

Sport. The return of enchantment to Western society

Rune Slagstad
(Sporten):
En idé-
historisk studie

[(Sport): A Study in the
History of Ideas] Oslo:
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IN EVERYDAY ENGLISH, television is just that. This Greek/Latin word is used in many languages for the same concept. In Norwegian, the concept is conveyed by the word *fjernsyn*. For Norwegians – and for speakers of the other Scandinavian languages – the literal meaning is preserved and easily understood. The same is true for German speakers. In German, television is called *Fernsehen*. The word means “to look far away”. The Norwegian social scientist Rune Slagstad notes that the word *fjernsyn* can be used for denoting a concept other than “television”. This observation lies at the very heart of Slagstad’s analysis of sport as history, social phenomenon and aesthetics.

Slagstad’s book covers a period of two hundred years. To him, in the beginning there was man and nature, the experience and conquest of nature. The first of the book’s nine chapters can be characterized as archaeology of sport. It is an excavation of the remnants of activities that were subsequently classified as the beginnings of sport as we know it today. This introductory chapter is devoted to the discovery of the world of mountains in a state that was becoming a nation in its own right: post-1814 Norway. The chapter is called “The cartographers and their landscape”. The author quotes the geologist Theodor Kjerulf who, in 1865, argued that geology would become the most popular science: “Because it reveals the picture of the past it cannot avoid directing the thought towards the future. Geology refers continuously to the two televisions [*Fjernsyn*], the beginning and the end of time.” (p. 37) According to Slagstad, the quest for exact knowledge of nature and for the experience of nature’s sublime beauty lay at the heart of sport as we know it. Not for nothing did this specific activity, which was neither work nor idleness, start at the crossroads of the Enlightenment and Romanticism, when the rationalist spirit coalesced with emotional expressiveness and inspired a specific kind of leisure which can be labeled purposeful behavior.

IN THE EARLY 19TH CENTURY, sport was a matter of covering distances in nature, in the forests, along the rivers and over the mountains, hunting, fishing and reaching for the mountain tops. It was not necessarily a competition between individuals (or teams). However, contemporary sport is about competition

between individuals and teams, even between “nations”. Thanks to television, it has become an all-encompassing feature of contemporary society. Slagstad concludes that “geology was the science of television [*fjernsyn*]. However, when television a hundred years later – than 1865 – became a medium that organized societal life, it was without this wide historical horizon – ‘the beginning and end of time’; television became, on the contrary, the medium of the present – offering a view of what is distant in space rather than in time”. (p. 37)

The title of Slagstad’s work is put in parentheses. The author does not tell us why. A Norwegian critic of the book, Gerd von der Lippe, has suggested that it is because the book lacks a gender perspective.¹ It does, but the research project has nothing to do with gender issues. It

is not even primarily a book on sport. A more likely explanation for the bracketing is that Slagstad’s macro-essay is a history of the modern project, in which sport functions merely as a structuring line, an agency that generates the plot.

(*Sporten*) is not a hyphenated history, but a total history. Slagstad’s work is a narration about, on the one hand, the creation of Norway and, on the other, Norway as a focal point for trends in global history. The author makes good use of a second ambiguity (in addition to *fjernsyn*) in the Norwegian language. In Norwegian, the English word “sport” is used to denote physical activity as competition. The book analyzes the emergence of contemporary sport with the construction of the modern Olympic Games as a crucial factor. However, sport in the English





ILLUSTRATION: AINO WINARD

meaning of the word does not exhaust the theme of Slagstad's book. His story has a second core concept, which is conveyed by the Norwegian "idrett". This concept denotes being out in the wilderness trekking, fishing, and hunting. It connotes "health", both physical and mental, fitness and wellbeing, even harmony. Drawing on a basic dichotomy in Slagstad's tale, one can say that "sport" is an outcome of the Enlightenment and "idrett" of Romanticism. The latter dimension also concerns sport as aesthetics and as expressiveness.

IN COMPETITIVE SPORT, the individual appears in a context that includes other individuals and is measured against them;

but in the basically non-competitive "idrett", the point is that the individual becomes part of nature or the universe. It is a fine point that the audience of the spectacles of 20th century and contemporary sporting events, of the competitions, belong to the emotional, romanticist side: the precise point is, in Slagstad's view, that *fjernsyn*, which was once experienced as relating to time and eternity, has undergone a transmutation and now refers to place and the present moment. The audience gets its emotional kick through "being there now", even when the competition takes place far away, on the other side of the globe.

