

**National, authentic, excessive: Toward a globalized body of sports**

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**Abstract**

Sports are ways of knowing with the body that are to a large extent taught silently, transferred from the teacher to body of students, often without ever reaching the level of verbal utterances. This is one reason why sports are powerful vehicles in social orchestration. This essay shows how the body produced through the Physical Education curriculum in Norway has changed from a military body, via a body appreciative of “fair play,” a disinterested air of rôle distance, and of sports as ends in themselves, to a body enmeshed in what Pierre Bourdieu referred as the “cult of the natural and authentic.” Such a body enables a more autonomous cultural field of sport compared to nationalism's epic body, since it no longer places nations in a necessarily antagonistic relation to each other. Instead, the impure and unnatural pose as new opponents of the sporting body. The essay begins with a discussion of a possible paradox that results from applying certain notions of authenticity to sports in schools and as mass disseminated spectacles. The discussion then shifts to the current obsession with the natural and pure that work in combination with a quantified body. This combination means sports increasingly function to signify excessive and ineffable aspects of our existence. Bourdieu's notion of *illusio* shows how sport participants can arrive at this understanding through an experience of the seductive character of sports. It is only with this understanding that they can, in turn, emancipate themselves.

**Introduction**

Those who set out to investigate the relationships that constitute power and its investment in the body are confronted with a number of questions concerning the locations and inscriptions of values, and how such values are signified and articulated in practice. This essay contrasts the work of Pierre Bourdieu with remarks Michel Foucault gave on the embodied nature of power. Foucault  
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made a connection between desire and the work of power on the body, implicating that this association is productive of both resistance and coercion.<sup>i</sup> Our bodies are regulated and shaped by power, and empowered in the very process of moulding. What is at stake, then, is, on the one hand, to make an account of the kinds of investments that power make in the body, and the values that are inscribed into it, and, on the other, how bodies may respond, and, in the process become subjects of empowerment.

The concerns here are as much with values *of* the body, as they are with values *in* the body, or what may be referred to as a theory of belief. As Foucault (1977) points out, the modern subject is “a reality fabricated by [a] specific technology of power that I have called ‘discipline’. [...] Power produces; it produces reality; it produces domains of objects and rituals of truth” (p. 194). This kind of understanding of the body, then, is intimately linked with the production of consent. As Pierre Bourdieu notes, “obedience consists in large part in belief, and belief is what the body (*corps*) concedes even when the mind (*l'esprit*) says no” (1988, p. 161). Discipline brings about belief, and a kind of belief that is inscribed into the body of its subject. The micro-technologies under investigation in this essay shape dispositions, and are put to work as vehicles in the production of subjects. For Bourdieu (1977), dispositions signify actors’ “predisposition, tendency, propensity or inclination” of action and thought (p. 214 n.1).

If values *in* the body refer to the inscription of particular values into the physical properties of subjects, nationalizing the body entails a process of embodiment, whereby distinct values are signified as “national”. These properties are, by extension, expressed *through* the body, as attachments of value to the body of the subject. In other words, these processes of evaluation express themselves both in terms of how bodies are valued – i.e. which signifiers need to be in place for bodies to be considered valuable, and which values are expressed through the body – and in the sense that these values are inscribed or embodied in subjects of power. However, as Claudio Tamburrini (2000) points out, there may be a contradiction in terms between the notion of sport, and particularly professional sport, as a field of mass production, and its dominant values, such as

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the gentlemanly code of “fair play”, and an air of disinterested rôle distance (pp. 215-216). Furthermore, as these values are expressed through events of mass dissemination they are also, in turn, inscribed into the bodies of spectators and through the technology of discipline the bodies of children.

