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From the Civilizing Process to the Re-discovery of Self Identity. Norbert Elias and Recent Changes in the Italian Sport Activities

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Premise

The aim of this paper is to describe the main change in sport activities in the last decades, using both Elias theory of civilizing process and the Multipurpose ISTAT data collected in the survey *Citizens and Leisure* in 2006 and subsequently revised. It will be presented a brief history of the transition from modern sport style focused on the results and on the ethics of competitive performance, to a postmodern style, focused on the search for the self.

The starting point will be the civilizing process identified by Elias, deeply interwoven with rationalization, which generated the repression and the regulation of aggressive instincts and the organization of a global, self-referring, sport system. Sport associations have long focused on modern sports, principally football, based on a strict organization and on a large adaptability to broadcast TV.

From 1980, with the increase of women and the emergence of new disciplines, the dominance of football has slowly crumbled till 2006, when, for the first time, practitioners of the disciplines of gymnastics, aerobics, fitness and physical culture have become the most significant group. Considering also the growth of dance, these data can be explained as a switch from the model based on performance to another one based on the search for the self and self-regulation by an appropriate lifestyle. It could be an ecology of consumption, or of individual self-regulation, which uses sport as a means to prevent discomfort, support individual identity, create relational networks. To understand better the reasons of sport activities, an index structure of sport designed by Stefano Martelli's analysis of ISTAT data for the Emilia-Romagna region can be adopted. These data will show the widening of social meanings attributed to competition games: from the pure competition (as in the analysis of Elias) to an ecological, holistic vision of the body.

Elias and the civilizing process

According to Norbert Elias, the civilizing process is a part of a wider social development. The monopolization of the use of violence by the state and the pacification of larger territories, change the personalities. With absolute monarchies, all groups became dependent upon each other and the state was the central coordinating power.

Gradually, social constraints became interiorized and all short-term impulses became subject to long-term perspective. Men searched for a more conscious self-regulation and self-restraint of their impulses to use violence.

In pacified territories physical safety facilitated the growth of towns, commerce, wealth. political integration developed interdependence among groups and constrained people to settle conflicts in non-violent ways. Socially appropriate behavior (for instance, eating with a fork, shaming for their bodies) became part of a *habitus*. Modern personality in which ego and superego functions became differentiated from drives, is a product of the process of

civilization.

«However, the human characteristic discovered by Freud in people of our own time and conceptualized by him as a strict division between unconscious and conscious mental functions, far from being part of humans' unchanged nature is a result of a long civilizing process» (Elias 1939: 410).

The creation of super-ego, which gave the behavioral codes upon personalities, is a product of the process of bureaucratization and rationalization.

This analysis of Freudian theory links Elias with Michel Foucault, as Dennis Smith argued. For him «both Foucault and Elias, like Hannah Arendt, have a high regard for conditions of relative stability which allow people to make rational decisions on their own behalf and exercise a high degree of autonomy... If the only practical alternative is the oppressive experience of modernity, then Foucault chooses disruption and, ultimately, chaos» (Smith 2001: 101-102), while Elias sees the control of human emotion as a moment of a civilized process that permeated all modernity.

The invention of ego, super-ego and the id are characteristics of modernity, which diffused social and sexual repression. In medieval time, people have lower thresholds of shame, embarrassment and repugnance; «the moulding of affects that makes this all-round exercise of self-restraint possible only gradually develops after this time as people are increasingly "forced to live in peace with each other"... Over larger spatial areas and the decentralized feudal society is gradually transformed» (Killminster 2007: 92).

This regime of manners became part of the behavioural code of the courtly class: from the mid-eighteenth century, for instance, these classes began to use plates, knives, forks, spoons and napkins and the bodily functions became invested with feelings of shame and repugnance. These courtesy genre of manners during the nineteenth century became an etiquette genre diffused also in the wealthy middle classes. The bourgeois class needed to acquire the self-discipline to have a rational life, developing strategies for time-keeping and ordering activities. The force of the market compels people to regulate social traffic, behavior and order activity to assure professional success. private life, too, was strictly ordered with the birth of bourgeois family.

