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INTRODUCTION

Sport, unity and conflict: an enduring social dynamic

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The purpose of this article is largely to serve as an introduction to this special issue on sport, unity and conflict. This was the theme of the European Association for Sociology of Sport conference in 2015, held in Dublin, Ireland. The special issue contains articles by the three keynote speakers of the conference – Randall Collins, Anthony King and Roberta Sassatelli. Each dealt with the theme in different, yet compatible, and highly thought-provoking ways. This article will also attempt to elaborate on the theme and argue for the continued significance of the place of unification and conflict processes within sport, and in the relationship between sport and other fields of social life. The discipline of sociology, as is well known, has become more specialized and fragmented over time with distinct fields of research, such as sport, childhood, emotions, war, to name but a few. This process of academic specialization has also continued within these fields, so the sociology of sport now has distinct subfields such as social policy, sport governance, nationalism and sport, sport participation, sport for development, and so on. There is much to be gained from such specialization, such as the sustained examination of particular research problems, but potentially also much to be lost, such as a relatively encompassing theoretical frame that might guide or unify various research enquiries.

The concepts of unity and conflict seem to capture some of the common concerns across these specialisms. Social policy research often aims at evaluating the effectiveness of state programmes (or those of NGOs) in encouraging greater sports participation among the population. Aside from the health benefit of such potential outcomes, participation is also seen as a way of bringing people together, of strengthening communities, or, in short, as a mechanism of unification. The history of sport, or the process of sportization (Elias & Dunning, 2008), concerns the long process of unifying different versions of various pastimes within a particular territory, usually under the governance of emergent organizations. It is a standardization process as well, enabling more and more people to play the same game, thus unifying people around common practices. But this process has been uneven and incomplete for many sports, with various forms of resistance throughout history producing new variations and fragmentations. Unification processes entail much conflict within particular boundaries, and can amplify or reinforce conflict between groups organized as cities, regions or nation states. Processes of social integration involve both inclusion and exclusion, and these boundaries shift over time. While sport is more often presented as reflecting these

social boundaries, as a representational practice and source of group symbolism (and charisma), sport has also been instrumental in boundary maintenance by providing visible evidence of group existence and efficacy in emotional rituals underpinning social solidarity. The lines of battle or conflict serve to contour feelings associated with group identification, strengthening solidarity in the face of real or imagined antagonistic outsiders.

Sport can be examined at different levels of social integration and across different temporal trajectories. In this special issue Collins concentrates largely on the micro-situations involving players, spectators and officials to show how the dynamics of face-to-face interaction, in the form of rituals, structure emotional energy relationally. King also addresses rituals, but more in the symbolic significance of sport and conflict as commemoration and the relation between group solidarity and the use of sport to mark collective and individual sacrifices in the name of the nation. The form of commemoration changes with the nature of conflict over time. As conflict becomes more diffuse and less easily presented in terms of established foes in the pantheon of nation states, the work of commemoration also becomes more individualized in the absence of a coherent sense of collective purpose. Sport serves as a metaphor for conflict, precisely because of its development from battle-like encounters towards mock-battles and beyond, including sports that seem to depart further and further from the notion of conflict and competition. Sassatelli's article at first seems to occupy that space of sport and leisure devoid of competition, with little sense of battling others for supremacy in the fitness gym. But as Sassatelli makes clear, the conflict becomes largely internalized as gym consumers must balance contradictory desires, and social compulsions, to 'have fun' and become physically disciplined. This is a recent historical development, so the question of historical time and social change up to the present is significant. The three authors connect also in terms of the emotional significance of sport. As Collins (2008, 283) elsewhere states: 'At the center of sports is its emotional appeal.' This is often forgotten or simply taken for granted in much of the sociology of sport literature, but for the question of the relationship between sport, unity and conflict it is useful to recall the development of sport in the context of wider social changes and the perceived need to channel aggression in new exciting, but safer, ways. This is of course not simply a concern lost in the mists of time, but continues in many sport programmes aimed at showing youth an alternative path and building cross-community solidarity (Bairner, 2013; Sugden, 2010; Sugden & Bairner, 1992).