This is not to say that the values that are inscribed into national bodies through the Football World Cup or through the Physical Education curriculum are of the same kind as was the case with the national discipline dreamt of in the late 18th century. Comte Jacques-Antoine-Hippolyte de Guibert, urged that “discipline must be made national,” disputing the “vulgar prejudice by which we are made to imagine that empires are subjected to an impervious law of decline and ruin” (Foucault 1977, p. 169). Rather, the values of the military body, which Napoleon sought to inscribe into the entirety of the social body through meticulous individual training and control, are increasingly complemented by a cluster of values that are attached to a body signified as “natural”, “healthy”, or “authentic”, which is to say a body that is located *outside* the temporalities of culture.

The approach in this essay is three-fold. Firstly, with the view of investigating how such values are instilled in practice I shall ask which body relations are valued or set to become part of children’s dispositions in school sports, with examples from the national curriculum for Physical Education in Norway. The article will then go on to compare these with the values that are circulated and inculcated in elite events through the vehicles of mass-disseminated sport. Lastly, I shall ask whether national bodies are now inscribed, or signified, as untainted, “healthy”, and “authentic”, and what is constructed as “other” – located on the outside of such a discourse. I contend that the kind of careful attention to minute detail proscribed by Napoleon’s national discipline which is productive of the individual of modern humanism now applies as much to a military body as it does to a body that is signified as “natural” or “authentic”, and that the nationalist address of the military body is increasingly substituted by a novel, totalizing body with a post-nationalist address, and one with a novel set of discursive outsiders.

### **School sports: A Physical Education curriculum**

In order to situate the purpose of Physical Education as part of the national curriculum in Norway it is necessary to understand how it was inserted into, on the one hand, a totality of sporting practices and on the other the totality of education as a moment in the construction of national bodies or as one of a number of practices set to instil a national discipline. The sports movement in Norway was originally conceived as a measure of national defence against Swedish rule. Therefore, exercises intended to form character “in youth and soldiers” were central to Physical Education at its inception. In the 1922 national curriculum Physical Education was referred to as *gymnastikk*, after its single constituent element, a sort of gymnastics exercised in groups emphasising control of each individual pupil’s activity, as well as coordinating the entirety of the unit. Attention exercises were central and the teacher would use commands such as “Straight,” “Attention,” and “At rest” (By 1998, pp. 3-4). The purpose of Physical Education was both to produce a body that may be subjected, used, transformed and improved, as well as to facilitate the kind of hierarchical observation that would link the visibility and power characteristic of the military camp.

The kind of political anatomy of detail prescribed by Napoleon’s national discipline produced children’s bodies as national capital available for inscription. Disciplinary power was elaborated through three simple instruments: hierarchical organization, normalising judgement, and the combination of the two in the examination (Foucault 1977, p. 170). The military camp style organisation of Physical Education in the 1922 curriculum lent itself well to these techniques. Children could be ordered according to how they were evaluated on a normative scale and in keeping with their internal rank. The semi-judicial status of normative judgement made it an invaluable component in the attempt to implement a “military model as a fundamental means of preventing civil disorder” (1977, p. 168). This meticulous attention to detail in each child was a founding moment in producing the modern subject as individual.

When sport was included as a general field of practice in the national curriculum of 1939 central targets for Physical Education included reinforcing pupils’ health and imbuing them with a sense of

“good and beautiful body posture and teach[ing] them to use limbs and joints effortlessly and freely”, as well as making pupils “fond of gymnastics and sports, so that they sustain This was an approach intended not only to design bodies for military defence but to instil in them an appreciation for sports as ends in themselves. School sport in Norway were adapted in their usage from English public schools, where vulgar games had been appropriated by a principle of conversion into “bodily exercises, activities which [had become] an end in themselves, a sort of physical art for art’s sake” (Bourdieu 1993, p. 342). As these practices were disseminated through the vehicle of national curricula the political philosophy of sport remained intimately linked to the moral ideas of the dominant fractions of the dominant class, including a theory of amateurism and a code of “fair play”.

