Corporeity and Integration in the Intercultural Dimension of Sport

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Abstract
When doing sports, it is mostly the body that speaks. The face expressions, the gestures, the behavior, the cries of joy or pain, are all ways of communicating. Some bodily expressions are universal and also athletes use body language; Sport is practiced by many, is followed by everyone, and is in everyday life, thus becoming a psychological, social and cultural incentive. It creates symbols and expressive signs, and fully belongs to culture; it can be defined as a communicative language that changes as the society changes too, and triggers a multitude of behavioral patterns. Greater value holds what a sportsman communicates with his behavior: a correct behavior, respectful of rules and opponents, shows that he shares the authentic values that sport spreads. The connection with the cultures of other peoples allows sport becoming an instrument through which one is able to implement a process of socialization between subjects, whether they are men or women, or ethnic minorities and immigrants, wherever economic differences emerge or physical barriers are found for people with disabilities, in linguistic and cultural diversity.

Introduction

In a complex world evolving towards a global society, which minimizes distances and is linked by a communication structure composed of a dense planetary network, sport, compared to all other social contexts and areas, speaks a universal language that, more than any other one, is able to unite people. It generates similarities among people and brings them together, outside of all national, political and cultural inequalities and against all forms of discrimination. Judo athletes, for example, communicate various emotions and feelings through their gestures and movements: love, pain, joy, etc; the tired face of a cross-country skier reminds us of the effort and tenacity he employs during the race; the discobolous sporadically launches a cry expressing all his satisfaction; that cry is not expressed in Italian, in French or Arabic: it is a cry of universal joy. Therefore, sport represents a type of language that can be perceived by everyone; a form of aggregating communication, perhaps the most powerful of the twentieth century. Like culture, it also uses action patterns, symbolic systems and a shared language. These characteristics then arouse a particular interest in the field of sport sociology. Specifically, when we speak of sports, in the meantime, we also speak of the body language featuring an ambivalence that makes it elusive to any observation and analysis. Even the proposals and developments of non-verbal communication, projected to understand the signs of the body and to decode them, are likely to mislead the authentic nature; we cannot speak of body language by separating it from the emotional past.

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To listen to the other, however, should not be understood only as an emotional involvement aimed at easily dying out, but it should rather be preserved and sustained through constructive confrontation with thoughts that are different from one's own ones, and then fuelled by the encounter of different knowledge through which to bring out the discrepancies between the different ways of interpreting the world, grasp the analogies and share cultural heritage and ideas. The understanding is, at the same time, the means and the goal of human communication. If mutual understanding is lacking, progress cannot exist in the relationships between individuals, nations and cultures. The other is not only objectively understood, but he is perceived as another person identified with oneself, an ego alter that becomes an alter ego; therefore, in order to understand the other, it needs to develop a process of empathy, identification and projection. The understanding also requires openness, sympathy and generosity. Rejecting otherness and what one does not know puts social relationships on the same level and makes them poorer, denying the individuals the possibility of living opportunities for personal growth and intercultural exchange. Therefore, of fundamental importance are: dialogue, interaction and comparison, but also a constructive conflict between divergent identities and cultures. Like also in sports, confrontation is needed to learn discrepancies and bonds, the development of the respect for diversity, the ability to decentralize and control the cognitive conflict when dealing with what is not familiar and proves usual to us; they are intellectual and practical skills and abilities that must be improved, introjected and trained from the first years of life, through the direct experience of the multiplicity and complexity of one's own life environment. So sports practice should be seen as a project that requires a multitude of ideas and a plurality of initiatives able to elaborate cooperative skills, face together conflicts and tensions, test bonds and interconnections, and create interdependencies to develop new forms of solidarity and friendship. School alone is not enough to continue this new journey together towards shared values, being it the only socializing and formative source. As has already been said, it becomes fundamental to work in non-formal educational areas, capable of enhancing the experiences, problems and senses of belonging that bind indigenous peoples and migrants; thus it needs to start from any educational context in such a way as to favor the interaction between natives and migrants as much as possible. Nowadays, the sociology of sport cannot understand the values of a single culture, but it must put itself to the test of the many values that distinguish the so-called multicultural societies in which we come across, and with which we deal today. Explicit racism has now fortunately almost disappeared from the intercultural discourses and paths; yet, a multi-cultural racism is still alive, even if, as mentioned above, it tends not to make explicit judgments of superiorities or inferiorities, but it seeks to enclose and divide individuals within cultural cages that are often related to powerful stereotypes. A good example can be given by the idea, currently complicated to eradicate, that certain peoples are expressly suited to certain types of sports and not to others for their physical and mental characteristics. Therefore, an interculture which starts from sport understood in its recreational meaning teaches us that the game experience connects us to other human beings, that all games are similar (for which we can discover the other more similar to us than we expected), and that, by playing together, we can feel united by the game more than we feel separated from other forms of belonging. Furthermore, an interculture that starts from the games leads us to another perspective, because, while a multi-cultural approach to the game is based on the assumption that cultures come first and some games resulting from them come second, an intercultural approach presupposes the idea that cultures take shape depending on who plays and where, when and why he does it.

