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Sport and Politics: An Ethical Approach

Last year the former Prime Minister of Ukraine, Yulia Tymoshenko, was sentenced to prison for seven years, guilty of abuse of office when she was brokering a gas deal with Russia in 2009. The prison sentence as well as the treatment of her during her time in prison has been widely criticized all over the world. Tymoshenko herself has claimed that she has been physically abused. Many experts and commentators of the political life of Ukraine have also accused the regime of being corrupt, and human rights organizations have criticized Ukraine for lacking respect for fundamental human rights.

Needless to say, Ukraine is a politically controversial state, and in this controversial state one of the world's biggest sport events will take place during the summer: The European Championships in football. Together with Poland, Ukraine is host for the championships. And once again one can notice that the "eternal" issue of the relationship between sport and politics become urgent. The current political situation in Ukraine, especially in the light of the Tymoshenko case, have already led the EU commissioner for sports, Androulla Vassiliou, to announce that she will not participate at any of the football games played in Ukraine. Other political leaders, for example the German Chancellor Angela Merkel, have proclaimed reluctance to visit Ukraine for the same reasons.

Now, it is an old truth that sport and politics always have had an intimate relationship. Sport history has taught us that. In that respect the current debacle regarding Ukraine is not unique. The fact that the EU commissioner for sports and others will boycott Ukraine during the Championships, have raised the more principal issue regarding the political effects of boycotting sport events for political purposes. Is boycott a good strategy in order to put political pressure on non-democratic regimes? Or, should it just be considered as a political marker? Whatever the outcomes may be from boycotting sport events, the discussions on it can serve as proof for the important role sport can play for politics. This

matter of fact also raises ethical issues at heart. How should the democratic world navigate when sport is being used as political means? Is it a threat to sport as such, as pure sport idealists tend to believe. Or, perhaps we should just give up the idea of pure sports altogether, and instead embrace “reality” and argue that we, as democrats, are morally obliged to use sport as political means, which can mean that we should not surrender to our enemies by letting political opponents kidnapping sports for their purposes. The philosophical conflict between the idealist position and the realist one cannot easily be solved. One reason for that lies imbedded in the relationship as such.

Politics in Sport

As claimed, sport has always been a target for political interest of various kinds. Or, differently put: Ever since the dawn of modern sport, political leaders have seen the potential of making sport political. This is not the politicians fault. No one can blame them for using sport for their own purposes, not least when we consider that the sport movements never have been shy to invite political actors into the sport family. In fact, at long times they have had mutual interests to continue working on their relationship. So, insofar that we see the relationship between sport and politics as a problem, we have to be aware of the fact that sport organizations always have been preparing for a political “invasion” of sport. This also means that when the Union of European Football Associations (the UEFA), the governing body of football in Europe, let Ukraine to be host for the Championships they are partly morally responsible for indirectly supporting the regime of Ukraine.

One also has to consider that big sport events always have been subjected explicit political involvement. Even an idealist such as the founder of the modern Olympic Games, the French Baron Pierre de Coubertin, argued that sport *should* be linked to national interests, when he stated that the Olympics should embrace traditional virtues of sportsmanship, such as “fair play, the beauty of the fight and national representation”.¹ The focus on national representation when it comes to sport competitions has not been reduced over time. But that does not mean that the moral difficulties that come with sport nationalism have diminished. Sport history is full of examples where sport nationalism has perverted sport. The most infamous example of this is when Germany was hosting the

Olympic Games in 1936; a scandalous arrangement where Hitler and the Nazi Party exploited the Games for their own ideological purposes.

There is no doubt that many political groups and individuals – not only regimes – have been aware of the impact a big sport event can bring ever since. Consider, for example Black Panthers' action during the Olympic Games in Mexico City in 1968, where the American runners Tommie Smith and John Carlos made a Black Power salute during the prize ceremony; or, consider the Palestinian activist group Black September who attacked and killed a group of Israeli athletes during the Olympic Game in Munich in 1972.