The distinctive values of dispositions are expressed both in a person’s outward appearance, for instance through their body-posture (soldier vs. civilian, school master vs. pupil, etc.), and in the relational assessment of practices. Thus, when the field of sport codes in the Physical Education curriculum were expanded from the singular *Linge-gymnastikk* in the 1922 curriculum, to the more general “gymnastics and sport” 17 years later, the shift may be understood as an expression of changes in the field of power and ultimately in the field of class relations.

The Labor party (*Arbeiderpartiet*) took government for the first time in 1936, and the shift in political power entailed a dethroning of the hitherto exclusivity of gymnastics – perceived as an activity associated with the upper-class – and an expansion of the array of sports included in Physical Education. Also, the organisational apparatus of sport had changed. Soon after its inception in 1861 the national sport association branched into two separate associations. In the early twentieth century voluntary sport was administered by two country-wide organizations, the bourgeois National Sports Organization (*Landsforbundet for idrett*) and the socialist Worker’s Sports Association (*Arbeidernes Idrettsforbund*). In 1939, the year of the new Physical Education curriculum, these two organisations merged. However, even though Labor took political power and the worker’s sports movement was included in the sporting mainstream, the values associated

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with the dominant fraction of the dominant class strengthened their position in the Physical Education curriculum.

Sport was among the activities designed to train the character of future leaders, both with regards to their body posture – outward image of their bodies – and by inculcating courage and “manliness”. The sons of the aristocracy attending English public schools were imbued with a will to win, common to all subjects regarded as soldiers, but, in their case, as “will to win within the rules”. This “Fair play” was constructed in accordance with

an aristocratic disposition utterly opposed to the plebeian pursuit of victory at all costs. [...] “Fair play” is the way of playing the game characteristic of those who do not get so carried away by the game as to forget that it is a game, those who maintain the “rôle distance” [...] that is implied in all the roles designated for future leaders (Bourdieu 1993, p. 343).

The “habitus” has its own system of evaluation, homologous to the field of class relations, and Physical Education serves to assess the degree to which children are capable of acquiring the preferred dispositions. The habitus is an expression of “the unity of the system of dispositions” (Bourdieu 1993, p. 350). The formation of character, finding physical expression in exercises intended to control body posture, body-object articulations, and so forth, is intimately linked to a system of values through technologies of discipline.

The current curriculum shifts the emphasis further from its inception as a military body, via a body appreciative of “fair play”, rôle distance, and sports as ends in themselves to a body that can be characterized as “natural” and “authentic”. “Play, sports, dance, outdoor life”, as well as “natural” experiences, form the central components of the current curriculum. The evaluation of children’s bodies is now articulated as a study of their “motor skills” (Ministry of Education 1996, p. 110), and extend beyond the realm of Physical Education classes to become part of “the daily education”,

and emphasise individual abilities, work processes and results (Ministry of Education 1996, p. 79). Adding to the classical age's *L'Homme-machine* (Foucault 1977, p. 136) and its image of the disciplined soldier – the ability to stand straight, make exhaustive use of the body, etc. – Physical Education produces a body imbued with more gentle values expressed as a dancing body or a body engaged in outdoor life.

As Bourdieu (1988) shows, the value of sporting practices are regulated according to the physical engagement of the body so that the most distinctive practices are those with the least body contact, such as golf, tai-chi, or gymnastics while, for instance, wrestling and American football stand at the other end of the continuum, requiring complex engagement with other bodies (p. 154). While the 1939 curriculum did not explicate any specific sporting codes that should be incorporated in Physical Education, excepting the continued inclusion of gymnastics, the current curriculum makes particular mention of “dance” (predominantly, forms of folk dancing) and “outdoor activities”, but there is no reference to any contact sport. On the one hand, these more gentle activities require little or no engagement with other bodies and hence serve to establish the most distinctive practices as those preferred by the curriculum, and their ascending popularity coincides with the emergence of a new bourgeoisie and the invention and marketing of “a new form of poor-man's elitism” (Bourdieu 1984: 220). These new distinctive practices find their expression in, for instance, a preference for hiking in the place of the industrial bourgeoisie's penchant for golf. Physical Education, and its emphasis on outdoor life and “the personal and social benefits of a healthy life-style” (Ministry of Education 1994, p. 3), demonstrate the rising dominance of the new bourgeoisie. As Bourdieu points out in a study of life-styles in France in the 1980s, practitioners of the “new sports, often imported from America by members of the new bourgeoisie and petite bourgeoisie, in particular by all the people working in fashion – designers, photographers, models, advertising agents, journalists” constitute a new kind of counter-culture which “reactivates all the traditions of the typically cultivated cults of the natural, the pure and the authentic” (Bourdieu 1984, p. 220).