Slagstad tells the well-known story of *idrett* as an aristocratic pass-time – although the pioneering amateurs of open-air, non-competitive sports such as mountaineering and tracking were often, and certainly in the Norwegian case, "aristocrats" in spirit alone, scholars, and scientists. These did not belong

to the noble estate. Slagstad also treads on a beaten track when he characterizes sport as competition, as the art of the self-assertive, rising bourgeoisie. Slagstad draws on this dichotomy between leisure and competitive activities when he turns to the third social class which emerged as a crucial political force in the course of the early 20th century, the workers, and their relation to sport.

It so happened that Norway, less than half a century after it had become a fully sovereign state (this happened in 1905, although nation-building took off after separation from Denmark in 1814), hosted the sixth Winter Olympic Games. In the inter-war period, Norway experienced, as did other European states – with Finland as a clear example – a conflict between bourgeois and working-class sport. In 1952, however, when the Games were held in Oslo, the split had to be overcome in the sign of the decidedly non-political Olympic spirit.

IN NORWAY, ROLF HOFMO was the chief ideologist "in the social democratic modernizing movement and its utilitarian physiological culture" (p. 198). The focus was on upbringing and hygiene. In this context, sport symbolized a new synthesis of social welfare and culture: the welfare culture. According to Slagstad, the sculptures by Gustav Vigeland in Frogner Park in Oslo, "the ultimate park of corporal culture", is the visual expression of this ideology. However, ironically, Hofmo did not realize that Vigeland had succeeded in creating a showcase for "the vitalist corporal culture which had become the hegemonic trade mark of the nation". Slagstad demonstrates, and this is very important, that the connection between aesthetics and ideology is arbitrary and lies in the eye of the beholder. The naked men, women and children of Vigeland's "vitalist" sculptures were not meant to celebrate Fascist or Nazi ideals – Hofmo indicated that such an association was near at hand – but, on the contrary, to highlight human freedom and joyfulness. And in spite of Hofmo's resistance, the Norwegian authorities used the Vigeland's sculptures as an advertisement for Oslo in the campaign for the Olympic Games.

Thanks to his position as a prominent social-democratic politician and a leading sports ideologist, Hofmo played a central role both in Oslo's lobbying to

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get the Olympic Games and in their organization. His idea was that the Games would highlight Norwegian society as a sports society where the masses took active part by viewing the skiing competitions as they took place out in nature. Hofmo was a national strategist. Slagstad views him as an “organic intellectual”, as Antonio Gramsci defines the term. He saw in sport (*idrett*) a means of strengthening the working class and making it the vital core of Norwegian society. However, when the Games took place, Hofmo, who had struggled against what he regarded as “the sport idiocy”, was pushed to the side-lines and the competition atmosphere prevailed. This happened in 1952, at the zenith of the welfare policy project, and Slagstad argues that the staging of the Oslo Games heralded a new era: “This certainly signified that ‘the sport idiocy’, contrary to Hofmo’s beliefs, would not gradually disappear during social democratic modernity and its utilitarian sport. Sport without any sense has become the dominating culture in the post-modern society, where social democracy has lost its leading position.” (p. 292)

Slagstad’s book is very Norwegian. It is, however, also a global history of Western civilization as mirrored and embodied in different kinds of sport. The author of (*Sporten*) argues that the rise of sport has been intimately connected with modernist aesthetics. In the early 20th century, painting and philosophy transgressed the boundaries between art and life, and at the end of the century, post-modernism transgressed the boundary between high culture and mass entertainment. The beginning of the process is expressed in Edvard Munch’s portrait of Friedrich Nietzsche (1906, after the death of the philosopher). The painting, which is strikingly reminiscent of Munch’s famous “The Scream”, is expressive and embarrassing. The viewer knows that the subject of the painting is considered to have been insane: for Slagstad it bears witness to the fact that, at the end of the 20th century, Nietzsche’s philosophy had become the order of the day: “sport without sense is post-nihilistic illusionism.”

