

TOWARDS THE GENESIS OF SPORT: THE FUNCTIONS OF SPORT IN MODERN  
SOCIETY

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**Abstract:** *The article examines notions of sports practices across different historical epochs, concisely analyzing forms of physical activity that preceded the modern concept of sport. The author suggests that sports have acquired a new status as a sociocultural institution in contemporary society, fulfilling specific functions aimed at maintaining the existing sociocultural order. These functions include maintaining and reproducing human corporeality as an axiological, ethical, and aesthetic unit; normalizing and demilitarizing social life; entertainment and leisure; and democratization.*

**Key words:** *sport, sportization, functions of sport, modern culture, modern society, globalization.*

Sport, a vital element of contemporary social and cultural life, is not just a pastime but a significant societal force. Its influence on modern society is on a constant rise, as evidenced by the increasing participation in sports practices and the pervasive presence of sports in popular culture, mass media, and social networks. This ubiquity of sport underscores the dialectical relationship between sport and modernity, a relationship that we aim to explore in this article.

Jürgen Habermas defines modernity as a project encompassing various processes such as secularization, demythologization, technologization, democratization, bureaucratization, urbanization, industrialization, division of labor, unification of educational standards, and social norms of life. This project, in a broader sense, represents Western European rationality. These processes, which originated in the 16th century in Western Europe, laid the groundwork for modern society. However, modernity, when detached from its spatial-temporal context, is also perceived as a model of universal historical progress, capable of global implementation and serving as the cultural foundation for economic globalization. In this context, we propose that 'amortization, a concept introduced by Norbert Elias, is an integral part of the modernity project. We argue that sport, on the one hand, has significantly contributed to the formation of modern culture and, on the other hand, is a practice that promotes modern culture at the global level.

In this article, we have two main research tasks. First, we aim to present a schematic history of sports development, identifying its contemporary sociocultural status. This historical overview will serve as a foundation for our second task, which is to highlight the culture-forming functions of modern sport. By accomplishing these

tasks, we will be able to assess the relationship between sport and modern culture, understanding it as a complex interplay of causes, symptoms, and consequences.

Reviewing the historical development of sport should also dispel the contradiction that may arise when associating sport with modern culture. Indeed, is sport not one of humanity's oldest practices? What is the basis of the connection between modernity and sport?

It is possible to talk about four stages of the historical development of sports.

**Sport in Antiquity.** Archaeological evidence proves that sport existed already in the Minoan era of Crete. This is confirmed, in particular, by carved stone seals stored today in the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford, depicting people engaged in various physical actions (bull-leaping, hunting, running, bull catching, exercises on a square, etc.). In the era of Ancient Greece, physical activity became so widespread that the Scythian philosopher Anacharsis could already make the following remark: "In every Greek city, there is a place where, daily, Greeks are seized by madness — the gymnasium." In many Greek city-states, sports competitions were held: Pythian, Isthmian, Nemean, and Athenian games, and the most famous was the Olympic Games. During the Hellenistic period, sports practices spread along with Greek political influence over vast territories of the Mediterranean, Minor, and Western Asia. However, in this period, sport was one of the components of sacred rituals, and the competitions often staged mythological plots. Thus, despite the high level of sports mastery and preparation of the contestants, one cannot equate ancient and modern sports practices: "Although the sports activities of the ancient Greeks are perceived as a direct precursor to modern sport, the contests in Olympia and Delphi are much closer to primitive games than to modern Olympic Games. The Olympic games were sacred festivals that were part of the religious life of the ancient Greeks."

**Sport in the Middle Ages.** This era is often characterized as a period of degradation concerning Antiquity, as the "dark ages." The religious ideals of the Middle Ages pushed people towards subjugation and mortification of the flesh, not its improvement. Therefore, many researchers in the history and sociology of sport believe that this period did not contribute to the development of sport, remaining an intermediate time segment between the fall of the Roman Empire and the Renaissance. Meanwhile, the formation of feudal society and knighthood contributed to sports development. During this time, educators who aimed to raise boys into mature men through serious physical training appeared among the knights. Sports practices served both utilitarian (preparation of knights for war) and pedagogical and entertainment purposes (knightly tournaments). Moreover, we can talk about a specific system of values and ideals for knighthood, in which masculinity, based on physical strength, becomes a main component. However, it should be recognized that sports have not yet become widespread, and physical education has not received due recognition.

1. 3. **Sport in the Renaissance and Early Modern Period.** The Renaissance era, marked by secularization, restored sport to its previous status as a worthy

pastime. According to the views of that time, citizens should be able to control their bodies to defend themselves and their homeland if necessary. Hence, the new ethics favorably viewed physical exercise. Girolamo Mercuriale published 1569 the widely famous treatise "De Arte Gymnastica," illustrated with engravings and dedicated to ancient sports practices. Interest in the aesthetic ideals of Antiquity grew, with the human body becoming a source of inspiration and an object of effort towards its perfection.

