

# Towards a New History of European Sport?

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The title of this focus is not the product of sloppy language. Concentrating on European sport rather than sport in Europe, the editors and authors aim to explore whether sport has contributed to the creation of a European identity. In doing so they also wish to establish a new approach to sport history. In essence, they propose that the ‘British model’ of competitive sport and its dissemination in Europe should no longer be the starting point for research, but rather the huge diversity of so-called movement cultures in the regions and nations on the European continent instead. Identifying the core disciplines here, the editors suggest, would give us the key to a genuinely European sport model. Such an approach would not only throw light on ‘contrasts and ruptures’, but also on the many different ‘commonalities and continuities’ of European movement cultures that have to date been overlooked.

In my response, I will deal with two points. First, I will discuss the terminology of the project, which is marked by a deliberately vague use of the concepts ‘sport’ and ‘movement cultures’, and pinpoint the potential problems this vagueness might entail. Second, as someone who has contributed to research on the cultural transfer of ‘English/British sport’ to the European continent I would like to revisit some of the central findings of this work. In my view, the argument has become quite differentiated in the last few years and should not be reduced to the textbook version of a simple donor-recipient relationship attacked by the editors. It seems to me that a stronger consideration of the British sport model is not just a good way to solve terminological problems: if the British model is used for comparative studies it can also improve communication between researchers, and contribute to a more precise definition of national and regional development patterns on the European continent.

### Terminology

The editors and authors sometimes use the concepts ‘sport’ and ‘movement cultures’ to signify different strands of development in ‘European sport’, and sometimes synonymously. In the latter case, it is then mostly unclear whether ‘sport’ is a subset of the comprehensive category ‘movement culture’, or the other way around. Thus, the reader is unsure whether early-modern games and pastimes (which Young and Tomlinson stress as a research desideratum in their introduction) should be categorised under ‘sport’ or ‘movement cultures’. Similarly, the specific features of ‘movement cultures’ such as German *Turnen* or Slavic *sokol* remain unclear. These affiliated themselves to nationalist movements, political parties and churches in a number of European countries in the course of the nineteenth century in order to bind their supporters into a cultural network and strengthen activists to meet moral, political and military challenges. Most of the contributors to this focus section refer exclusively to track and field disciplines within these movements, although the comprehensive programmes of the clubs and societies also featured apparatus gymnastics, diverse gymnastics systems and (para-)military exercises such as marching, exercising and drill, and these should not be forgotten.

The imprecise nomenclature used by the authors and editors could be seen as an expression of our contemporary understanding of ‘sport’. Today, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, there is a tendency to regard everything as ‘sport’, from competitions supervised by a governing body according to fixed rules to activities that might be better defined as physical education, general exercise or preventative health exercise. Some people even regard sex as sport. This was already the case at the turn of the twentieth century when jovial typesetters indulged themselves by (mis)printing *Liebesübungen* (sexual exercises) instead of *Leibesübungen* (physical exercises). The vague use of language in the essays presented here is problematic because it presupposes the successful dissemination of a comprehensive European understanding of sport, whose creation the essays aim to describe and explain. English academic language makes things even vaguer because – as the editors correctly note – certain sport traditions do not exist in Great Britain. For this reason, English lacks the terminology to express these traditions.

In order to avoid linguistic confusion, it would be important to work with key concepts in the relevant languages and to explain precisely the specific characteristics of a movement culture as they describe it. This would have the advantage of defamiliarising current linguistic use. It would moreover be very useful if these more precise concepts could be related to each other via a *tertium comparationis*, i.e. a common point of reference. My suggestion would be to abstract the model of competitive sport, as codified in the second half of the

nineteenth century in Britain, before it was transferred to the European continent, to an ideal type in the Weberian sense. This could be followed up by describing the numerous other models by way of detailed comparisons that pinpoint similarities and contrasts.<sup>1</sup> This strategic research approach that privileges the British model is on the one hand a pragmatic solution. On the other – as I shall now argue – it can also be justified by the exceptional status of this model on the European mainland.

### **The impact of the British model**

First, it is important to emphasise the strategic significance of the British sport model in creating a common European understanding of sport. Its import to the continent had the effect of establishing a common point of reference for the supporters of the various, heterogeneous movement cultures in the individual European countries. This occurred within the space of a few years in a rapid but nonetheless complex process.

In the 1830s, horse races were occasionally staged in continental Europe in which competitors had to conform to the rules and conventions of the English Jockey club. But in the 1880s and 1890s a broad wave of cultural transfer began, bringing a large number of other ‘sports’ based on the British model, including track and field sports in athletics. Within a few years, the isomorphic creation of a sporting subculture could be observed in almost all major European cities as well as in smaller trading, university and residence towns, spas and leisure resorts. Sport spread everywhere where British citizens could indulge their passion for sport and recruit teammates and competitors from the local population. But it is important to note that the recipients of this dissemination spread the movement immediately, with the result that a network of sporting relationships evolved within a short period of time.

The very first generation of continental European sportsmen selected and extended the spectrum of disciplines. Most of them dropped cricket and rugby in favour of organising competitions in disciplines such as cycling, motoring and aviation. At the same time, they went to great efforts to organise and network the new pastimes on a transnational basis. Even before 1914, these efforts gave rise to international sporting organisations – the origins of today’s global organisations – in no less than 16 disciplines.<sup>2</sup> This virtual simultaneity of import and transnational agglomeration could be understood as a game ‘kicked off’ by the British but then taken over by the opponents. This social dynamic cannot be simply explained by general processes of modernisation on the European continent, particularly since nation states and regions differed vastly in their the economic, social and political development. I would therefore still hold to the position that the cultural transfer of the British sport model had a high impact on the creation of a

European scene. The intensified network of transnational events and international relationships, which soon extended to clubs and societies, then imposed itself on national and regional cultures and broke down the traditional linkage between culture and territory.

