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Sport and violence: a contribution to ethical, sociological and psychoneurobiological considerations

ABSTRACT

Even though some authors feel that (fan) violence in sport cannot be explained, this paper tries to go beyond the usual approaches which try to identify the cause of fan violence by looking into social relations, individual frustrations, alcohol abuse, etc. The authors of this paper accept the importance of these motives, but they believe that they are just side-effects and triggers, and that violence is inherent to some sports, especially those that involve two opposing teams. This is particularly true of the sports where athletes exhibit a great deal of competitiveness or a high level of expectance because these are later resolved by aggression.

Key words: sport, violence, aggressivity

Introduction

There are many theories and theoretical analyses of violence. Some philosophical teachings of the Far East (the extreme being jinnism), base their ethical principles on nonviolence (ahimsa), believing the violence to be completely unacceptable. In the the modern Western society, Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer and Giorgio Agamben see violence as a product of the Enlightenment, while Jürgen Habermas considers it to be a representation of the the Enlightenment's "unfinished project". Etienne Balibar regards violence as an essence of modernity which makes both freedom and danger possible. Furthermore, Hannah Arendt, considering primarily the

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political use of violence, distinguishes between power and violence, and does not recognize violence as being instrumental in achieving revolutionary goals, but appreciates the importance of choice, according to which by choosing violence we abandon ethics, while by opting non violence we give up political change.¹ Slavoj Žižek, on the other hand, differentiates between subjective violence (which violates the 'normal' state of things, e.g murder and war) and objective violence (which occurs both at the symbolic level of language or at the systemic level which sustains to the 'normal' state of things such as, for example, liberal capitalism).²

Sport and violence

Violence in sport refers to acts of violence seen in the competition (for example, boxing, wrestling, Asian martial arts, rugby, etc.) or to acts of violence committed by athletes out of the competition. However, the violence of sport fans is the phenomenon which is analyzed the most. (Michael Smith distinguishes between "relatively legitimate" and "relatively illegitimate" violence. The first type of violence denotes both the violence committed within the rules of sport and the violence that breaks the rules but is widely tolerated. The second type, on the other hand, refers to "quasi-criminal" violence that breaks both the law and the unwritten rules and, is thus completely unacceptable.³)

The boundaries between these phenomena are not, in fact, as clear-cut as it is commonly believed since fans identify themselves with the athletes and the athletes often become positive role models for young people. Identifying with the player is one of the key catalysts of aggression: the simulated aggression seen in the sport field is emphatically transformed into a real aggression at the stands.⁴ Several examples of outrageous behavior by either athletes or club managers, that occurred outside of the game (including a fist fight in Zagreb, slapping in the press box in Rijeka, nightclub brawls in Split, and the recent incident in which a footballer assaulted a taxi driver) represent sufficient grounds for fan violence, and, which is much worse, for general violence in society. (According to Vrcan, "[football stars] often transform their ex-

¹ Cf. Tonči Valentić, "Afterword" in Slavoj Žižek, *Violence: Six Sideways Reflections*, translated by Tonči Valentić (Zagreb: Naklada Ljevak, 2008.), 205-6.

² Michael Smith, "What is sports violence?" in *Sports Ethics: An Anthology* by Jan Boxill (Malden, MA/Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd., 2003.), 205 (199-216).

³ Michael Smith, "What is sports violence?" in *Sports Ethics: An Anthology*, by Jan Boxill (Malden, MA/Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd., 2003.), 205 (199-216).

⁴ In ancient times physical contact between athletes and spectators was not uncommon. See: Srđan Vrcan, *Nogomet – politika – nasilje: ogleđi iz sociologije nogometa* (Zagreb: Naklada Jesenski i Turk / Hrvatsko sociološko društvo, 2003.), 13.

ceptional football skills and reputation into some kind of common good and ability, as well as into a general social status [...].⁵ This way fame, "uniqueness" and social privilege are joined to the athlete's physical fitness and fortune.