The dispositions required and taught through the current curriculum, as well as practices marked as distinctive, are manifestations of the values and political philosophy of the dominant class and also marks the inauguration of a new set of values associated with an emergent petite bourgeoisie. In the current curriculum, dance, outdoor activities and attention to ethical norms, such as “fair play”, are complemented by a set of guidelines with regards to health, diet and life-style choices from the age of 10. In other words, despite the emancipation of sport from its inception as an area of activity reserved for the few its political philosophy prevails, articulated as a “cult of ‘fair play’, the code of play of those who have the self-control not to get so carried away by the game that they forget that it is ‘only a game’” (Bourdieu 1984, p. 215). Furthermore, through the inclusion of a set of values associated with a petite bourgeoisie a “gentle, invisible education by exercise and diet which is appropriate to the new morality of health is tending to take the place of the explicitly ethical pedagogy of the past in shaping bodies and minds” (Bourdieu 1984, p. 219).

### **Elite events: Beyond the national body**

The kind of “authentic” child, appropriated through “outdoor life” and “natural experiences”, serves as a further elaboration of the dispositions required by school children. The disciplinary formation of character articulated as an attention to “motor skills”, the values of amateurism and rôle distance, and a new morality of health and authenticity are productive of a new national body which stands in a complimentary, rather than contradictory, relation to the individual postulated by early humanism. However, implementing the cult of the authentic as a requirement in the curriculum leads to a paradoxical situation. As Walter Benjamin (2003) points out, “the whole sphere of authenticity is outside technical – and, of course, not only technical – reproducibility” (sec. II), hence it cannot be inculcated, shaped, or manufactured. The notion of authenticity “has its basis in ritual, the location of its original use value” (sec. IV) as opposed to exchange value, indicating the ritualistic and pre-capitalistic imaginary of the authentic. The paradox lies in that the curriculum now requires reproduction of a sphere that in itself – to Benjamin – is beyond reproducibility.

To return to our initial distinction between values *of* the body and values *in* the body, the sporting body is now inscribed as a *natural* machine and the corresponding values are written into the bodies of school children and through regulations and representations of elite sport. In diachronic terms, the values of the preferred sporting body has shifted from its early conceptualisations as a military body – organized in sport association with the purpose of national defence, trained through camp-style gymnastics in schools, and finding expression today in team sports and the intensive quantifications of mass produced sporting events – to a leisurely body organised in amateur sport clubs, imbued with notions of sport as a physical art for art's sake in the training of the industrial bourgeoisie's children in private schools. The latter finds continued expression in the gentlemanly code of fair play today to the natural or authentic body groomed in schools through the technology of the Physical Education curriculum, articulated in the teaching of health, diet, and life-style choices from the age of 10.

Further, the latter expression is disseminated through mass sporting events through the application of anti-doping discourse to elite athletes. The meaning of these mass sporting events are increasingly hegemonised as national, characterising each performer as a representative of a nation, or presenting events as a gathering of nations, and so on. The values *of* the body are quantified so that nations are ranked according to the performance of their athletes, the degree of amateurism measured on the degree to which teams play in accordance with the gentlemanly code of fair play, and the distinction between a "healthy" and "unhealthy". The measuring and quantification of the sporting body finds its precise analogy in the way nations are classified according to their inhabitants' expected age of death – as a quantification of life itself, and an attribution of this measure to the national body. However, perhaps it is from this location, we should start our investigation into the causes and conditions of the inscription of these values of the body into the bodies of children and spectators of mass sporting events.