Whether, and to what extent, the cultural transfer of the British sport model simultaneously created the precondition for new communication and relationships between the movement cultures in Europe is still a matter for further investigation. At any rate, its resounding success throws an indirect light on the lack of connections and dynamics between the movement cultures, which had existed up to that point in isolation from each another. Here, one thinks of the remnants of a few individual early-modern folk games in remote geographical areas, such as *soule*, the ballgame played in parts of Normandy and Brittany; or of fencing as part of the corporate culture of guilded artisans, students or aristocrats. The same is true of the polymorphic movement cultures, which developed a mass character at the end of the nineteenth century and added a broad repertoire of exercises based on (re-)invented traditions. Of course, the ideologists behind these movements may have registered or even recognised the gymnastic ‘systems’ invented (but not necessarily practised) elsewhere and developed them further. But international rank-and-file meetings did not take place – and this is hardly surprising in the case of political movements whose main aim was to create a nation state, and therefore maintained the idea of ‘enemy states’.

As a result of the rapid Europeanisation of the British model, the movement cultures of continental Europe should not be seen as indigenous cultures. Rather, each European case should be defined in its relationship to ‘English sports’, establishing whether these were imitated, rejected or changed, and pinpointing the individual meaning of the respective movement culture and the social context of its exercises and disciplines. Not to do so would be to run the risk of arriving at erroneous conclusions. A good example is handball, which several authors in the focus section regard as the incarnation of a specifically continental European sporting discipline. This is not entirely wrong since handball was indeed ‘invented’ by German *Turner* officials, is popular across the continent, and all but unknown in the United Kingdom. Nonetheless, its rules were clearly based on those created by the British Football Association. Furthermore, handball was created because of the huge popularity soccer enjoyed in Germany after the First World War when football grounds could no longer meet the surge in demand. Moreover, soldiers returning from the front owned only heavy military boots and faced serious injury in matches. These problems necessitated the creation of a new, less ‘harmful’ alternative that could be played on more or less any available cultivated field. (It was only after the First World War that handball moved indoors.)

The British and continental European models did not always harmonise as smoothly as they did in the case of handball. Precisely in the period covered by

this focus section (1880 to 1930), severe connectivity problems were the rule, as evidenced in the breakdown of communication, and strategies of avoidance and rejection in the course of national and transnational exchanges. One huge bone of contention for the *Turner* and *sokol* movements was the principle of sporting competition, which was inherently incompatible with the established hierarchical and military organisation structures of club life. Athletes who wanted to take part in competitions conceived of themselves by definition as individuals (or in team sports as a group), and this demanded and rewarded initiative and creativity. Such characteristics clashed with the authority of the demonstrators (*Vorturner*) in the *Turner* movement, who placed great value on the correct execution of the exercises and, like their military officer role models, issued orders as to how they were to be carried out. Other conflicts between the sporting model and movement cultures arose from the need to preserve an independent cultural identity, organisational self-interest, and political resentment, since many *Turner* clubs and associations, which were created in the nineteenth century, were linked with political parties (Liberal, Socialist) or churches (Roman Catholic, Protestant, Jewish). A further problem arose from the distorted power relations in local contexts because gymnastics and sport clubs were often specifically supported by governments and military bodies while others were suppressed. The extremely aggressive campaign against ‘non-German’ sports, for instance, conducted by the Deutsche Turnerschaft (German Turner Association) in the 1920s (the so-called *Reinliche Scheidung*) arose from the divide-and-rule policies of the political and military authorities.

For all these reasons, ‘European sport’ projects should, in my opinion, look beyond the preferences of Europeans for certain sports disciplines and movement cultures. It is at least as important to link the studies with the vicissitudes of European history that occasionally created dynamic constellations. Whether an active nationalist movement in sport or *Turnen* produced or failed to produce a nation state; or whether a particular European country ended up on the winning or losing side after the First World War; whether a totalitarian regime had a positive or negative attitude towards *Turnen*, gymnastics and sport in the years between 1918 and 1945; whether a territory and its inhabitants were allocated to ‘the West’ or the ‘Eastern bloc’ at the end of the Second World War; and how national boundaries were redrawn after 1989 – all these factors changed the mix, the profile, and the development of ‘European sport’.

It goes without saying that these complex mutual relationships were also strongly influenced by global factors, as Europe was gradually pushed to the margins of international sporting organisations due to the growing importance of the Americas, Australasia, Asia and Africa. This development led to the foundation of separate European sporting organisations from the 1950s onwards – and filling out this consequence of international sports politics should also be the subject of future research.<sup>3</sup>

### References and Notes

1. M. Weber (1988) Die 'Objektivität' sozialwissenschaftlicher and sozialpolitischer Erkenntnis. In: M. Weber *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Wissenschaftslehre*, 7th edn (Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck), p. 191.
2. F. Mevert (1981) *Internationale and europäische Sportorganisationen* (Wiesbaden: Deutscher Fachschriften-Verlag Braun).
3. For football see J. Sugden and A. Tomlinson (1997) Global power struggles in world football: FIFA and UEFA, 1954–1974, and their legacy. *The International Journal of the History of Sport*, **14**, pp. 1–25; C. Eisenberg (2005) Europäische Interessenpolitik im Weltfußball. In: R. Hohls, I. Schröder and H. Siegrist (eds) *Europa and die Europäer. Quellen and Essays zur modernen europäischen Geschichte. Festschrift für H. Kaelble zum 65. Geburtstag* (Wiesbaden: Steiner), pp. 293–298 (accessible via <http://www.europa.clio-online.de/2008/Article=112>).

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