The rules for non-violent combat in social life emerged also in sport activities, which required more self-control, giving people a sublimatory skill. Sport can evoke a kind of tension, a controlled excitement, which can have cathartic effects. Elias and Eric Dunning, in *Quest for Excitement* (1986), described how sport activities can give the possibility of catharsis, stirring up emotions, in a sort of imaginary battle. So these moments represent examples of an excitement due to evoking a pleasantly de-controlled emotion.

«However, not only football but sport in general has the character of a controlled and non-violent mimetic battle» (Elias 1986a: 50).

Motion and emotion are followed by a phase of release if battle-tension, in which aggressivity and pleasure are mixed.

The birth of modern sport was in England, because the English parliamentary form of government functions reasonably and the peaceful rotation of government was the mirror of a higher self-control. If changes of government didn't use violent strategies, also common people were able to reach higher levels of self-regulation through sport.

«The restating of violence in the political arena which, in the case of the English upper classes much more than in that of their French or German counterparts, had the character of a self-pacification, a restraint imposed, not by a prince and his ministers, but by the members of a self-ruling oligarchy upon themselves and one another, had his counterpart in a greater sensitivity with regard to violence... leisure sport provided then, and as far as one can see it still provides today, the solution to a human problem of particular significance» (ibidem: 58).

Modern sport, following state' organization, is organized according to principle of labour division. It refused the physical violence of Greek and Roman society and has precise norms to eliminate aggression.

One of the most famous examples is the ritual of fox-hunting, which, with the sensitivity against violence, prohibited human direct participation in killing the animal. the civilized gentlemen could not execute their mission, but confined their activity to assisting the hounds in killing foxes. This gave them a pleasure for a well-regulated battle without any regret. At the later stage, people had their excitement for the game itself.

From the early form of sport (cricket, soccer, fox-hunting, a.s.o.) there was an evolution and a social diffusion

in the leisure activities. Modern sport became to be diffused and had federations, associations and fan. The last phase of sportivization include the birth of the IOC and the diffusion of international sports.

Rationalization conduced to a complex form of written rules, with clear sanctions and specific roles. Modern sport has great and efficient apparatus, with a wide range of new occupations. As noted by Allen Guttman (1994; 2000), our sport is based on secularism, on rationalization and is strictly linked to the concept of "record". The best fighters needed to emerge and to be measured in their fight. Modern sports became more ritualized play-fight, with high rational/instrumental forms, organized by a strict preparation.

With the shift of post-modern (or late modern) age, sport, too, highly changed. To understand what happened during the '80s is probably useful to make a comparison between Elias and Zygmunt Bauman. According to Bauman, postmodernity is decivilized modernity: a glocal world which nobody can control and there is the widespread of lifestyles and different tribes.

According to Smith (2001: 127), «a central mechanism of the civilizing process as described by Elias in his classic work is the tension-filled mutual engagement between established and outsider groups within a dense web of interdependence under the aegis of a stable power monopoly... However, Bauman describes a world in which the web of interdependence has been torn to shreds, one in which old power monopolies have been destabilized and dispersed».

In global world (Bauman 1998), bureaucracies are less important and more fragmented; so individual ego has less self-restraint. Network society has several "centres" different from the old states and is full of multiple minorities with ethics (sexual, racial, religious) very divergent. Freudian self is more ordered and regulated than contemporary personalities, more flexible and differentiated. For Bauman after civilization process now we are going to a de-civilized phase of history.

These concepts appear also in Elias' last production, starting from his sociology of sport. The last part of *Quest for excitement* speaks about the "football hooligan phenomenon", demonstrating the existence also in civilized society of aggressive manners. Eric Dunning thinks, however, that in the future the violent masculine style will be replaced by a higher equality between sexes, races and the same sport will become more similar (and less aggressive). In a "late-modern society", sexual aggressivity and segregation will decline and the "macho complex" will disappear, becoming a more pacific and human way of living, in which social relations become more equal and "human".

