

Modern Society, Sport, and Lifestyle—Together Forever*

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Theories of sport sociology seem to suffer from a lack of studies dealing with changes in modern society with relation to sport. We can find many successful applications of sociological techniques in the field of sport but almost no conception is found at the level of a general theory. One of the reasons can be seen in the understanding of the term *sport*. Its meaning originates from “an activity that is recreation” (a leisure-time activity).¹ Is there any reason not to understand, for example, *religions* like this? Of course, there is at least one reason, that is, the close binding of religion and *culture*. Let us try to look at sport in a similar way, not by its common definition, but by starting with some definitions of human culture. It will help us to discover the full range of activities associated with the term *sport*.

In the following paragraphs we will introduce some basic terms such as *culture*, *heroism*, *modernity*, and *lifestyle*.² Our aim is to see sport as a multidimensional social institution which has its fixed position independent of a particular culture. The background is formed by modern society and, in particular, by its last period.

Culture

The term *culture* originates from the Latin word *colere* (cultivate). The original meaning is *man's cultivation and improvement of things*—things located outside of the human being. As the time passed, the meaning was slightly changed and moved closer to the human being. Cicero understands it as an improvement of a human being (especially in the sense of “the cultivation of the soul”). The combining of the cultivation of (external) things and the human being is connected to the 17th and 18th centuries (FS 1985, pp. 330–331).

Nowadays, in the social sciences, the following definition is most widely used:

Culture is the sum of activities and its artifacts which enables man to survive in nature, together with the ideas that include the purpose of this survival.

Sociology works with the term *culture* in the sense of *the sum of particular formulas of behavior* (Keller 1995, pp. 159–160). Because of its cumulative character, culture is defined by its *institutions* (“formulas of behavior”), *values*, and *norms*.

When we speak about culture in the sense of modern definitions, we speak about culture in the *general sense*. When there are some differences of institutions, values, and norms (cultural as well as temporal differences of societies), we use the term *specific culture* or *society*.

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¹ The term *sport* was used in English in the 15th century. Compare the Latin word *desportare* (“to amuse oneself”) (Decker 1993, p. 2).

² There are many definitions of these terms in sociology. We decided to use some of them for the purpose of this text.

Venerated cultural value—heroism

When speaking about cultural values, it is useful to emphasize their specific features. It is a two-way relationship. Both the venerated person (group) as well as the worshipping person (group) have their own roles. Both of them understand their positions in the context of their specific culture. Each member of a society knows the venerated activities. The important thing is that venerated activities are rare activities and a rare activity or, generally, a rare *social capital*³ has a higher value in a society. Social stratification is based on the distribution of rare capital. Let us say that no matter how limited the social vertical mobility is, the hero is celebrated because heroism is distributed throughout the whole culture. Although specific cultures can differ in values and their heroisms, there is no culture without heroes. Thus, it is useful to introduce the terms *hero cult* and *heroic performance* (Veblen 1999, esp. chapter 10).

A heroic performance is primary; a person-hero is known to have extraordinary ability⁴ that has been demonstrated (often many times and in competitions). The hero can be a gifted “being” (god, demigod) or a man who makes efforts. The former does not belong in our analysis; members of this first class are expected to be able to perform heroic acts. The latter, however, is dependent upon a particular understanding of a heroic performance.

We remarked that venerated activities enter a two-way relationship, thus, they must be exhibited by readily understood demonstrations. Human activities bear symbolic meanings. If there is a performance that is celebrated only by “specialists”, it does not bear a widely distributed value; it is hard to understand the full symbolic meaning of the performance. Nobody is hero if they have to explain their act. The hero cult must be based on a well and widely understood demonstration of a (heroic) performance. From this point of view, a physical effort has a special position. There is a clear connection between physical effort and a venerated form of this performance. Especially, in the last period of the western culture there are clear patterns of hero performances (one of them is, for example, the body shape).

Modernity—modern society of the Western type

The word *modern* is used for the society coming after the Industrial Revolution. Many traditional patterns of communication, values, and norms were replaced by formal communication, new norms (with rational-legal legitimization) and new values that are well understood for a market-conducted space (effort, competition, liberalism). The global market controls the activities of all people and evaluates each effort. Working time is perfectly delimited by the “rhythm of machines” and *spare time* is available to everyone.

Because of the permanent changes and global features of modernity, the importance of readily accepted ideas increases. Lipovetsky speaks about the “decline of duty” (*le crépuscule du devoir*). Human beings have their personal rights, in particular, the right to happiness (Lipovetsky 1999, pp. 27–29). Such directed development of modernity brought the importance of freedom of all options in a human life (Lipovetsky 1999, p. 55). The total victory of freedom was won in the field of *leisure time*.⁵

³ Here, we understand *social capital* as a many-dimensional theoretical construction. Some of its dimensions are power, knowledge, general social influence, occupation, etc.

