

Editorial

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Anti-doping ideology and Protestant ethos: is there a connection?

On my way back to sunny Tarragona from the conference on “Body enhancements and (il)legal drugs in sport and exercise” held in grey and drizzly Copenhagen, I had a brief stop-over at Frankfurt airport. I had brought with me the post-Vuelta issue of the Spanish cycling magazine *Ciclismo a Fondo* to while away the hours, which I supplemented with its British counterpart *Cycle Sport Magazine*. This provided an interesting comparison between an “Atlantic” and a “Mediterranean” version of the Contador case.

Issue number 312 of the Spanish publication features a full-cover picture of an earnest and defiant-looking Alberto Contador, captioned with the quotation: “I will fight until the end”. Inside, the magazine’s editorial expresses sympathy and support for Contador: “We are not going to judge the rider, this is the UCI’s and the AMA’s remit (...) The three times winner of the Tour in person emphatically assured me (...) that he is innocent and there is no reason why I should doubt him. I hope he wins the battle and can defend his title in next year’s Tour” (page 2).

In stark contrast, the December 2010 issue of *Cycle Sport* has no mention of the Contador case, on the front cover, indeed there is little in-depth coverage of the case in the whole of the magazine. There are, however, various comments suggesting a secret delight in the fate of the Spaniard, or at least a clear mistrust and total lack of support for him. The editorial article, for instance, is tellingly entitled “Contador under a Clenbuterol cloud”, and takes a line that suggests *Cycle Sport* does not consider the Spaniard a triple winner of the Tour, unlike the Spanish magazine: “With the launch of the 2011 Tour, under normal circumstances we’d be speculating about Contador’s ability to win it. Instead, we’re speculating about whether he even won in 2010” (p. 15). Some pages further on we can read: “sinister smiley Alberto Contador seems

to be on the verge of disqualification from the victory” (p. 22). Other sections of the magazine, written in a more humorous mood, label the rider as “naughty carnivore Alberto Contador” (24) and compare him to a Peperami: “plastic-wrapped, meat-based snack that’s ‘a bit of an animal’” (p. 160). The magazine is sprinkled with sarcastic references to cheats and dopers, and goes as far as to propose that “the clean riders organise a protest against the dopers” (p. 158), a suggestion included in the humour section but probably with more serious undertones than this suggests.

Leaving aside the obvious dose of sporting chauvinism underpinning both magazines, my impressionistic perception is that the British (and the Australian cycling magazines) I read from time-to-time are explicitly and strongly committed to a “zero tolerance” anti-doping stance. This cannot be said of their Spanish counterparts. In fact the deputy editor of one of the latter is a Basque professional rider who has just finished his two-year ban for a doping offence and will resume racing next year. This, I feel, would be simply unthinkable in countries such as the UK, Germany, Norway, Denmark or Australia. But, in Spain no one raises an eyebrow over a magazine on elite cycling being edited by a convicted “drug cheat”, to use the anti-doping terminology, even if it may be read by many children.

The December 2010 issue of *Cycle Magazine* itself indirectly alludes to this contrast between Spain and what we call “the Nordic countries” concerning the public perception (including the media and political perceptions) of doping in elite sport. In an article devoted to the new World Champion, the Norwegian Thor Hushovd, the magazine refers to the insistence of the president of the UCI, Pat McQuaid, “that Spain needs to enforce its anti-doping laws more strictly” (pp. 33-34), and pits this lenience against the uncompromising Norwegian approach to doping. Thor Hushovd’s personal trainer and former professional rider Atle Kvalsvoll is quoted as saying: “That is the character in Norway – we don’t like to cheat (...) It is our mentality”. In a similar vein, Jann Post, a journalist from Norway’s NRK television broadcasting company is quoted as stating: “It comes from Norway’s attitude towards doping (...) It is clear in Norway, there is no tolerance and if you do something wrong then you are doomed for life. It will stick with you and no one will ever forget it” (p. 34).

A few years ago, the UCI boss himself had more broadly and less subtly referred to this story about “good” and “bad” countries regarding the ethics of doping and anti-doping. In early January 2007, he stated to the Dutch NOS TV channel that “there is a clash going on at the moment between two cultures, the Anglo-Saxon and what I might call the mafia Western European culture”, which tend to be more lenient with “certain practices”. According to McQuaid, the Anglo-Saxon cultures include the Netherlands, Germany, the UK and Denmark, which take the anti-doping task very seriously; on the other hand, there are the mostly Latin countries, which drag their feet on the issue. “I feel”, claimed McQuaid, “it is very important that at the end of the day the Anglo-

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Saxon approach wins out—because if it doesn't, then the sport is doomed"¹. McQuaid was of course reproducing a cliché, which in a more frank version would read as follows: the lazy, corrupt and immoral meridionals are jeopardizing the future of elite sport with their tolerance towards (even connivance with) drug driven performances; but fortunately they are counterbalanced by the Anglo-saxon countries, marshalling virtue and purity at any cost and therefore doing a service not only to sport, but to the whole of humankind.

