Moreover, these events keep the global sport community alive and celebrate the 'unity in diversity' principle of sport social field. Alternative sport communities are brought into the spotlight of this global 'emotional symbiosis' (Ponomariev, 1980) of the sport show.

All in all, in talking about global versus local sport communities, spatiality should be understand as socially constructed rather than physically determined. The 'glocalization' (Horne, 2006) concept is probably the one that best address the global-local problem of sport communities. These 'glocal' sport community islands are hybrid forms that combine both global and local aspects of sport dynamics.

2.3 Communicative anchors of sport communities. One of the most important resources of similarity that define a community is the communicative dimension. 'Speaking the same language' is probably the most used metaphor of similarity and convergent interests, as language has a powerful symbolic value in addressing identity and identification aspects.

Although the communication register of postmodern times is dominated by the intertextuality principle, sport communities distinguish themselves in terms of communicative forms and contents. We can speak about a dual structure of sport communication whether we address the

popular versus professional dimension or the public versus private dimension of sport actors' performances.

Globalization and 'paradiplomacy' are two factors that, along with the high professionalization of this social field, contribute to the emergence of a common frame of communicative practices among sport actors. Moreover, the cyclicity of competitions and their ritual dimension consolidate the 'communication contract' associated with sport events. Understood as a set of social norms and expectations which govern a particular frame of interaction, the communication contract 'allows the participants to co-construct the sense of their discourses' (Charaudeau, 2002: 309) and increases the predictability of their structure and content. Being part of a sport community island, sport actors call on to common discursive resources. Thus, many of the elements that define the communicative profile of a community are, in fact, *standard formulaic routines* (Bing, Ruhl, 2008). These standardized aspects of communication contribute to establishing and maintaining the relationship between communities' members in a conventional register, which has already been socially negotiated and reaffirmed.

Even though an exhaustive analysis of sport discursive gender is not within the scope of this paper, there are some communicative aspects that must be approached in outlining the communicative dimension of sport communities. If we refer to the thematic component of sport actors' public discourses, we can speak about some recurrent frames or metaphors. One of them is the representation of sport confrontation in terms of war, as sport has become for many years now a symbolic surrogate for war. References like: 'old enemies', 'final fight', 'revenge', 'an entire arsenal of techniques', 'battlefield of action' are part of a wide conceptual field build on this war metaphor of sport confrontations. Even the competitional designs and repertoires of roles reflect a social imaginary of war: every game has its strategy, its attacks and defences, its spies and its retires. Behind athletes and teams, there are local or national communities that fight for gaining material and, most important, symbolic resources and proving their superiority.

Another common element of sport discourses is the comparative frame, whether it involves a social comparison with 'others' or a temporal one, referring to sport actors' previous level of performances. Regardless of the competition type or the sport actor, it all gets to a direct or indirect 'us' versus 'them' polarization. Comparative logic is the very nature of sport competitions. 'We were better than them', 'They played better than us', 'It was our best match' or 'it was our worst performance' are common aspects of post-match public discourses. Thus, evaluating sport performances implies a form of comparison, built on a relational and not an absolute system of reference.

The last thematic component that will be brought into discussion is strongly correlated with the sport paradiplomacy function and sport actors' public exposure. The constrains associated with these two aspects have contribute to the emergence of what can be called *sport courtesy*. Based on sport global values like fair-play, respect and fairness, sport courtesy refers to common behaviour and discursive practices. Besides the ritual dimension of these practices, there is also an instrumental value attached to them: maintaining a 'positive face' (Goffman, 1959/2003) and reflecting the desirable role model that people expect from sport actors. This is why athletes and coaches congratulate their opponents, give thanks to their opponents for the 'good game', admit and appreciated the value of the opponent performance, empathize with the opponent defeat disappointment or even wish their opponents 'good luck' in the next confrontations. All in all, sport courtesy is about 'impression management' (Goffman, 1959/2003), as well as keeping to an informal moral rule of the global sport community.

Besides these three main frames associated with sport actors' public discourses, there are many other common features regarding both content, as well as discursive structure. Most of them are related to the cyclicity and

cumulative representation of sport dynamics. Sport performances are rarely understood as isolated events, but rather put in connection with the history of similar confrontation and to the forecast for the next ones. This is why statistics and track records are always brought into discussion: 'numbers show that ...', 'statistics are not in favour of...' as powerful arguments for the competitions' outcomes. Thus, keeping the track records seems to make up for the uncertainty of sport results, as people look for increasing the predictability of competitions. On the other side of the coin is the common tendency to speak about future action using, in most cases, the 'hope' frame or the 'commitment' one. 'I hope that our next performance will be much better than today', 'I assure you that we will do our best to' or 'We promise our fans that we will win the next mach' are just some examples of sport actors' way of always looking further than today's performance.

All these aspects regarding the sport actors' contextual and structural components of discourses outline the existence of some solid communication anchors of sport communities.

3. CONCLUSION

Sport social field is not all about competition and differentiation. Beyond this powerful master-frame, sport means also identity and identification. Defined in terms of shared experiences and emotions, sport social field can be understood as a complex net of sport *community islands*.

Two of the main sources of similarity that stands as the formative principle of communities are spatiality and communication. Given the duality of global vs. local dimension of sport dynamics, 'glocalization' and transnational athletes seem to be the hybrid forms that define the new mapping of sport community islands. Furthermore, the sport global values and the public exposure of sport events contribute to a standardization of sport actors' discourses. The war metaphor, the comparison frame and the sport courtesy principle are three common aspects that dominate the discursive practices

of sport community. Hence, whether we speak about the global sport community or about a particular sport community island, between their fluid boundaries, individuals share a common social imaginary of the sport field.

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