

## Book Review

### Jean-Michel De Waele & Alexandre Husting (eds) *Sport, politiques et sociétés en Europe centrale et orientale*

Brussels: Éditions de L'université de Bruxelles (2005)

**Luca Barani**

*Université Libre de Bruxelles, Belgium*

This book offers an analysis of the transformation of sport structures and activities in the Central and East European countries (CEECs) after their transition to market economy and liberal democracy in the 1990s. The chapters of the book detail the changes induced by the transition from a state-controlled sport model, based on political accountability of sport governing bodies accompanied by formal and informal public subsidies, to a 'privatised' sport structure, based on economic performance and business logic, forced by the disappearance of political international competition with the 'western bloc' and by the fading of the predominant role of state-directed economic and social activities.

The reader is provided with a kaleidoscopic view of some of the changes experienced by sport structures and organization in the CEECs, with the underlying view that they are not pathological or abnormal developments, but rather interesting cases where certain trends and constraints, experienced elsewhere in the world, are magnified. By adopting such a perspective, the social consequences of underlying characteristics of the sport are under scrutiny. In the view of the authors of this book, competitive sport is more and more aligned to the enterprise and to the pursuit of profit, given its looming economic dimension.

From a theoretical view of point, this book has its main references on the French-speaking literature of sociological analysis of sport phenomena. With this reference in mind, this book criticises the myth of the apolitical nature of the sport phenomenon maintained by the sport governing bodies. This discourse is put into question from a double perspective. On the one hand, the introduction presents the sport phenomena from a international relations perspective. Especially for Eastern Europe, during the Cold war, sport organisation and structures were dependant of international politics. Firstly, major competitive sport events were used for legitimising political regimes, leading to the instrumentalisation and politicization of sporting victories. Secondly, this situation led to perverse effects for athletes: early screening of youth attitudes to sport, emphasis on sport elites over-competitive training techniques and organised doping.

On the other hand, the introduction focuses its attention to the dimension of the political internal dynamics. Two independent variables are highlighted; the first is the general political configuration and the state policy for the sport sector in particular, and the second is the social context, including legal and economic parameters. In spite of this one-way relationship, sport activities are considered to be specific with their logic, structures and actors' configuration. Nonetheless, the lack of references to more western-oriented scholarship, like Pascal Boniface (*Football et mondialisation* 2006; *L'Europe et le sport* 2001; *Géopolitique du football* 1999) is glaring, unless for criticising it for the neglect of sport developments in the CEECs.

As said before, the thread which links the different chapters is the relationship between sport and its social and political context. Sport is the dependent variable in respect of its more

general context. The idea of sport as a factor able to change social reality is rejected. On the contrary, sporting phenomena are considered as a symptomatic of more general social transformations on which they are embedded. This is especially true for the segments of sport activities characterised by a business logic and mass media exposure, which are more sensitive to the changes experienced by societies in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE). The empirical examples used to illustrate the link between sport and society, according to the line of research taken in this book, are drawn from the transition societies of CEE. The chapters can be read in pairs.

The first chapter investigates how football competitive logics in Romania were influenced by change of the political and economic context in the direction of a drift to corruption and lack of competitive balance in the national league. The second illustrates how sport organisation in Poland was transformed by the economic liberalisation in the direction of professionalisation and privatisation, with the consequent shrinking of the associative tissue of sport activities. The third shows the symbolic and nationalist uses of sporting symbols and structures in Lithuania during the Soviet rule of this country and its struggle after the sudden shift to the private sector. The following chapter continues on the same vein presenting the nationalist discourse developing around sport issues in internet chat-rooms populated by Bulgarian supporters, stressing that sport is best understood as a vehicle for debating what nationalism is. The forth piece analyses the linkage of football supporters with political hooliganism in the former Yugoslavia, presenting it as the acceleration of a earlier trend of growing instrumentalisation of sport for political purposes. The fifth tries to unbundle the links between sport business and illicit economic activities in the Balkan region, more specifically in Bulgaria, as part of the general 'privatization' of previously state-controlled activities. The final chapter correlates the general migration trends of eastern Europeans with the presence of football players in West European leagues. The main finding of this chapter is that, notwithstanding the open-door policy represented by the legal regime instaurated by the Bosman ruling for citizens from CEECs, economic and social logics are favouring immigration of African and Southern American football players.

The heuristic potential of such an approach overcomes the fact that, as it is often the case with edited books, the collection of articles is of uneven quality. Reviewing the evidence presented in this book, it seems that sport does not produce many social changes, apart from boosting national pride and providing evidence that east European societies became more integrated. A minimum of national pride is necessary to put nations on the map. But Yugoslavia, the USSR and East Germany produced world-class athletes, yet collapsed regardless.

The books presents an introduction to the concrete problems of sport in the societies of CEE without providing a systematic picture of the former 'Soviet bloc', resulting in a publication that as a collection of articles fails to work as a whole and does not present common model for the analysis of sport. The readership for such a book is the general public who want to become more familiar with sport development in CEE.