**Sport in Modernity.** Modern sport began in Western society at the beginning of the 19th century. Unlike sports that existed in previous historical stages, modern sport is a universal practice, that is, open to all. Indeed, despite individual games involving physical activity in earlier eras, sports practices remained the domain of a limited group of people for almost the entire history of humanity. In modern times, sports first became a mass phenomenon, and from this era, we can speak of the democratization of sport, that is, its penetration into all layers of society.

1. It should be noted that this process was inextricably linked to the struggle for social and economic rights, in particular, for the reduction of working hours. In other words, sport could only enter the lives of the population en masse when people had free time and disposable income, not before the 19th century. Sport began to be regarded as a mandatory practice for everyone, and the introduction of physical education in schools solidified its universal status.

From the 1920s, we can speak of the gradual process of the sportization of social life: the influence of sport widely spreads into human life, now being not only a specific practice but also a popular form of leisure activity. Participation in sports and events organized around sports involves spending time at stadiums, the opportunity to bet on favorite players, the formation of fan communities, and sports fashion.

The rapid spread of sport across all population layers in Western society required the rationalization of sport, making the process of sportization controlled and predictable. The rationalization of sports was accomplished through a series of processes aimed at it: the unification of rules for sports practices and competitions, the bureaucratization of sports, the specialization of sports (strict division of sports disciplines), its professionalization, and institutionalization.

From the above, we can conclude that Western European rationality "created" sport as we know it today. However, at the same time, one can observe the reverse process: the influence of sport on the culture of modernity itself. The interplay between sport and modern society is particularly noted by N. Elias, who made a significant contribution to the development of the modern sociology of sport: "It is more productive to consider industrialization (which served as the technical basis for modern culture) and the transformation of certain forms of leisure into sports competitions as interrelated tendencies and integral components of the holistic process of transforming society into its modern form." This interplay is most noticeable in its aesthetic and ethical components. Thus, we can speak of the modern

human as a homo ludis — a sporting human. This new human not only differs in sports physiology but also possesses a particular set of moral qualities that logically stem from their sporting lifestyle: perseverance, goal orientation, absence of socially condemned habits, etc.

In the era of modernity, non-utilitarian sports practices were rationalized, and this process was inextricably linked to instrumentalization: certain functions were imposed on sports.

The list of functions we will present below is our theoretical development based on the analysis and synthesis of scientific literature on our research topic. It is important to emphasize that we will list only the culture-forming functions of sport, not all of its functions, which are significantly more.

Function 1. Sport produces and reproduces the human body.

The human body has always been part of the economic production process. However, in the era of modernity, specific relationships between the economy and the human body were established. On the one hand, the body gradually ceases to be a productive force, thereby seemingly exiting the economic cycle. Indeed, technical, economic, and social progress has significantly reduced the physical involvement of humans in the labor process: economic growth has allowed both a reduction in the working day and freed many population layers from the necessity of participating in the work process - children and teenagers, people on leave, those temporarily or permanently freed from work due to health conditions, the elderly; technological progress has relieved humans of physical loads, transferring them to machines; the development of society has led to an increase in the need for intellectual labor, meaning an ever-increasing part of the population is engaged in work that does not involve any physical activity.

In the democratic society of modernity, sport creates a special sociocultural space where class, political, economic, interethnic, interracial, and gender inequalities are annulled. Indeed, sport nurtures the democratic belief in equality of opportunity and equal rights: in sports, everyone abides by the same rules, quantitative criteria for evaluating sports achievements are known and transparent, and everyone can engage in sports and demonstrate their sports achievements.

However, despite significant social progress in Western society, universal equality remains a horizon towards which we can only strive: actual inequality continues to exist (in various manifestations), despite the declared equality of people.

By highlighting the culture-forming functions of modern sport, we can see that modernity and sport are in a reciprocal relationship: on one hand, the modern economy has allowed the entire population to engage in sports, and on the other hand, sport fuels today's stagnating economy; on one hand, modern moral norms condemning violence and aggression have led millions of people to sports, where they can vent negative emotions, and on the other hand, sport allows for the natural aggressiveness of humans to be channeled into the peaceful stream of sports

achievements, thereby making modern society safer; on one hand, the high modern level of economic and technological development has allowed everyone to have leisure time and, consequently, to engage in sports regularly, and on the other hand, sport solves the complex problem of modern man—ridding him of boredom; on one hand, the modern political system ensures equal rights for all, allowing everyone to engage in sports and have chances for high sports achievements, and on the other hand, sport supports the population's satisfaction with the contemporary political situation, reinforcing its belief in the realization of democratic ideals.

From the above, we can assert that the sportization is one of the components of the modernity project, allowing this project to expand both in depth, penetrating into all new areas of human activity, and in width, remaining a horizon of development for non-Western societies.

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