⁴ We do not differ between physical and mental abilities.

⁵ This term originates from the Latin (*licere*) and is used for the part of a spare time, which is free of any duty.

The growing importance of leisure time in human life was “noticed” by the market. The gap in a leisure-time market had to be filled with new products that bring personal happiness. But the only role of the human being in the market is that of the consumer.

Lifestyles

If we use a modern definition, *lifestyle* is the sum of a subject’s significant activities, relationships, and customary practices. In a very general definition, the subject can be a person or a group (Duffková 1994). Traditional societies had a clear structure of lifestyles based on some traditional legitimizations (“duties”) and the stratification within the society. Modern society seems to be rather fuzzy. Duty has lost its significant role in human life. The decision how to spend our leisure time depends on us. Our imagination is restricted only by our capital. Modernity produces many patterns of lifestyles. Modern people seem to stand in front of shop windows trying to find and then buy their identity. But the aim of the global market is a permanent and never-ending proposal of lucky lifestyles. It is very difficult to find our identity if we have no certainty whether our decision is right (Bauman 2002). In addition, we cannot refer to tradition or a well-arranged society if the modern way of life has been chosen.

Postmodern society—the last period of modernity?

Let us summarize what we have just said about life in a modern society. It is a global society with a significant role for the market. People often engage in communications based on formal rules. Formal aspects form a good framework for non-intervene fractions of human life. Leisure time is such a fraction—time devoted to individual happiness. Where to obtain an inspiration for leisure-time living is in question. There are two possibilities. The first one is a return to tradition. Of course, it is a rather incomplete tradition with the permanent endeavour to explain the activity in a rational way. The other possibility is to consume offered lifestyles. An adopted (pseudo-)tradition could be included here but the main difference is that a consumer does not need to seek an explanation. This way of life is a complete “parcel” and no position must be created in a consumer’s life before consumption. The term *postmodern society* seems to be suitable for the point when *quality of life* and personal happiness became primary values in modernity.

Figure 1 shows the idea we are speaking about. The weakening role of duty should be understandable in the following way. Duty lost its general power in modern life. But we can acknowledge the importance of duty’s role at the very beginning of modernity.⁶ However, it is a check on consumption (Bell 1999, p. 46).

⁶ Compare Max Weber’s *Die protestantische Ethik und der „Geist“ des Kapitalismus* (1904–05) in which duty (based on a religion) is directed at an effort to be successful.

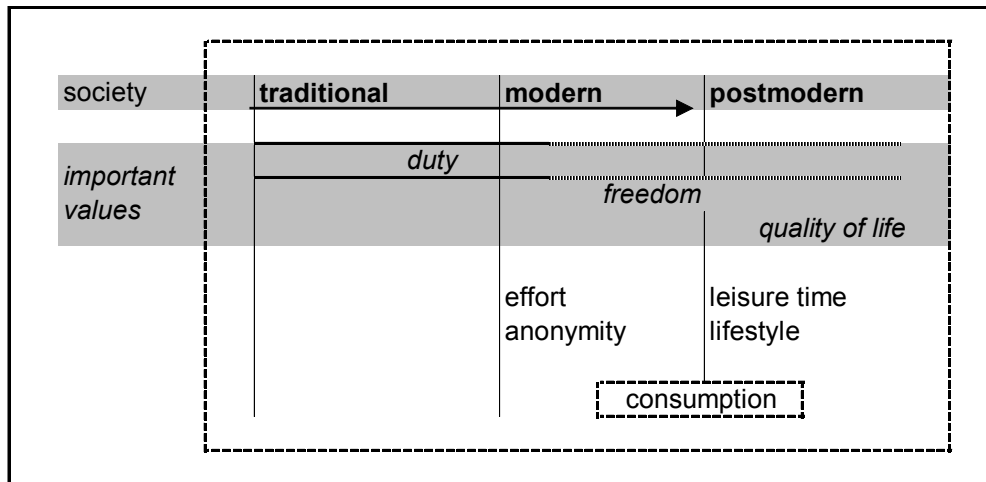


Fig. 1

Modernity is a convenient time for the complete development of a human being. This development is presented as the right of *all* human beings. Focusing on man's important features of his/her life, a human being seems to be *homo faber* ("creator") and *homo ludens* ("player").⁷ These are the only chances to find a personal identity. However, we do not consider these two aspects as being disjunctive. In the postmodern epoch (of the Western type), the quality of life considers the combination of all life activities; working time and spare time are included. It might be a good distinction between developed and developing societies to compare *leisure classes*.⁸ Leisure time forms the lifestyles of their members and it is the main space for consumption.

