6 Chariot Races, Tournaments and the Civilizing Process*

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AVAILABLE PARADIGMS

To the many halls, chambers, nooks and crannies of historical experience there is no single theoretical password. For some rooms, one says ‘Marx’ and the door swings open. For others, one says ‘Weber’ or ‘Durkheim’ or ‘Freud’. For some, the magic name seems to be ‘Elias’. This, at least, has been my experience. The reference to my own experience is intentional. Although positivistic social science frowns upon the use of personal pronouns, it is salutary to recall a remark by Henry David Thoreau: ‘We commonly do not remember that it is, after all, always the first person that is speaking.’ In this introductory section of my four-part essay, I shall comment on the role that Norbert Elias and other theorists have played in my own research in sports studies.

When I turned, nearly twenty years ago, from research in American history and literature to sports studies, I began a monograph that was supposed to demonstrate, in a manner reminiscent of Alexis de Tocqueville, that American sports are uniquely American. I concluded my research with the opposite conviction, that is, that the cultural differences between American and European sports, while undeniably real, are quite superficial compared to the extraordinary differences between modern sports and the sports of preliterate, ancient and mediaeval cultures. It was impossible for me to contemplate the cultic associations of the Greek periódos or the stickball games of the American Indians and not see in our modern sports a confirmation of Max Weber’s theories about the Entzauberung (‘disenchantment’) of the world. It was equally impossible for me to overlook the obvious similarity between the Verwissenschaftlichung (‘scienticization’) of sports and the modern mania for rationalization in all its many forms – including bureaucratization. How can one not recognize in the specialization, standardization and quantification of sports an instance of the larger Weberian movement from traditional to modern society?

Before I sat down to write From Ritual to Record (1978), I had read Eric Dunning’s brilliant essay ‘The Structural–Functional Properties of Folk-Games and Modern Sports’ (1973), which I found extremely helpful for the
kinds of distinctions I wished to make. Dunning’s primary focus, however, was on ball games as they evolved from the mediaeval to the modern period. My goal was a paradigm that strove to include a wider spectrum of sports across a longer span of time. While I took notes on what Dunning had to say about *Über den Prozess der Zivilisation* (Elias, 1976) and bought a copy of the Suhrkamp edition, I laid the book aside for some months. *From Ritual to Record* appeared with references to Dunning’s essay and to one of the essays he wrote in co-operation with Norbert Elias, ‘The Quest for Excitement in Unexciting Societies’ (Elias and Dunning, 1970), but it was Henning Eichberg’s masterpiece, *Leistung, Spannung, Geschwindigkeit* (1978) that finally brought home to me the fact that Norbert Elias had produced a sociological classic that was clearly indispensable for the monograph I intended to write on sports spectators. This realization was intensified when I read *Barbarians, Gentlemen and Players*, the landmark study which Eric Dunning and Kenneth Sheard published in 1979.

Before I was able to concentrate on my historical study of the spectators, however, I had to finish a project already underway; namely, a study of Avery Brundage and his role as president of the International Olympic Committee (1952–72). Although I read Norbert Elias at this time and discussed his work with a number of historians and sociologists, it was Emile Durkheim’s paradigm of mechanical and organic solidarity that lay behind my speculations about the communal forms and rituals that give the Olympic Games their extraordinary fascination. Durkheim’s name never appeared in the text of *The Games Must Go On* (1984), an intentionally untheoretical book, but I emphasized Pierre de Coubertin’s and Avery Brundage’s efforts to constitute the modern games as a secular religion. In Brundage’s case if not in Coubertin’s, the games were perceived as a substitute for Judaism, Christianity, Islam and other faiths, all of which had, in Brundage’s view, failed to provide an ethical basis for life in the twentieth century.

Having satisfied my desire to write a biography, I concentrated my research on the spectators, modestly determining to write a history of sports spectatorship from antiquity to the present. It was clear to me even before I began the intensive research, that Norbert Elias had provided the most useful theoretical framework and that Eric Dunning and his Leicester associates had done valuable historical and sociological work on football hooliganism and related topics.

That the figurational model is more than a methodology seems clear. Methodologically, the figurational approach concentrates upon ‘historically produced and reproduced networks of interdependence’ (Rojek, 1985: 158).