It seems that the sports fan mentality has been around since the first spectators. This mentality has not changed significantly since then. From the ancient times, over the 16th century Florence and until the present day, it has always been characterized by the formation of "sports fan tribes" which have their hierarchy and iconography.⁶ However, it is an "uncharacteristic" form of violence to the degree, which is best illustrated by Indro Montanelli, who very graphically compares fan hooliganism to the fascist paramilitary groups known as the Balckshirts.⁷

In sport each overstepping of the boundaries between competing by the rules and the intentional violence on part of the athletes⁸, coaches and fans (in other words any "act intended at hurting someone else"⁹) is considered to be violence.¹⁰ This violence, caused by sport or related to it, has always been around. In Greek mythology, Androgeus, son of Minos, king of Crete and the winner of the Panathenaic Games was killed in an ambush by jealous opponents.¹¹ In Ancient Rome spectators would call for violence, but, they would control it too, since, as D.G. Kyle suggests, "to reinforce social order violence must be performed or proclaimed in public, and public violence tends to become ritualized into games, sports, and even spectacles of death."¹² Wooden stadia of the Hippodrome of Constantinople were burnt in 491, 498, 507 and 532 so Justinian, the Roman emperor, built a new stadium of marble.¹³ In 1314 King Edward II banned football in England, believing that violence that accompanies this sport can cause riots, and even treason¹⁴, while "rows and bloodshed" are mentioned regarding football in 1583.¹⁵

⁵ Vrcan, *Nogomet – politika – nasilje*, 74.

⁶ Instances of putting notorious criminals in charge of supporters clubs are very interesting, from both psychological and sociological aspects.

⁷ Cf. Vrcan, *Nogomet – politika – nasilje*, 57.

⁸ For example, in 1997 Mike Tyson was sanctioned for biting off the opponents ear.

⁹ Smith, "What is sports violence?", 203.

¹⁰ See brief history of violence in: Lynn Jamieson, *Sport and Violence: A Critical Examination of Sport* (Oxford: Elsevier, 2009.), especially 27-.

¹¹ Yiannaki Soteria, "Ancient Greek athletics and violence" (<http://www.cafyd.com/HistDeporte/htm/pdf/4-n.pdf>).

¹² D.G. Kyle, *Spectacles of Death in Ancient Rome* (London: Routledge, 1998), 7.

¹³ Vrcan, *Nogomet – politika – nasilje*, 140.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 10-11.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 10.

The event that has, however, reached wider audience instantaneously, thanks to the media, happened at the end of the 20th century. On 29 May 1985 in Brussels, at the Heysel stadium, 39 Juventus supporters died when a wall collapsed on top of them, due to the pressure of the opposing, Liverpool fans. The penalty for English clubs was a complete ban from European matches until 1990, and for Liverpoolians until 1991.

While we must rebuke the notion that violence pertains to modern age (even though it is true that the escalation has been taking place in England and Italy from the Sixties onwards¹⁶; or so the media claim), it should also be clear that fan violence is not exclusive to football. Riots at the horse races in 532 AD got out of hand so much so that the Byzantine general Flavius Belisarius had to engage the army¹⁷, while the horse races that took place between two world wars saw far more riots than the football matches.¹⁸ According to statistical data from the second half of the 20th century, in the United States of America most riots happened at baseball matches, American football, basketball, hockey, boxing, horse and car races etc.¹⁹ At the beginning of the 21st century, again, great riots took place in Montenegro during a volleyball match.²⁰

On causes of aggression and aggressiveness

Some authors feel that (football) "hooliganism cannot truly be explained" but can "only be described and valued".²¹ Others try to systemize theories of origin of violence into "apocalyptic" (socio-political causes, cultural causes and behavior of masses, criminal causes, errors of club managements, players and media) and "fatalistic" (caused by psychopathologies and impulses).²² Others still attach a significant role to football as a "social outlet" for violence, believing that, were there not such a thing as football, a society would be subject to even greater outbursts of hooliganism.²³ Some feel that sport is a clue to "ancient predatory impulse", "indicator of the fall of human race into barbarianism", while the elimination of violence from sports would rid it of its "basic psychological function".²⁴ This standpoint which, in

¹⁶ Ibid., 54.