According to Richard Kilminster, «in this last period Elias showed an acute perception of the fruitful, pleasurable consequences of 'the controlled de-controlling of control' in the field of social behavior, particularly in the relaxation of traditional taboos that resulted from the social and behavioral experiments of the 1960s and the controlled excitement possible in sport and leisure events... It is highly plausible that these social and psychic developments have given rise to a different, more flexible, more malleable, pattern of internal controlling and self-regulation that is showing itself in many areas of culture» (Kilminster 2007: 126-127).

These arguments are linked to the themes of *Involvement and Detachment* (1986). Elias thought that all scientific knowledge is characterized by a permanent *tension between involvement and detachment* (on the work of Elias see Quilley, Loyal 2004; Coakley, Dunning 2000, eds). People must regulate their affects, because ever knowledge is socially constructed, but, at the same time, observation and analysis need to reach impersonal, systematic conclusions.

Human reason needs to be both "value-free" and "value laden"; so there are different evaluation: autonomous evaluations (produced by professional standard) and heteronomous evaluations (driven by human feelings).

This interplay between subject and object reflects the higher degree of self-regulation. Elias, speaking about Masaccio, van Eyck and Velazquez introduces the notion of secondary involvement. In non totalitarian regimes the self-restraint of their members are greater and their capacity for detachment increases. «Compared with absolute monarchies of, for that matter, with totalitarian regimes of contemporary type, external restraints in non-dictatorial, parliamentary societies, whose central authorities have strictly limited power-chances are less oppressive... Differences in the regime, in particular differences in the power-chances and permanence of the central authorities of a state, have their counterpart in differences in the self-regulating pattern and thus in the involvement-detachment balance of the human beings» (Elias 1987: LXVIII).

In post-modern (or late-modern) society, personality becomes “self-centered” and his capacity for detachment increases. Cas Wouters discusses this point and analyzes the long-term process of informalization. In 1960s and 1970s, many manners changed and several taboos fell down; every areas of expression (sexuality, the written and spoken language, clothing, music, dancing and hairstyles) adopted this trend towards informality. New webs of interdependency implied less rigid boundaries of nation, class, age, gender, religion. «In this way, these social processes - i.e. the relationship and manners between social groups becoming less rigid and hierarchical - are connected to psychic processes: less hierarchical and more open and fluent relationships between the psychic functions of people’s emotions and impulses, their regulation via the counter-emotions and counter-impulses of conscience, and their self-regulation via consciousness... I have introduced the terms “third nature” and “third-nature personalities” as sensitizing concepts to illuminate these changes... the term “third nature” refers to a development of a more reflexive and flexible self-regulation» (Wouters 2004: 210).

Postmodern selves can exercise more self-control in the light of a “controlled de-control” of emotion. Also sport activities become self-centered, more concentrated on the search for the self. New personalities (that emerge from the “culture of narcissism”) seem to be weaker and researching self satisfaction in new, less competitive ways (Lasch 1981; 1985). According to the last theories of Pierpaolo Donati, in modern societies emerges a functional differentiation. Elias, at the end of his work, seems to speak about “autonomous reflexivity”, that is, homogeneous with market logics. In this case, identity seems to be a cultural construct, based on “neo-tribalism”. Identity depends on communication with significant other. «Social identity assumes a strongly instrumental connotation. It becomes an aggregate of economic and political interests, leaving aside their ‘cultural foundation’» (Donati 2011: 29).

When modernity and his conceptual configuration reaches its limit, then social relations redefine social identity. The relationship becomes a “supra-functional”, reflexive imperative. This idea of relational theory about the emergence of a conception of the Self as radicated in a relationship through the other had not been seen by Norbert Elias, who thought very often about a stratified society, in which there were cleavages between the different classes. His last, configurational theory, is, therefore, an attempt to understand a “after-modern society”, in which ego can free himself from the cultural mediated environment in which he lives. Sport practices seem to reflect both this turn towards individuality and the attempt to overcome functionalistic integration. «The actors... act not as a network of individuals, but as relational networks» (Donati 2010: 209).