FOR SLAGSTAD, SPORT IS A CENTRAL societal phenomenon in secularized Western society – as it is in the westernized rest of the world, one may add. If we read

the bracketing of the word “sport” as indicating that it is a provisional title that may be deleted, we get the key to understanding what the book is all about. It is about the gradual return of enchantment to Western society. Like many before him, Slagstad notes the pseudo-religious arguments behind the Olympic idea of Baron de Coubertin and the outright religious *mis-en-scène* of the Olympic Games in Berlin 1936, with Leni Riefenstahl as the director.

However, the author goes far beyond merely recording the obvious. Analyzing the spread of professionalism, from its beginnings in British soccer football in the late 19th century to its encompassing of every sport imaginable one century later, he is able to demonstrate that, as was the case in Antiquity, from the courses in Delphi and Athens to the Coliseum in Rome, the Olympic Games once again mark the time. Today the Games unite all mankind in the same manner as they united the Greeks and the Romans two millennia earlier.

SLAGSTAD’S HISTORY of the modern world as seen through a Norwegian lens does tell us a lot about sport in the proper sense of the word. An understanding of sport as a model for society gives one an understanding of the modern project as a fusion of rationality and emotion, of analysis and expressiveness. Post-modernism is characterized by sport without sense in a culture saturated with kitsch.

As a book, (*Sporten*) is a collection of essays, each of which offers a new angle on the theme. After the introductory chapter on the birth of modernity as a fusion between the Enlightenment and Romanticism, the following chapters treat the northern playground/English sport; Nordmarka (north of Oslo) as a Norwegian realm of memory centered around sport; utilitarian notions of sport (*idrett*); the corporal aesthetics in the art of Edvard Munch; the stadium as a device for making sport a sacrum (a lengthy analysis of Riefenstahl and the Olympia Stadium in Berlin is included): sport as a spectacle (television broadcasts the Tour de France and the Olympic torch relays night and day), sport without sense (kitsch and emotions); and the maturing of contemporary event society with sport taking center stage.

Precisely because Slagstad’s book is not a history of sport, it is a very good read on the significance of sport in the making of Norway and in the shaping of the contemporary world.

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1 Gerd von der Lippe, “Om menn og baller. Sport for litteraturrediøter” [About Men and Balls: Sport for Literature Idiots], *idrottsforum.org/feature*, 2009-09-02.

Dissertation review. Making culture governable

Egle Rindzeviciute
Constructing Soviet
Cultural Policy:
Cybernetics and
Governance in Lithuania
after World War II

Linköping 2008
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Arts and Science 437.
Theme Q, Culture Studies,
Linköping University,
Department for Studies
of Social Change and
Culture) 277 pages.



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LIFE BEHIND THE IRON Curtain is known mostly through stories of individual suffering and macro pictures of politics and economy. Management practices in the centralized systems are rarely the focus of research. Egle Rindzeviciute’s dissertation helps fill this gap, while confirming an observation made by Hungarian-Swedish economic historian György Péteri: the curtain was made not of iron but of nylon – impenetrable but transparent. Similar processes occurred on both sides of the curtain, a result not of “convergence”, but of local translations of translocal trends.

RINDZEVICIUTE CHOSE a fascinating subject: central management of the cultural sector in Lithuania after World War II. A pilot study, inspired by her personal experience as an art historian and curator in post-1989 Lithuania, moved her onto the path of historical investigation, and on the traces of a “cultural policy” that was allegedly a cornerstone of management practices in the field of culture. Her investigation went back in time until it reached the event that was to become the beginning of the story: the 1948 publication of *Cybernetics* by Norbert Wiener, a U.S. scientist of Russian-Jewish origin.

WHAT POSSIBLE IMPORTANCE could a book published in the U.S. have had for Lithuanian cultural policies? The chain of associations is complicated. The first connection is that between Lithuania and the Soviet Union. As this connection tightened (a euphemism for annexation), Lithuanian cultural policy came to adhere more and more closely to the Soviet model. The second, more surprising, connection is between the Soviet model and cybernetics. As a capitalist product, cybernetics was banned in the Soviet Union immediately after its creation. After Stalin’s death in 1953 and Nikita Khrushchev’s official repudiation of Stalinism at the 20th Congress of the Communist Party in 1956, however, cybernetics was rehabilitated. Indeed, it was promoted to the status of being the science of control, much as the creators of cybernetics themselves, and especially the Austrian biologist Ludwig von Bertalanffy (1950), had claimed it to be. In 1961, Wiener’s article “Science and Society” was published in the most influential Soviet journal, *Voprosy Filosofii*. It was accompanied by an ap-