¹⁷ Ibid., 140.

¹⁸ Ibid., 81.

¹⁹ Cf. Vrcan, *Nogomet – politika – nasilje*, 164.

²⁰ Ibid., 133.

²¹ Ibid., 138.

²² Alessandro Salvini, *Il tifo aggressivo: dall'aggressivita' simbolica al comportamento violento – il caso dei tifosi ultras* (Firenze: Ginati, 1988.), 170-1.

²³ Vrcan, *Nogomet – politika – nasilje*, 164.

²⁴ Srđan Vrcan, *Sport i nasilje danas u nas i druge studije iz sociologije sporta* (Zagreb: Naprijed, 1990.), 52.

a sense, considers violence to be inherent to sport, mainly remains on the plain of psychology or even folk psychology. Authors that consider violence to be inherent to sport feel the sport is a "war with friendly means",²⁵ "intra-species aggressiveness", a form of combat that strives towards domination, etc.²⁶ Srđan Vrcan, for example, is not prone to explain fan violence with human nature and impulses, or any theory that does not take into account the historical momentum, emphasizing the particularity of social context that leads to the eruption of violence in sports.²⁷ However, by using the notion of "eruption", Vrcan points out the very fact that violence in sports and around sports is a universal phenomenon that but oscillates.²⁸ It is clear, of course, that violence in sports is strongly influenced by culture²⁹ and class³⁰, as well as supported by outer, i.e. collective, social "triggers": the fact is that the majority of violent riots in former Yugoslavia happened during heightened tensions preceding the war in the Nineties speaks strongly in favor of that argument. (Of course, it would be completely erroneous to claim that fan violence is a sort of "outlet" of totalitarian regimes, given that it is equally present in modern democracies). But really, what lies at the basis of one's readiness to attack with the intent to hurt a supporter of the opposite club, a passer-by or a police officer?

Konrad Lorenz explains aggression as a natural phenomenon aimed exclusively towards feeding, or, in case of members of the same species, towards resolution of a territorial dispute, dispute over a female, or other possessions.³¹ According to Lorenz, human cruelty, apart from its instinctive nature, can be attributed to the fact that mankind, having invented weaponry, introduced the possibility of remote violence and hence "exceeded" the natural limits of hurting someone with one's bare hands.³² Lorenz's findings (according to which sports could be considered a catharsis appropriate for channeling instinctive aggressiveness), however, as correctly pointed out by Hannah Arendt, alongside many other ethnologists and psycholo-

²⁵ K. Petrović, "Nasilje u sportu – segment nasilja u suvremenom svijetu", *Pogledi* 14 (1984), 79.

²⁶ Cf. Vrcan, *Sport i nasilje*, 51.

²⁷ Vrcan, *Nogomet – politika – nasilje*, especially 139-40.

²⁸ At the same time, Vrcan's position of social behavior as the primary cause cannot but raise doubts as to whether this is really "defending the profession", i.e. sociology, and not "defending the argument".

²⁹ Canadian ice hockey is more aggressive than Scandinavian. Joseph Anthony Maguire, "Violence and sports" (<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/561041/sports/253581/Violence-and-sports>)

³⁰ That is, the social class that follows a certain sport prejudices violence more than the roughness of that sport. See: Allen Guttman, "Spectator violence" (<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/561041/sports/253581/Violence-and-sports>)

³¹ On the differences of animalistic "functional" aggression from violence, see: Deepa Natarajan i Doretta Caramaschi, "Animal violence demystified", *Frontiers in Behavioral Neuroscience* 4 (April 2010), 1-16.