Sugden (2010, 259) reprises George Orwell's famous quote that sport is 'war minus the shooting'. While many sports avoid the charge of being war-like, certainly some of the more popular sports in terms of both participation and spectatorship are structured in terms of oppositional conflict, or at least competition. Elias (2008) used the phrase 'parliamentarisation' to refer to the changing nature of social conflict in England following the wars and upheavals of the seventeenth century. Increasingly politicians were expected to settle their differences through rhetoric in parliamentary assemblies, unlike the former tendency towards physically violent combat in order to seek advantage over rivals. This was a gradual and uneven process, with reversals and transgressions. After all, cultural imperatives are recognized in their breach as much as their adherence. But Elias and Dunning argue that with increasing shame attached to violent practices, advancing due to the growing social interdependence within and

between societies (or other forms of social groupings), people exercised a more even and automatic self-control. This reduction in aggressive physical conflict had its social benefits of course, but also left many people feeling starved of emotional excitement. In a similar vein, though from a different theoretical foundation, Collins (2004) argues that people seek out the most emotionally satisfying situations in their everyday lives. So various leisure pursuits developed in order to regenerate excitement and emotional drama. This in itself proved contentious as groups of players from different regions had acquired varying sensitivities to acceptable levels of aggression in games. More common standards emerged, at least in the form of more standard sets of rules – though rule implementation and latitude of transgression varied – in order to facilitate more stable series of games. And, of course, a wider variety of sports developed to cater for different tastes regarding the degree of ‘contact’ permitted. Team sports, in particular, attracted local community sport, and over time certain clubs attracted wider and wider appeal. These club fans came to constitute another form of inter-group rivalry, which sometimes descended into violent conflict. Spectators and players can form at different levels of social integration, which can in turn be in conflict with one another. Antagonistic club supporters did and continue to join forces in support of national teams, though differing on the relative emotional significance of each social level. Many emphasized and continue to emphasize national identification, though perhaps there is a growing tendency of some supporters to value their club identification ahead of other levels. The contested nature of some ‘nations’ means players may assume a rather temporary and emotionally tepid position in relation to international competition, as their national habitus from childhood experience emanates from different conceptions of their nation (see for example McGee & Bairner, 2011).

Within sports clubs, though sometimes imagined as internally harmonious sites of solidarity, there is considerable scope for conflict precisely due to the functional interdependence between players, coaches, owners and spectators. Indeed the higher the level of interdependence, and particularly with functions performed on both a professional and voluntary basis, the greater the potential for conflict within the same sporting organization (Amis, Slack, & Berrett, 1995). Supporters can be in conflict not only with those of rival clubs but also among each other on the basis of their commitment to the cause or perceived ‘authenticity’ by virtue of their residential proximity to the club stadium and devotion in terms of attendance and degree of vocal support at the stadium. While ‘core’ supporters bemoan the intermittent interest of more peripheral fans, they also rely upon them to bolster their own status as unshakeable and total fans. The supporter status hierarchy enables relative positions. Unlike an actual league table, fans also get to argue over the relative significance of the various attributes connoting status. These internal conflicts differ across sports and some sports are unifying due to their historical significance for a nation state. For example, the Gaelic games of football and hurling in Ireland are highly associated with national identification, and so the balance between conflict and unity may lean more towards the latter (Connolly & Dolan, 2010, 2013; Dolan & Connolly, 2009, 2014). The sports themselves ‘transcend parochial or county rivalries’ and serve as a source of solidarity against others following different national identifications (Bairner, 2002, 129).

The article by Randall Collins in this issue also addresses the question of solidarity, but more from the micro-sociological perspective that has informed much of his work.