Beyond anecdote and irony, it seems to me undeniable that there actually exists both a markedly different approach to the doping issue between the "Latin" and "Anglo-saxon" cultures, to use McQuaid's terms, and an extended awareness of this contrast among the latter, coupled with an increasing hostility and resentment towards the former's more relaxed perspective on the issue. A closer look would in fact reveal that, if such a divide does indeed exist, it is not exactly between Anglo-saxon and Latin cultures or societies, but rather between Anglo-germanic and Latin cultures. And to be still more precise and nuanced, the opposition seems to actually run between Protestant and Catholic societies, at least at a European level, with the odd exception on both sides.

A fact that seems to reinforce this interpretation is that the crescendo of the anti-doping campaign has run in parallel with the growing success and influence of athletes, teams and officials from Protestant countries (the USA, the UK, Denmark, Germany, Norway, Australia, the Netherlands...) in some "doping sensitive sports", mainly professional cycling, which until the late eighties had been monopolized by Catholic countries (France, Italy, Belgium and Spain). A similar process seems to be at work in the governance of the Olympic movement, a traditional Catholic preserve (consider the origins of its successive presidents, with the exception of Engstrom and Brundage), which has recently seen its powers curtailed by WADA, so far chaired by two people hailing from protestant countries (Canada and Australia). Please note that I am talking about Protestantism and Catholicism in a cultural, rather than purely religious, sense and beyond the actual creed of the officials themselves. In this power struggle around global sporting hegemony and governance, the growing influence of the Protestant, Anglo-germanic countries seems to have a reflection in the monopolistic position achieved by the prohibitionist paradigm in the management of doping.

At any rate, what seems clear to me is that there is something typically and deeply Protestant in the way doping is socially seen and tackled in countries like Denmark, Germany, the UK, Canada and Australia. The Protestant morality is arguably influenced by its perception of sin as unredeemable and indelible, and by the existential anguish associated with the sense of

¹ " ("Latest: McQuaid hits out". Bikeradar.com, consulted December 2009:
<<http://static.bikeradar.com/news/article/latest-mcquaid-hits-out-tdu-in-town-dutch-at-revolution-contracts-saunier-in-mali-9374>>)

culpability it raises in the sinner. Another feature of the Protestant ethos (although by no means exclusive of it, of course) would be the pervasiveness of a surveillant and suspicious attitude of people towards the morality of the others. This attitude is satirized in the joke in which hell for a Puritan is a place where everybody must only mind their own business, and appears clearly in the statements by the Norwegian journalist quoted above: “if you do something wrong then you are doomed for life. It will stick with you and no one will ever forget it”. In contrast with these arguable features of the Protestant ethos, the typical Catholic attitude towards sin and culpability is, one might say, more pragmatic and “casual”: in short, your faults certainly do not “stick with you” forever, neither from a self nor from a social perspective, unless you have killed your mother, to pose a radical example.

Coupled with this one finds the intolerant attitude towards the intake of alienating substances, namely alcohol and recreational drugs. Puritanism, of course, is not the preserve of Protestantism, but it can be strongly argued that the values of this fundamentalist version of the latter are firmly embedded in the relevant societies, and can be seen at work, for instance, in the peculiarities of the “drinking culture” of these societies, which stands in stark contrast with the one prevailing in the meridional, Catholic countries. For instance, in my opinion the relationship of the meridionals with alcohol is more based on a routine, low-dose, food-related contact. In this sense, it is significant that in Spain wine is officially considered a food, not an alcoholic beverage. This does not exclude, of course, binge drinking nor chronic alcoholism, but corresponds to a more nuanced and unproblematic approach to drinking generally speaking. On the other hand, my perception of the Protestant “drinking culture” is that it is based on a tension between abstentionism and excess: either you don’t drink at all, or the complete opposite. And among many “common persons”, periods of complete abstinence are followed by outbursts of alcoholic excess. In this sense, drinking would be much more linked to the concept of sin than in the Catholic ethos.

This is, of course, little more than impressions and intuitions, and even prejudice, I must acknowledge. Anyhow, my preliminary conclusion of this exploration is that, rather than talking about the moral righteousness of the Anglo-saxon countries and the immoral depravation of the Latin societies concerning the way doping is socially understood and managed, what we actually get is two different ethical approaches to the issue, deeply conditioned by the respective cultural-religious backgrounds. And if I would be forced to make a choice between the two, I would probably seek inspiration in the words of the American anarchist Emma Goldman criticizing the Dry Law:

“As to Prohibition, everyone knows what a farce it really is. Like all other achievements of Puritanism it, too, has but driven the “devil” deeper into the human system. Nowhere else does one meet so many drunkards as in our Prohibition towns (...) Ostensibly Prohibition is opposed to liquor for reasons of

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health and economy, but the very spirit of Prohibition being itself abnormal, it succeeds but in creating an abnormal life”².

Citation suggestion

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² Goldman, Emma (1969). "The hypocrisy of puritanism", in *Anarchism and Other Essays*. New York: Dover Publications, p. 175.