At times political conflicts have led to actions between whole states as well. Consider, for example, the “boycotting years” of the Olympics between 1976 and 1984. In 1976 twenty-eight African countries boycotted the Games in Montreal. The reason behind the boycott, initiated by Tanzania, was that the New Zealand rugby team had been playing in South Africa. Due to South Africa's apartheid policies, they were banned from the Olympics since 1964, and even if rugby was not on the Olympic programme, the International Olympic Committee (the IOC) had decided to allow New Zealand to participate at the Olympics. In 1980, many Western countries boycotted the Games in Moscow, because of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. The Eastern bloc states responded to the boycott in 1984, when the Summer Games were held in Los Angeles.

Apart from the mentioned boycotts, other sport events have been subjected to boycott threats. A late example is the Beijing Olympics in 2008. Despite the well documented fact that the Chinese regime violates fundamental human rights, the Olympics were never threatened, probably because the political and commercial interests in the Games were too big.

The discussions of boycotts usually follow the same patterns, independently of sport events. Usually it stays as threats. But how should we consider the principal issue regarding this? One thing is certain: Only by suggesting boycotts, it shows that sport contain political importance and value. But, how to navigate in this particular landscape? Perhaps the most reasonable way is to follow Claudio Tamburrini's thoughts on this, and claiming that “[s]port is a powerful weapon. We should never surrender it into enemy arms.”²

Sport and War

Modern elite sport is much about national pride, at least in rhetoric. The examples of how national teams have been seen as soldiers going to war, where the football pitch symbolically are seen as a battlefield are many. In that particular rhetoric, often evoked by media, the sport *in itself* gets devalued. The sport performances are not in themselves especially important, but what they are supposed to represent to the public. On the other hand, politicizing sport may improve the athletic performances, which in turn make sport even more interesting and valuable from a result oriented perspective. From this view one can argue that the Cold War was good for sports, or for the development of sports. The athletic arms race between the East and the West may have led to sport results that would not have occurred if it had not been for the Cold War. This argument is of course hypothetical. Nonetheless, the fact that the East and the West invested a lot of effort and resources in sports should have had impact on the results. Sport idealists, that is people who believe that sport and politics should be separated from each other, would not applaud this, and perhaps also for good reasons. They could argue that there is a danger that the performances *in themselves* are being neglected by non-competitive circumstances.

As claimed, sport performances are, or can be, influenced by politics, and especially politics linked to nationalist interests. Sport competitions between nations are, in this respect, wars, at least symbolically. Should we consider this matter of fact morally problematic? Many seem to think so – for obvious reasons. Sport can be used to reinforce nationalist, or patriotic, attitudes and sentiments that may lead to more serious conflicts between nations and people. The most extreme case in this manner took place in 1969, when a sport event fuelled a regular war, the so called “soccer war”. The sport event in question was three qualifying football games between Honduras and El Salvador for the 1970 FIFA World Cup in football. The situation between the two countries were even before the games were played much tensed, caused by a conflict regarding immigration from El Salvador to Honduras. In short, the political atmosphere surrounding the games was not the best. And they were supposed to meet each other in three games; one in Honduras, one in El Salvador, and finally one on neutral ground, in Mexico. Honduras won the first game, 1-0. As a direct consequence of that, an eighteen-year old Salvadorian woman, named Amelia Bolanios, shot herself right in the heart. The Salvadorian newspaper El Nacional commented

on the suicide by claiming that “the young girl could not bear to see her fatherland brought to the knees”. Her funeral was later televised, and the president of El Salvador walked behind the coffin.³ The second game, played in El Salvador, was won by El Salvador, 3-0. And the third game, played in Mexico, was won by El Salvador again, 3-2. A few weeks after the third game, the war broke loose. It lasted for four days. More than two thousand civilians were killed.