Sport and game

Sport has a special position in human life. Each society brings its own meaning of all activities to this word. The main and most general dimensions of sport are

- physical training
- games
- contests

Homo faber improves things that can be improved. Each society is based on hierarchies and competitions. A competition is the only way to demonstrate the success of an improvement and is the essence of modern sport as well as the hero cult.

The other part of human nature is the *homo ludens* within us. Although sport seems to be equal to a game, it is a common misunderstanding that originates from the definition of the term *sport*.⁹ The reason we do not accept the equivalency (*sport* \equiv *game*) is recognized from our three-dimensional conception of sport and our tendency to emphasize the role of an individual improvement conducted by values of society. However, *game* is a good model for a social life. Many roles following man-made rules are played. So, a game is considered to be a set of behavioral patterns that solve symbolic situations. The most important difference between a social life and a game is that games should be chosen of one's own accord. Players

⁷ The term *homo ludens* is borrowed from Johan Huizinga.

⁸ This term is known from Veblen's *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899).

⁹ If you would insist on the statement that everything is a game, then sport would be, too.

“live” in a communicable framework, which is well-known. Roles are much clearer than in everyday life. The playing of a game is a step into a new “reality” (Sutton-Smith 1971, p. 106). No matter how strange the game is, it is well-arranged and more fun than everyday communication. There is also a new role for games in a modern society. That is, as a commodity for consumption promising a new identity for the consumer.¹⁰

Summary—putting things together

In the previous sections we introduced the basic notions used in our picture of sport as a cultural phenomenon. At this general level, we have to understand all sport activities in the basic dimensions mentioned above: *physical training*, *game*, and *contest*. We tried to present the hero cult as an integral part of each specific culture. Then we moved to a modern and postmodern society of the Western type. Changes in modernity were introduced with an emphasis on the growing importance of leisure time in modern lifestyles.

Now let us look at sport within the framework of culture (figure 2). There are some aspects nested in a culture, in particular, the *hero cult*, *self-improvement*, and *game*. They form people’s approach to sport activities of all types. We believe this complex of activities has a very strong influence on human lifestyle and it is not important whether we participate in an active way or not. Any particular manifestation of these cultural-based aspects can differ culture by culture, but the general picture of sport should remain the same (Olivová 1979; Decker 1993). The significance of sport in a human culture is based on the nested aspects while its special role in modernity is associated with leisure time.

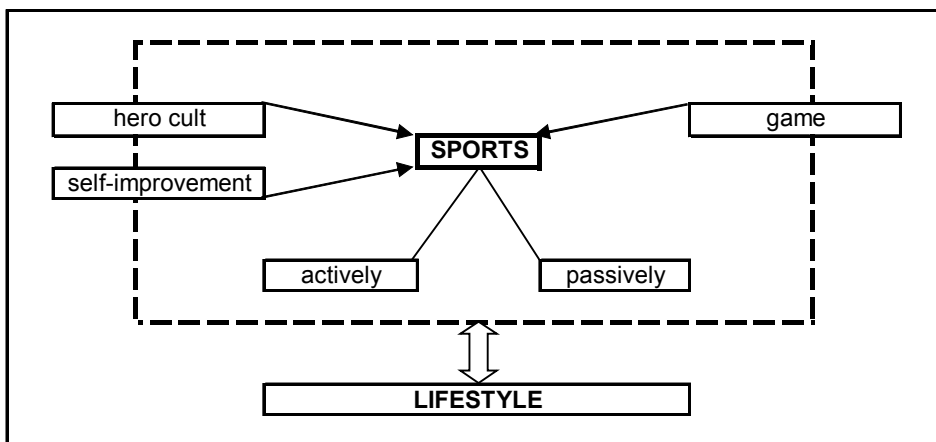


Fig. 2

We focused on the changes in societies from a temporal view (*traditional—modern—“postmodern”*), which is the main interest of general sociology, and wanted to show how the unchanged picture of sport (figure 2) could be seen in a global (“postmodern”) society. This brings us to the understanding that sport is one of the key social institutions (Sack 1992, p. 198). Sport has its own firm position in human life and its relationship with other institutions can be studied. From this point of view, sport can bridge the gap between cultures or societies which might differ in other institutions. I believe this could be one way of understanding how sport can be used in an integration process. At the very beginning, we mentioned the comparison of sport and religion as a provocation. Let me use it once more in

¹⁰ Of course, we must not forget the inevitable role of game in the socialization.

connection with the term *diffusion*.¹¹ Sport seems to be more readily available for diffusion into other cultures because of the following reasons:

- Sport performances are easily understandable.
- Hero cult and self-improvement are expected to be nested in every culture.
- Game is a good space for the transmission of some social values and norms.
- If modern society of the Western type is a framework, then
 - sport does not retard innovations and
 - it is not incompatible with the values of modernity.

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¹¹ Speaking about diffusions and religions see (Montgomery 1996).