Based on his synthesis and extension of the theories of Durkheim and Goffman in particular, he presents sport as a form of interactional ritual building emotional energy and social solidarity. Indeed this article follows quite closely two of his recent books – *Interaction Ritual Chains* (2004) and *Violence: A Micro-Sociological Theory* (2008). For Collins, an interaction ritual is an ‘emotion transformer’ (Collins, 2004, xii) as it refines and recasts prior emotions into new ones, and generates emotional energy that sustains people across a succession of different social situations. Seeking emotional energy is the ‘master motive’ (xv) in social interactions and physical co-presence enables the mutual entrainment of assembled people. A mutual focus of attention, combined with the exclusion of outsiders, thereby heightening the inclusive experience, produces feelings of collective effervescence, which in turn nourishes solidarity and gives the group a stronger sense of identity. In short, these social and psychic processes depict many sporting events. If the rituals produce group symbols, this also enhances solidarity. A local, rather than cosmopolitan, focus of group membership leads to a higher emotional charge (Collins, 1990). In the context of sport encounters, Collins also highlights the significance of maintaining team solidarity in order to maintain emotional dominance. Breaks in the solidarity of one side provides opportunities for the other. Emotional domination by one side leads to the demoralization of the other. As such emotional domination and submission follows a relational dynamic, which cannot be reduced to mere physical strength and stamina. The feeling of gaining the upper hand (dominance) charges up collective energy and saps the energy of the opposing group. Though Collins is not restricting these processes to sport, he argues that they are equally applicable in sporting activities. In fact the effects of emotional domination and submission is perhaps all the more apparent in sport. The rhythm of the game follows the ebb and flow of these emotional dynamics. While violence can occur, most sporting encounters, just like most social situations, tend not to produce actual physical assaults beyond the rules and conventions of the particular sport. Where violence does erupt, it is more likely to be incompetent because, according to Collins, people experience confrontation tension in such conflict situations. Generally competence in violence requires specific learning. Such socialization could become part of a sportsperson’s development, but most sports have developed such that aggressive conduct is curtailed. Sport is an audience-oriented conflict, but ideally the sides should be evenly matched in order to sustain the drama. In *Violence* Collins argues that an audience urging physical aggression between the opponents can sometimes generate sufficient solidarity on one side in order to push them over their confrontational tension. Where one opponent weakens, the other can engage in severe aggression. But excessive aggression, especially in team sports relatively tolerant of some aggression such as rugby or American football, can lead to a loss in rhythmic co-ordination between members of a team. Such emotional disruption lessens emotional energy, or ‘confidence’ within the sporting context, thereby increasing the chances of defeat.

Anthony King in his paper also draws parallels between sport and violence, though in this case through the commemoration or representation of wars in art. King examines two works of art – one ostensibly commissioned to commemorate World War I and the other a visual representation depicting the more diffuse conflict involving British forces in Afghanistan in the early twenty-first century. Clearly both paintings

represented violent conflict, and both artists used football as another form of popular, though far less violent, conflict to say something about war. For King, the earlier work represents a nation's sacrifice, whereas the later work presents a more universal and individualistic message due to the changing nature of military conflicts. Where powerful nation states once declared wars on each other as part of international politics, increasingly the targets of war are more diffuse. This lack of clarity translates into unclear strategic goals for national defence forces. King further notes the long relationship between sport and military conflict. Ancient sports developed as funereal rites to commemorate war, and indeed Elias and Dunning (2008) argue that sport was used in this period as a preparation for war. Sport and war were more continuous; they were not segmented as entirely distinct aspects of life. But commemoration of fallen soldiers was largely anonymous prior to World War I. This war saw demands by families that the sacrifice of individual soldiers be recognized. But the individualization process regarding commemoration intensified further since then; more and more of the personality of each soldier was revealed. From Collins' perspective one could argue that the paintings themselves represent national group symbols of solidarity, though their meanings, as King shows, are certainly complicated by the emotions and sympathies aroused through the artists in their contradictory identification with the nation, the soldiers, the state, and the exercise of the state's physical force, at considerable cost to many. Collins (1975) has also argued that rituals can obscure reasons for internal conflict on the basis of inequality for example. Class divisions can be veiled by the appeal to group solidarity.