Of course, the “soccer war” in 1969 can, and perhaps should, be seen as a tragic exception. Normally, sport competitions between nations do not end up in regular wars. In the rear-view, it is easy to see that the games between Honduras and El Salvador should not have been taking place. One can also notice that the old idealist idea of sport as a peace keeper failed. On the contrary, the football games fuelled an already tensed political situation, a situation that finally ended up in a regular war.

But as said, and in all fairness, most games of football, or any other sport for that matter, do not end up in regular wars. Solely based on that empirical note, one can claim that sport is generally not politically dangerous. At the same time, “the soccer war” shows in all its nakedness that the intimate relationship between sport and politics is a delicate one, and should be handled with care. With that said, one also have to consider the possibility that sport nationalism is not always bad. In fact, small and otherwise neglected nations can be recognized on a large scale, if they are being successful in sports. William Morgan, for instance, argues that “the achievement of national recognition is an important moral accomplishment in its own right”, which in turn may “serve the cause of distributive justice” between, say, rich and poor countries.⁴ Others, such as Nicholas Dixon, argue that we have to distinguish between chauvinistic nationalism (or, patriotism), where there is a lack of respect for other nations than our own, and what he calls “moderate patriotism”, which is built upon a mutual respect between athletes as well as fans from different countries.⁵ The problem, though, with that particular kind of distinction is that it can easily be blurred at the edges. Can we know the difference between a moderate patriotism and the brutal kinds of patriotism, before it is too late? Can we ever be certain that the patriotic attitudes stay at the sport arenas? Paul Gomberg does not think so. He objects to the idea of “moderate patriotism”, by arguing that “moderate patriotism, even as cultivated in sports, gives way in these situations to the most barbaric, fascist attacks on others. [...] As in pregnancy, a little

patriotism leads to a lot.”⁶ We should take this issue seriously. Sport history is full of reminders regarding this.

Final Remarks

If we would have the ambition to compile a catalogue where the connection between sport and politics have occurred, either as narratives or in more concrete political situations, the work would not have ended. Dependent on actual political situation, different kinds of suggestions have been announced. The European football Championships in Ukraine and Poland is, in that respect, only just another example. A positive effect of placing the Championships in Ukraine is that a more intense debate on the democratic deficit in Ukraine has emerged. That we should welcome. On the other hand, this can also lead to a situation where the regime in Ukraine benefit from the Championships, not least after the Championships have started and the general public becomes more interested in the games than in the political situation. Therefore, I believe we should be careful to overestimate the impact of the Championships.

However, sport can be used not only as means for political awareness but also as means for redirecting the severe political circumstances from the political scene to the football pitch, where the political objections are turned into athletic prowess among the football teams. Of course, it does not mean that the political problems have disappeared. They are still right in front of us, even when we are watching the games. And, as always when we are watching sport, we are also watching politics.

References

¹ Pierre de Coubertin: *Olympism. Selected Writings*, Norbert Müller (ed.), (Lausanne: International Olympic Committee, 2000), p. 542.

² Claudio Tamburrini: “The Right to Celebrate”, *idrottsforum.org*, 2006, (<http://www.idrottsforum.org/features/tamburrini/tamcla.argentina.html>). Accessed May 16 2012.

³ For an intense narrative of the occurrence, see for example Ryszard Kapuscinski: *The Soccer War* (London: Granta Books, 2007 [1990]).

⁴ William Morgan: “Sports as the moral discourse of nations”, *Values in Sport: Elitism, nationalism, gender equality and the scientific manufacture of winners*, Torbjörn Tännsjö and Claudio Tamburrini (ed.), (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), p. 71-72.

⁵ Nicholas Dixon: “A justification of moderate patriotism in sport”, *Values in Sport: Elitism, nationalism, gender equality and the scientific manufacture of winners*, Torbjörn Tännsjö and Claudio Tamburrini (ed.), (London and New York: Routledge, 2000).

⁶ Paul Gomberg: "Patriotism in sports and in war", *Values in Sport: Elitism, nationalism, gender equality and the scientific manufacture of winners*, Torbjörn Tännsjö and Claudio Tamburrini (ed.), (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), p. 98.