³² Konrad Lorenz, *On Aggression*, translated by Marjorie Kerr Wilson (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., 1966/1980).

gists state no more than the ancient truth that man is but an animal with the additional attribute of reason.³³

Lorenz's ideas are nevertheless useful in initial defining of the nature of man, correctly underlining the universal motivational force of impulse. On that basis, the psychoanalytical interpretation of fan violence, advocated by Umberto Eco as well, further elaborates football as a "cultural neurosis",³⁴ as an obsessive-compulsive syndrome prompted by the Freudian understanding of "the loss of (life's) meaning" which, given that it cannot find the satisfaction in the (spectator's) voyeurism, results in violence.³⁵ The modern society, with the characteristics of mature capitalism, sees some very elaborate social tensions and competitive pressures on the individual,³⁶ similar to the Lorenzian animal world. Enticing the ambitions to gather wealth and move up the career ladder, the consumer culture based on artificially created needs, imposed hierarchy at the workplace and within the family, various forms of "silent repression" in various modern democracies, manipulation by the media - these are all phenomena or actions aiming at neutralizing impulses. The resulting emotional numbness (disturbances in emotional regulation, such as an abnormally increased or decreased tension, can culminate in excessive aggressiveness and violence³⁷), social insensitivity and passiveness, frommian "hatred towards life" as a result of boredom (parts of the brain "in charge" of empathy and violence seem to overlap, thus it is possible that the increased capacity for aggression is linked with decreased capacity for empathy³⁸), are vented out and compensated also or primarily through sports.

The so-called reversal theory is quite popular in modern psychology, stating that aggression (not necessarily linked with anger) is the result of meta-motivational states and their reversals.³⁹

³³ Hannah Arendt, "O nasilju", translated by Nikica Petrak, in *Politički eseji* (Zagreb: Izdanja Antibarbarus, 1996.), 193 (155-222).

³⁴ Peter Pericles Trifonas, *Umberto Eco i nogomet* (Zagreb: Naklada Jesenski i Turk, 2002.), 19.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 20-1.

³⁶ Cf. Ivan Kuvačić, *Obilje i nasilje* (Zagreb: Praxis, 1970.), 197-9.

³⁷ Inga D. Neumann, Alexa H. Veenema and Daniela I. Beiderbeck, "Aggression and anxiety: social context and neurobiological links", *Frontiers in Behavioral Neuroscience* 4 (March 2010), 1-16.

³⁸ Luis Moya-Albiol, N. Herrero and M.C. Bernal, "Bases neuronales de la empatía", *Revista de Neurología*, 50. br. 2 (2010), 89-100.

³⁹ Cf. John H. Kerr, *Rethinking Aggression and Violence in Sport* (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2005.), 38.

Aggression, sport and play

Sport offers directed artificial competition,⁴⁰ while some sports - mainly the most popular ones, such as football - offer also gradation of tension, i.e.. expectations. Each one is familiar, from personal experience, that we are able to formulate quite complex expectations of an event that we observe, of our acts and other people's acts. Behind the formation of expectation is the constant comparison of our experiences (stored in the long term memory) with our current observations. It has been proven that overlapping of these two sets of data activates the dopaminergic system (which includes ventral tegmental area, frontal cortex, nucleus accumbens and septal nuclei) and creates the sensation of pleasure ("reward")⁴¹. If the experience (or better yet the constructed vision of the end) does not match the immediate perception, it makes it impossible for the dopaminergic pathways to be activated and thus, probably, enabling another neurotransmitter and system (perhaps amygdala), creates the sensation of discomfort and dissatisfaction.⁴² Given that neural cells of the ventral striatum show activity **before** the predictable events occur, it is quite likely that these are the very cells involved in the loop that manages the formation of expectations.⁴³ To sum up, the expectation that comes through resolves the individual tension (frustration), while the expectation that fails to be realized makes that tension stronger and eventually transforms it into aggression. When this aggression comes to life protected by the anonymity of the masses, it is a surrogate for interaction with the society, while the emotional bonding of fans to a club is a substitute for the everyday alienation.