\*\*\*

### **Declan Hill**

*University of Oxford*

The link between sport and politics goes back a long way in Europe, but arguably the worst example in the contemporary era was in a football match on the 13 May 1990 in the Maksimir Stadium in Zagreb. There had just been an election in Croatia, at that time still a state of Yugoslavia, and pro-independence parties had won a majority of the seats. In the game the Serbian team Red Star Belgrade played the Croatian team Dinamo Zagreb. Both clubs were linked to the ultra-nationalist politicians of either side. During the game the visiting fans

ripped out billboards and began to chant political taunts like 'Zagreb is Serbian'. The home fans pelted them with stones and then charged across the pitch. In the ensuing riot the police fought, the fans fought and the players and team officials fought. It was this football riot that is credited by many observers as the incident that sparked the long series of Balkan civil wars and all their accompanying ethnic massacres. Certainly, the Serbian war criminal and mafia thug Arkan, explicitly boasted of the role played by his gang of football 'fans' in this riot and during some of the worst atrocities of the war in the former-Yugoslavia.

It is this area of sport and its political connections in former socialist countries of Central and Eastern Europe that De Waele and Husting explore in their book *Sports, politiques et sociétés en Europe centrale et orientale*. The work is available only in French. This is unfortunate because there are parts of the book that deserve a much wider audience. The book is an edited volume, containing a collection of eight chapters linked together by the theme of sports and politics. As it is often the case in collective edited works, there is a variable level of quality in the chapters; some of the articles are extremely good and set a particular standard which other chapters fail to meet.

The book begins with a slightly underwhelming essay by the two editors entitled '*Sport, more than a game*'. It is largely a review of the sociological work on the links between sports and politics and mentions the usual suspects of the Nazis, the Olympics and the Cold War. The second chapter, '*The Organization and Economics of Rumanian Football*', by Michel Raspaud and Radu Ababei is more interesting. It attempts to explain why no Eastern European football team since the fall of the Communist era has done well in UEFA club competitions. The principal strength of this piece is that the authors explain how deeply corrupt the world of sports was in the former Soviet era, which acerbated the current economic problems for sport in the central and east European region.

'*The Influence of the Political Transformation on the Functioning of Polish Sports Clubs*' by Andrezej Smolen continues this exploration. Unfortunately, Smolen's work was completed a few years ago, so he does not mention the widespread match-fraud and corruption that has led observers to estimate that 70 to 80 percent of games played in the Polish professional league in the last few years have been fixed. Much of this corruption is alleged to have been organised by the clubs themselves; it would have been interesting to see what Smolen would have made of this situation.

'*Sport and the Construction of a National Lithuanian Identity*' (Ingvaras Butautas and Rasa Cepaitiene) switches from football to basketball and it shows how matches were regarded as a form of political protest under the Soviet regime and aided the development of national identity after independence in 1991.

'*Loyal until death*' by Maria Iliycheva is a discussion of Bulgarian chat rooms and football fans. She shows that the fans explicitly link sex, nationalism and manliness to the success of their football teams. It is a continuation in the cyber-world of the work of Marsh and others in their analysis of English football hooligan's chants and songs of the 1980s.

'*Football, Politics and Violence*' (Srdjan Vrcan) is an alternatively fascinating and, yet at times, frustrating account of the links between the some of the worst Balkan leaders and football violence. Fascinating, because Vrcan is excellent at showing the direct and explicit links that these leaders made to football to strengthen their regimes. Frustrating because, Vrcan writes badly and at times his ideas disappear into a cloud of overly verbose text. This is unfortunate because the analysis is strong .

The best chapter in the collection is by Philippe Chassagne and Kole Gjelošhaj, '*Sport, Business and Milieu in the Balkans*'. It makes for chilling and terrifying reading. Chassagne and Gjelošhaj keep their prose simple and the tale they tell reads like a section from the archives of a Mafia Godfather. However, it is no lurid re-telling of stories; their analysis is a good explanation of *why* criminals wish to enter into sport. They show that sport in the Balkans provides an excellent vehicle for both extortion and money laundering for criminals.

Chassagne and Gjelošhaj do miss an important motivation for East European criminals to enter the sports world: image laundering. Frequently, politically connected criminals or criminally connected politicians enter sport to wash their own images. They tie their profile to a sporting club and as the club does well so the politician or criminal's image is improved. It is clear that a number of East European criminals, politicians and businessmen are currently using sport for their own benefit.

The final article, Alexandre Husting's *'Sportsmen from Former Communist Countries in European Football'* is a straight-forward description of the numbers of 'foreign' players there are in each of the top European leagues and some of the reasons why they move to play there in the context of European Union legislation.

In general the book is a good read that I would recommend to anyone interested in the sociology of sport. However, there is one important caveat to my recommendation. The methodology used by researchers throughout the book is weak. In the entire volume of eight articles there was only one interview with an athlete – a Lithuanian heavy-weight boxer from the 1940s - cited in the notes. This is an important oversight. Imagine a similar volume on sex workers or business executives that did not feature interviews with the very people that it purports to study. Thus the volume reads like an interesting and intelligent, but not particularly well-informed, commentary on newspaper articles and academic journals. This is a pity because the subject is worthy of a more in-depth analysis.

\*\*\*