King places the paintings in socio-historical context. The Great War involved imperialist nationalism, and football was used in preparing soldiers, building morale and advancing unit cohesion (see also King, 2013). Footballs were used in the battlefield to signify the start of the next ground assault from the trenches. In the early twentieth century the nation state was the primary social unit, and football was seen to build national solidarity, or encourage unity in the national cause and in the face of other threatening nation states. The era of the nation state came under increasing challenge from the 1970s as globalization intensified. This subverted state power, thereby reconfiguring war. New hybrid wars of the twentieth century involved multiple agencies besides the military. Football matches between British and Afghan soldiers were organized in order to build mutual trust, a sense of unity amid the surrounding conflicts. This also involved reconstituting social boundaries to envision social solidarity along new lines. The incompleteness of this project, and the seemingly never-ending 'new wars' are depicted in Arabella Dorman's painting *Shoulder to Shoulder*, which seems itself to have been left unfinished. The painting evokes universal values of dignity and equality, and appeals to a sense of common humanity across opposing sides. Sport is invoked because of this connotation of unity through play despite the apparent conflict between opposing sides. Both must be committed and unified in the purpose, rules and meaning of the game in order for it to proceed at all. All are equal in the face of potential victory or defeat. Sport relies on this mutual interdependence between teams, and in relation to referees and other officials, and so the painting uses this sense of sacrifice to more unifying, and universal, human values rather than particular national causes. Human rights now operate on a more individualistic basis – a

universal individualism – and football can extract individuals from narrow social allegiances towards a more global humanity.

Roberta Sassatelli's article also addresses the themes of unity and conflict, but in the context of more individualized leisure pursuits such as fitness work in the gym. Gym consumers still rely on others within the gym of course, but they are expected to develop and impose a specific relation to themselves and their bodies. We can see echoes here of both Foucault and Bourdieu, in terms of the cultural imperative towards self-discipline and the formation of particular types of habitus. For Sassatelli, the commercialization of the fitness field brings new pressures on the gym consumer or fitness enthusiast. People are increasingly expected to use their leisure in a therapeutically active way. Though this may be presented as being 'true to oneself' or unified in oneself, this internalized pressure often leads to inner conflicts, potentially resolved through the very practices complicit in the feelings of conflict. Through techniques of body discipline aimed at controlling population health, individual consumers must negotiate the ideals of rationality and fun in their fitness practices. Variety is structured to maintain novelty; martial arts and other fighting techniques are domesticated, much like the sportization processes discussed above. Though gym users are subject to competitive displays and status hierarchies within the gym, the principle of unity is extolled through the maxim that 'all can succeed'. The increasing variety of leisure pursuits and fitness exercises, as well as their fast succession from one popular fad to another, makes these distinction games particularly difficult to play. The gym is presented as 'time for oneself' – as an imaginary domain free of conflict, and a site of potential self-unity. Echoing Elias and Dunning's (2008) concept of the sparetime spectrum, women in particular are expected to work on their bodies in their supposed 'free' time. The body is treated as a machine to be productive, demonstrating the hidden continuity between work and leisure. Healthy bodies are positioned as crucial in order to 'get more done' and thereby reduce the time conflicts experienced through multiple pressures and priorities. The elevation of consumption and individualism means each consumer is expected to show pleasure in his or her commitment to the routine of the workout.

There are of course many examples of particular sports becoming attached to particular national allegiances, or more commonly particular clubs or teams signifying such allegiances, projects or sympathies. In Ireland, the site of the 2015 EASS conference, sport has long held associations with national identification and even religious affiliation. In that as in many other regards, sport cannot be separated from society (Bairner, 2016), and so 'studies of sport which are not studies of society are studies out of context' (Elias, 2008, 10). The migration of people from one place to another not only brings different sporting traditions, but can also generate antagonisms and conflict (for an obvious example, think of the football matches in Scotland between Glasgow Celtic and Glasgow Rangers, though even here the intensity of feeling is uneven and continues to change). Unity and conflict are relational, and rituals such as sport re-energize this dynamic, though in new ways with each generation (King, 1995, 650), recasting social boundaries and emotional intensities as the scope of identification shifts. While the value of sport has traditionally been espoused in the name of unity, in its imagined capacity to bring people together whatever the politics of the day, its function as a source of drama and excitement means that conflict cannot be

banished altogether. Indeed the laudable efforts in promoting sport for the development and peace in troubled and contested territories (see for example, Sugden, 2010) must still channel the competitive spirit immanent in sporting practices. Societies riven by conflict lead to many lost and diminished lives, but equally the absence of conflict would involve 'the silence of the tomb' (Elias, 2013, 402). Sporting practices are an embodiment of this enduring dynamic between unity and conflict.

Disclosure statement

The authors report no conflicts of interest. The authors alone are responsible for the content and writing of this article.

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