Elias, too, draws attention to the problem of the interdependence between the structure of society and the personality structure. He wrote: «Societies without a permanently autocratic central authority can only function and indeed can only survive for long in that form if the relative weakness and instability of the central authority, of the leading external regulating agency, is matched by the relative strength and stability of the self-regulation of their members» (Elias 1987: LXIX).

Parliamentary societies make their members capable of searching for self-regulating patterns and a more balanced relation between involvement and detachment to product the knowledge guiding their action. Elias sees modernization processes as problem self-orientation and we can add the last phenomena of emancipation of the emotion, on deep informalization of personal conduct, reflect an higher, but flexible, capacity of self-regulating.

This appears more similar to Donati “functional differentiation”, but it is also a first theory of “individualization” and reflexivity. The relational concept of society and individual is not directly present in Elias’ work but it is a turn we see in some sport practices of the last years, as shown in Istat data, that I shall examine in the next paragraph.

Sport activities and the self-regulation

To understand better the change in sport activities, as discussed before, I shall analyze the change, as appeared in Istat 2006 Multipurpose survey on “Citizens and leisure” (see Dell’Aquila 2010: 122-127). The aim is to understand the diffusion of new post-modern sport, which mix the prevention of disease with the research of inner harmony, of the right balance of mind and body. According to this hypothesis, the ecological dimension of the

body should prevail over the physical one. This shows the widening of social meanings attributed to competition games: from the pure competition (as in the analysis of Elias) to an ecological, holistic vision of the body. If the self is more reflexive, self-regulate and in search for new identity and values, then it also practices sport changed towards "californian sport", such as jogging, surfing, biking, skating. These types of sport become means to explore the boundaries of the body (see also Roversi, Triani 1985, eds; Porro 2001; Kirk 2002; Duret 2004). As noted by Ferrero Camoletto (2005), postmodern selves use sport to express their social life and to live in a free, dynamic way.

According to John Horne, «the suppliers of commercial goods are eager to help the body assume such appearances and to convey the impression of fitness ... healthism, performance and perfectibilism remain the three dominant ideologies constructed in contemporary consumer culture with respect of the body» (Horne 2006: 131).

Global identity proposes a healthy-oriented person, which make the achievement of health, fitness and youthfulness a true lifestyle.

In sport activities, the subject tries to find out the limits of body. Since identity is an emerging process, sport is a way to consolidate it, by which the self knows himself. New forms of sports were often born as an attempt to overcome the limits of the body. Now they are only a means to express the subjectivity of the body, becoming more diffused and used.

In 2006 Istat survey (see Istat 2007a, 2007b), only 30.2% of the interviewers says they practice one or more sports (20.1% continuously, 10.1% seldom). 28.4% of the population carries on a physical activity (walking, swimming, cycling, etc.). People who don't practice any kind of sport is 41%; they were in 1995 37.8% of the population: this shows that those who perform physical activities (not sports) is in a sharp decline from 35,3% (1999) to 28.4%.

In 2006 gender differences decrease: from the difference of 22 percentage points in 1995 survey to 13 points in 2006, where 36,9% of the male population claims to play a sport, compared with 23,9% of women.

The greatest increase in female sport activities is among children aged 6 to 10 years (15.6%) in women aged 45 to 54 years (+23.9%) and in women between 60 and 64 years old (54.2%). There are strong differences between the practice of sport among the various regions. Most sporting people live in the Northeast (36.5%), followed by Northwest (33.7%), Centre (31.1%) and South (25%).

The level of education influences sport activities: the number of people who graduated is of 45.8%, while those who attended high school are 40.1%. Sportsmen are mostly students (60.5%) and employed (35.5%).

Recent Istat data confirm a great change in sport activities: most practiced sports are those in which there is physical exercise such as aerobics, fitness and physical culture (25.2%), followed by football (24.2%), swimming (20.8%), sport cycling (11.7%), jogging (11.3%), and winter sports (11.3%).

These data clearly express the transition from modern to postmodern sport. If we consider that the group of practicing dance and dance amounts to 6.3%, the total group of activities related to gymnastics, aerobics, fitness and physical culture rose to approximately 31% of athletes.