Stuart Hall (1982) observes, any signifying practice or practice of articulation also constitutes a “politics of signification”

The conduct of a social struggle depends, at a particular moment, precisely on the effective dis-articulation of certain key terms, e.g. ‘democracy’, ‘the rule of law’, ‘civil rights’, ‘the nation’, ‘the people’, ‘*Mankind*’, from their previous couplings, and their extrapolation to new meanings, representing the emergence of new political subjects (p. 78).

If sport is not so much a matter of training for war, flaunting the ability to waste time with leisurely activities, or building a healthy body, it is an allegory over life itself. In other words, sport may interrogate existential questions, such as why or what it means to exist. What may be at stake is on the one hand the disarticulation of elite sport from sport as a popular practice, to unhook the supposedly necessary connection between sport and nations, and on the other the re-articulation of sport with, say, the domains of the political and aesthetic. If sport interrogates questions of existence

[T]he cult of health may be a deception as to the reality of death. [...] If we stay healthy, we stay alive, and that should be our primary concern. In this view, life is identical to the meaning of life (Møller 1999, p. 122). ["Sundhedsdyrkelsen [kan] være en måde at belyve dødens realitet på. [...] Holder man sig sund, holder man sig i live, og det er det primære. Livet er i dette perspektiv identisk med livets mening" (author translation)].

### **The excessive body**

If sport derives its meaning not by way of some ethical prescription but through an aesthetic value then it may be that this value is not properly located in the militaristic, leisurely, or authentic articulations of sport. To critics like Elias and Dunning (1986), it is the Aristotelian drama’s notion of catharsis, or the cleansing of the audience by arousing in them feelings of fear and pity, which is

the defining component of sport's aesthetic function in society. They write

Within its specific setting sport, like other leisure pursuits, can evoke through its design a special kind of tension, a pleasurable excitement, thus allowing to flow more freely. It can help to loosen, perhaps to free, stress-tensions. The setting of sport, like that of many other leisure-pursuits, is designed to move, to stir the emotions, a well tempered excitement without the risks and tensions usually connected with excitement in other life-situations, a 'mimetic' excitement which can be enjoyed and which may have a liberating, cathartic effect, even though the emotional resonance to the imaginary design contains, as it usually does, elements of anxiety, fear – or despair (pp. 48-49)

Bertolt Brecht (1995) notes that drama aiming to produce catharsis enables the audience to go back to their daily chores as a result and prevent the spectator from "readily adopting a critical attitude to the things depicted, i.e. prevents him more effectively the better the art functions" (entry 17 Oct 1940). Møller (1999) suggests that we instead consider the predominant aesthetic value of sport to be associated with expressions of excess. That is, as ways to negotiate death as life's existential condition since "it is *expenditure* – waste, loss, and excessive enjoyment – which is the actual productive force of culture" (p. 108). ["Det [er] *udgiften* – ødselheden, tabet og den excessive nydelse – der i egentlig forstand skaper kultur" (my translation)].

Mass disseminated sporting events are visual spectacles allegorising the excessive. In this view sport functions not primarily to produce catharsis in an audience but in symbolising that which goes beyond – and therefore defies – description. Bourdieu (1977) notes that the rite or dance "always contains something *ineffable*" (p. 2), which in his view, signifies that sport, considered as rituals or communicative endeavours includes a pre-symbolic component. Based on studies of ritualistic societies, George Bataille (1996) suggests that it is "organized transgression, together with prohibition, which defines social life" (p. 70). Transgression, or the excessive, can be considered

a complement to the profane world, [since] the worlds of the *profane* and the *holy* constitute society together, or successively, as its two complimentary forms. The *profane* world is the world of prohibitions. The *holy* world emerges through limited transgressions. It is the world of parties, rulers and gods (pp. 72-73).