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At this point, it becomes fundamental to spread and educate to an interculture which starts from games and spreads a non-distorted image of cultures. It can be said that it is the people, and not the culture, that make sport; thus, in a multiculturalist approach, it is people themselves who lose out, who are never in line with the presumed cultures to which they think they belong. Pakistani kids who would like to play cricket or football (probably both cricket and football) in the city park, perhaps with their Italian peers, cannot easily access it because, as soon as their cultures are separated and their games distinguished, it is the adults, both Italian and foreigners, who ensure that the kids do not go "beyond the border". But the parents, the older mates, the instructors, the educators are there to watch the rules, correct mistakes, and laugh at the little ones' wrong ways of playing. This is what often happens to the second generation and to anyone else (foreigner or not) trying to change a culture while living in it. Therefore, a question arises spontaneously: what is the correct way to change a rule? It depends on who follows it, how many people recognize it as a valid rule, how many people follow it and make others follow it. Rules (and cultures) are learnt while changing them. Most of the historians and sociologists of games and sports are unanimous in arguing that it was their educational and socializing function to make modern sports emerge. To attach sport the educational value of social occasion and fertile ground for experimenting with new rights, means gaining a view of the world that favors the expansion of citizenship. Therefore, it can be understood how the right to sport, or simply to physical-motor activity, has joined authoritatively the arena of the new rights of citizenship. It needs to think of sport as an instrument through which one is able to implement a process of socialization between subjects, whether they are men or women, or ethnic minorities and immigrants, wherever economic differences emerge or physical barriers are found for people with disabilities, in linguistic and cultural diversity.

A further peculiar characteristic of sport is undoubtedly the education to the conflict, which, in the intercultural sphere, means training to manage conflicts in order to make them constructive and non-destructive, bearing in mind that the existential values of solidarity and democratic coexistence are not given a priori, but they must be established and defended together day by day. Managing the conflict does not mean being subjected to it. The person who gives up postpones the conflict and does not solve it, i.e. he addresses it to the weaker. The encounter with another culture implies being able to communicate, to go beyond the representations that we have about others, be it for defense and fear, or for the will of exploitation and domination, thus converting them into stereotypes and prejudices; in this way, real cognitive and emotional barriers are raised. The last goal of the intercultural education becomes, as already said, the learning of how to build a real perspective of a two-fold enrichment (emotional, ethical, intellectual, aesthetic and relational) starting from understanding the different one, being able to observe and identify the personal and cultural identity of the other, studying it with the tools of a reason defined as multiple and complex, decentralized and open. In sports practice, there is an "encounter" and a "clash" among those social actors, who, while being in the game, carry out a process of active participation. For those coming from other places in the world, one the one hand, we can find the desire to go beyond all those labels used in a negative and derogatory sense; on the other hand, we can see the need to convey one's own customs and habits, as well as one's own sports practices. The great attractive force that sport inspires in the individual, in the continuous search for a collective soul, comes from the assumption that it brings together a multitude of people by not taking into account races, classes, borders and ages, and allows them getting fully involved in the exercise of an activity without being divided by linguistic barriers.

Moreover, sport is a universal language for it is rightfully accessible to women and men at all levels, at any time in their life, and in any social sphere. It can be said that sport is a tool for the inclusion of ethnic minorities and immigrants, especially for the fight against racism and xenophobia. In the light of the aforementioned considerations and the potentialities of sport as a tool for integration, we should therefore start from sport and recover all its dimensions; a sport characterized by the various facets that are in line with human ones (i.e. those normative, psychological, ethnic and relational ones) and which can cooperate in breaking down the barriers raised by diversity.

Conclusions

Sports activity contributes to establishing and consolidating the sense of identity; the latter is firmly connected to how the subject perceives himself. Similarly, by optimizing the body scheme, the coordination skills and the awareness of one's own corporeity, sport widely contributes to the training and the subsequent development of the sense of identity. As for social relationships, self-confidence and a positive personal identity undoubtedly play a role of considerable importance. Yet sport does not only compete in this; in fact, being characterized by rules, competition and competitive spirit, it also helps increase the interaction skills. We could also find people disagreeing on it, because a competitive situation, in which the action is strictly regulated, could be a reason of exclusion for the disabled person, since these rules could be interpreted as a further limit in addition to those characterizing his disability, and the potential sports defeat could be understood and experienced as personal defeat, leading the disabled to close even more on in himself. All this would be nothing but unproductive. First of all, the subject practicing sport is an integral part of a team, of a group, and in today's society this is the image of a fully social lifestyle; secondly, sports practice allows the person funneling all conflicts and internal tensions into socially acceptable motor actions, and thus makes him able to join groups from which he would be excluded otherwise. In addition, the sportsman must bring into play both his performance components and those of a relational nature, being him forced to relate and compare with other players based on well-circumscribed technical parameters such as schemes, tactics and rules of the game: preparing for the competition and taking part in it becomes a ritual characterized by precise clothing, rules, training and competition times; a ritual that makes sport a form of uniform behavior aiming at ensuring and promoting solidarity and cohesion within the social group, through regulated methods. Therefore, the rule is not a limiting factor for the person, but it is a necessary element to better manage one's own energies and establish healthy social relationships.

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