The increase of this group is mainly due to the spread of these practices among women (39.5% versus 15.3% among men). Women are also more present in the fields of swimming (26.6%), dance (13.5%) and volleyball (8%).

Most sports are played indoor, such as 61.5% of athletes (gyms, pools), while 54.3% of the sports is played outdoor (soccer fields, tennis courts, swimming pools, etc.) .

Another important datum is the reason people declared for sport activities: it is mainly performed for passion and pleasure (63.8%), or to keep fit (53.6%), or for leisure (50.4%) or to relieve stress (30.4%), or to attend other persons (25%) or for the values it transmits (13.7%), or to be in contact with nature (12.7%) or for his therapeutic potential (11.5%).

There is a difference between males and females also on the reason for which sport is practiced: the females do it to keep themselves fit (59.8%), and to give great importance to the therapeutic potential (15.7%). These reasons are clearly postmaterialistic and connect themselves to the area of *fitness* and mental well-being.

Among men, the predominant reasons for sport activities are entertainment (52.5%), passion (71.5%), and closer contact with nature (14.6%).

People declare to practice any kinds of sport for the lack of time (40.2%, for the lack of interest (30.3%), for age (24.1%), for the tiredness (16.2%), for health reasons (14.9%), for family reasons (12.7%) and for economic problems (7.1%).

SportComLab (Sport Communication Laboratory, University of Bologna), directed by prof. Stefano Martelli, was able to outline a more detailed analysis of the motivations of sport. Factor analysis, drawn from data collected during the investigation Istat multipurpose 1995, 2000 and 2006 (Istat 2007a, 2007b) helped to build a very interesting typology.

Firstly, Martelli have defined an index of structure of sport, a scale measuring the frequency of sport activities and the participation to official/unofficial competitions (Martelli 2010, 2011).

The average score for Italy in 2000 is equal to 3,68%, while that for 2006 was 4,34%. There are very few differences between the last two surveys.

The application of factor analysis to the motivations of sport has allowed Martelli to develop a typology, with four categories.

The first is a *healthy life-style*, which contains 2.4% of the Italian population and is composed by people who practice sport activity for the following reasons: “to love”, “to attend other people”, “to keep up-to-date”, “for the values it transmits”.

The second group is composed by *hedonists*, sports practitioners who do activities for leisure or for their desire to keep fit. In Italy these groups involve 27.9% of the population, being the larger percentage group with a specific way of life.

The *relationists* belong to another group that practices physical activity for the following reasons: passion, to have relations with other people, to be in contact with nature, to be up-to-date, to believe in the same sporting values. They represent the 16.2% of the population.

The fourth group has *residual* or *mixed* reasons, since these individuals indicated two or more different reasons. It is the largest group, composed by 53.5% of the population.

From this analysis, I could assert that large strata of the population have a postmaterialistic value, highly represented in hedonistic or relationist groups. Except for the fourth group (not well characterized), I hypothesize that, with more self-regulation, the self could adopt a reflexive attitude and construct a new project of life, based on a closer relationship with both the natural environment and the social one.

The emerging culture seems to be based on a functional differentiation, because sport appears a means to reconstruct the individual's identity and to reach the physical and mental wellbeing.

If postmodern actor appears a “protean self” (Lifton 1993), a homeless mind, in search for new contexts of identification, sport activity can be also a more critical form of consumption. Some years ago, I recognised a form of ecology of consumption (Dell'Aquila 1997; Lipovestsky 1992; Weil 1993): a lifestyle more sensitive to the interrelation among the human, natural and technological environment. In this process, I saw a more balanced relationship between social system and life-world, between global and local (see also the concept of duality of glocality in Giulianotti and Robertson 2009, eds). These factors can be explained also as the emergence of a relation differentiation (in particular in one group). The controlled de-control of emotion can produce a concept of sport and individualization, (a “virtuous hedonism”, according to Cutolo 1989) about which Elias wrote in his last writings. This form of reflexive modernization derives from the balance of involvement and detachment he had described, and it is probably the symptom of a new form of social differentiation, that opens a new frontier of “citizenship”.

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