There is also the notion that sports must be used as a substantial resource for systematic and individual education of a person towards aggressive and assertive, but not violent behavior, i.e. a person that discovers their potential not abusing it, but rather controlling it.⁴⁴

It is a possible and understandable question whether sport is just a social deal/contract, a game, a social street performance tolerated by everyone as a remedy, a collective enema of individual frustrations. Nonetheless, while in a game we all just "play

⁴⁰ Spectacularization of fan violence and emphasis of rivalry was largely helped by television. See: Vrcan, *Nogomet – politika – nasilje*, 70.

⁴¹ This sensation, the consequence of "expectation", could explain why sport is more popular than culture (apart from the fact that it is less demanding)

⁴² Cf. Amir Muzur, "Bajke kao (re)generatori morala: primjer Djevojčice sa žigicama H. Ch. Andersena", in *Ars speculandi: lektira kao izgovor za razmišljanje* (Rijeka: ICR, 2004.), 72 (57-85).

⁴³ Wolfram Schultz, Paul Apizella, Eugenio Scarnati and Tomas Ljungberg, "Neuronal Activity in Monkey Ventral Striatum Related to the Expectation of Reward," *Journal of Neuroscience* 12, br. 12 (1992): 4595-610.

⁴⁴ Jim Parry, "Violence and aggression in contemporary sport" in *Ethics & Sport*, ed. M. J. McNamee and S. J. Parry (London: Routledge, 1998.), 224 (205-224).

together", and in sports we always confront each other,⁴⁵ as correctly pointed out by Eco, "how come football invokes such strong emotional responses, if it is just a game?"⁴⁶ The truth is that sport can, up to a certain point, be likened with carnival: it's mass psychology that overcomes fears and scruples of an individual, the enhancement of sensations with the help of alcohol, frequent outbursts of resistance to current politics etc. However, the carnival sees neither the escalation of tensions and clashes between two teams, nor the participation of the audience in violence. Furthermore, distinct from carnival and similar social phenomena, aggression in sports is often triggered by envy followed by anger, in both defeat and victory (euphoria), given that, as pointed out by Gore Vidal, "it is not enough merely to win, others must lose"⁴⁷.

Conclusion

The notion that violence is inherent to sport can be defended, according to the above, with at least three well-based arguments: firstly, that sport is based on competition, and competition entices envy, anger and finally aggression; secondly, that the phenomenon of sport-related violence is universal in time and space, even though it significantly varies and depends on culture, social stratification and politics (including the possibility to be stimulated by them: it might, therefore, be said that fan violence is a geyser driven by psychobiology, with a lid often taken away by the social moment); and lastly, sport implicates masses, and thus all the attributes of mass psychology, including the release of impulses, silencing of speech as opponent to violence,⁴⁸ etc.

It should be noted that, during the ancient Olympic games, a three-month truce was enacted,⁴⁹ which can be seen as a substitution of war violence with the artificial sports violence, and just as well that the English politics of 19th century promoted sports in order to suppress the sexuality of the youth,⁵⁰ which leads us to open a subtopic of interference or alteration of violence and sexuality (however much the old notion of a positive correlation between testosterone and aggressiveness is lately being relativized). Finally, the Greek words *agon* and *athletes* stand for fighting and competition at the same time as for warrior and athlete, do they not?

⁴⁵ Vrcan, *Nogomet – politika – nasilje*, 169.

⁴⁶ Trifonas, *Umberto Eco i nogomet*, 18.

⁴⁷ Cited in: Slavoj Žižek, *O nasilju: šest pogleda sa strane* (Zagreb: Naklada Ljevak, 2008.), 76.

⁴⁸ Žižek, *O nasilju*, 55.

⁴⁹ Cf. Soteria, "Ancient Greek athletics and violence".

⁵⁰ Cf. Vrcan, *Nogomet – politika – nasilje*, 10.