With the industrial revolution, the world of the sacred was increasingly subordinated to the profane as bourgeois values of accumulation and acquisition were constructed in opposition to the French nobility's overindulgences. Expenditure, expressed through waste, loss and excess, offers a hatchway beyond the utilitarian and acquisitive attitude of the bourgeoisie. As Bataille (1996) notes

the only obvious and concrete distinction between prohibition and transcendence are of an economic nature. The prohibition relates to work, and work is productive: during *profane* time, reserved for work, society accumulates resource, and consumption is reduced to the minimum requirement for production. The days of celebration represents *sacred* time (p. 70).

With the logic of accumulation there is lack and insufficiency that needs to be overcome, and sport represents an arena where there is no scarcity, where the body, as it were, spills over itself and becomes uncontainable and excessive.

Disarticulating sport from its preferred meanings – as harbinger of military discipline, purveyor of a gentlemanly code of conduct, and inculcator of a morality of health – facilitates an articulation of sport with aesthetic values, and not necessarily in association with the cathartic ideals of the Aristotelian drama. A subordinate reading entails a perversion of the very concept of elite sport with its attendant moralities. Slavoj Žižek (1999) notes that, while the neurotic acknowledges the Law “in order to occasionally take enjoyment in its transgressions (masturbation, theft, etc.), and thus obtains satisfaction by snatching back from the Other part of the stolen *jouissance*,” the pervert seeks to establish the Law, as when the proverbial male masochist “gains satisfaction from

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the very obscenity of the gesture of installing the rule of Law – that is, out of ‘castration’” (p. 117). Perversion, in this sense, means a reinstallment of the Law or a rearticulation of key terms such as sport or nation with subordinated signifiers. Equally significant illustrations of this kind of elision are cases where the term nation is rearticulated, such as in the concept of a sporting nation, queer nation, or as in the Norwegian composition “We are also a nation, we who are but an *alen* of height” i.e. a nation of children, where “nation” is radically delinked from its Latin root *natio* (to be born), which again may be constitutive of new political subjectivities. In these inscriptions, “nation” simply signifies community.

“Fair play” prescribes practitioners to maintain their rôle distance to the game. Play beyond such distance is excessive and according to the dominant political philosophy of sport must be contained. Paradoxically, however, such involvement may constitute precisely what Bourdieu (1992) refers to as *illusio*, or the recognition that one is “invested, taken in and by the game” (p. 116). To engage in sport, and particularly as a professional athlete, one must recognise “a specific form of interest, a specific illusion, as tacit recognition of the value of the stakes of the game as practical mastery of its rules” (p. 117). It is *illusio* which produces the confusion in spectators, causing us to concentrate on the “apparent producer – painter, composer, writer – and prevents us asking who created this ‘creator’ and the magic power of transubstantiation with which the ‘creator’ is endowed” (Bourdieu 1996, p. 167). In order to uncover the illusion – to objectify the fantasmatic – it is necessary to first have experienced and have been taken in by the excessive aspect of sport. Only then are we in a position to distinguish the gentle from the untrained, the authentic from the contrived.

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<sup>i</sup> “Mastery and awareness of one's own body can be acquired only through the effect of an investment of power in the body: gymnastics, exercises, muscle-building, nudism, glorification of the body beautiful. All of this belongs to the pathway leading to the desire of one's own body, by way of the insistent, persistent, meticulous work of power on the bodies of children or soldiers, the healthy bodies. But once power produces this effect, there inevitably emerge the responding claims and affirmations, those of one's own body against power, of health against the economic system, of pleasure against the moral norms of sexuality, marriage, decency. Suddenly, what had made power strong becomes used to attack it. Power, after investing itself in the body, finds itself exposed to a counter-attack in that same body” (Foucault 1980, p. 156).