

Editorial

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Anti-doping and nationalism, not such an odd couple

The link between elite sport and nationalism has been widely highlighted and researched in sport studies. Although academics are not alone in drawing attention to the link, the connection is there for all to see at any international sports event. National flags fly over the sports venues while spectators wave, and even wear, smaller versions of the flag of their home country at these events. In the cities hosting the events there are often flags hung along roadsides and people will place their national flag in the windows of private property and cars. Then it is the winning competitors' national anthems that are played when they receive their medals or trophies.

All these instances point clearly to the fact that modern elite sport is organized, governed and managed mainly and primarily on a national basis and under nationalist principles. From my perspective this is neither good nor bad, it is just a reflection of the essentially nationalist, not post-nationalist as some have argued, world we inhabit today and that is likely to exist for some time to come.

If one is to accept Ernest Gellner's ideas on the subject (Gellner, 1983), as I do, we scholars should stop thinking about nations and nationalism primarily in moral terms, as something intrinsically good or bad, and consider it instead as the unavoidable consequence of industrial capitalism: its demand for cultural and linguistic homogenization at a certain territorial scale to satisfy the need for an interchangeable and multipurpose workforce capable of coping with constant demands for innovation and change.

It is, perhaps, no surprise therefore that elite sport, as one of the most prominent cultural manifestations of modern societies, has been, and is, so closely intertwined with the never-ending process of nation-building. In other

words, elite sport cannot be understood in isolation of nationalism (the almost universal ideology fuelling nation-building processes), as the sport could barely exist without the nationalism. This does not mean, of course, that certain manifestations of (sporting) nationalism could not be labelled as good or bad, or benign versus malign, but this does not apply to (sporting) nationalism in itself.

Nonetheless, my perception is that when nationalism has been discussed in the framework of a particular dimension or phenomenon of elite sports – doping, it has been dealt with in precisely this same moralistic tone we social scientists should try to avoid if we are to fulfil our duties as such “scientists”. This is hardly surprising, as from my experience moralization, in fact, underlies a great deal of the scholarly literature on doping. Such literature generally spells out that one of the causes of this evil, scourge, plague, epidemic, etc. (doping) is sporting nationalism. This is usually presented as a corrupting and ignoble force acting upon the lofty ideals of sportsmanship (comradeship, character building, fair play, peace promotion, and so on).

Nationalism is presented in these arguments as an ominous phenomenon, which is alien and deeply detrimental to elite sport through among other things, encouraging the use of doping for national prestige reasons. This is usually followed by calls to get rid of the nationalistic tendencies so that the sacrosanct “spirit of sport” may once again reign supreme. I have already outlined why this is an essentially misleading interpretation.

But this has not put off most mainstream doping literature from portraying anti-doping as a kind of non-nationalist (even anti-nationalist?), trans-national or global effort uniting the good wills of all the people on the planet committed to the eradication of doping, a sort of ecumenical brotherhood which is embodied in the World Anti Doping Agency. In my opinion this is just another erroneous perception. The WADA is as much a trans-national or non-national body as one of its founding partners, the IOC. To suppose that the activities of the WADA, and of anti-doping more generally, are carried out without nationalist considerations would be the same as pretending that the Olympics have little or nothing to do with nations and nationalism. My contention is just the opposite: anti-doping, as an integral part of modern elite sports, cannot be understood outside the context of (sporting) nationalism.

We could compile an endless list of examples of this. For instance in a paper from 2001 John Leonard, the Executive Director of the American Swimming Coaches Association at that time, explained: “As the East Germans continued and even accelerated their dominance [in swimming] in the later 1970s and 1980s, endless meetings in the United States centred on the questions, ‘what are we doing wrong? (...) ‘What has gone wrong in our society?’ ‘Why are we losers?’ ‘Has America lost its edge?’” (Leonard, 2001: 229). In other words, the dominance of East German swimmers and later on of Chinese swimmers (according to Leonard himself) prompted a sort of national anxiety and the ensuing nationalist reaction in the until then dominating swimming world power, the USA. In this context, anti-doping emerged as the cure to bring the “artificially” altered sporting hierarchy of nations back to its “natural” state.

At the Aarhus conference in August 2011 we were told by Finnish researcher Erkki Vettenniemi about the nationalist rationale underlying the introduction of the first ever EPO tests at the 1989 Lahti Nordic ski championships in Finland: namely giving a competitive advantage to EPO-consuming Finnish skiers, who would have been secretly advised by the organizers that the tests were actually a sham.

More recently: during the last Vuelta a España, the two main contenders, Englishman Chris Froome and Spaniard Juan José Cobo, were treated very differently by the French sports newspaper *L'Équipe* (closely linked, as widely known, to the TdF organizers). Being both relatively unknown riders and therefore unexpected contenders for the overall title, Froome was hailed as a future “grand” of cycling¹, whereas one of the newspaper’s main commentators confessed to being “totally baffled” by Cobo’s performance: “I do not believe at all in its sincerity”.² Media coverage is not in fact a constitutive part of the anti-doping institutional system, but it is quite clear that its signalling of particular athletes/teams/countries as potential dopers has a clear influence on who the system targets (and in some instances harasses, as the Michael Rasmussen case demonstrates), to the detriment of the level playing field ideal which is supposed to be the foundation of this system (Møller, 2010).

If anti-doping is to be properly understood and analyzed from a social scientific perspective, we must therefore relinquish the idea that it is an ideology/activity/endeavour/crusade untainted by nationalist considerations, strategies and passions. A more profitable perspective would be to see it, for instance, in the light of the never-ending fight for sporting superiority between dominating and challenging nations.

References

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¹ http://www.lequipe.fr/Cyclisme/breves2011/20110907_171209_froome-a-tout-d-un-grand.html

² http://www.lequipe.fr/Cyclisme/breves2011/20110905_191839_-cobo-c-est-un-peu-gros.html

Møller, Verner (2010): *The ethics of doping and anti-doping. Redeeming the soul of sport?* London: Routledge.

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