

# The Contribution of Eric Dunning to the Sociology of Sport: The Foundations

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*Eric Dunning and Norbert Elias were both keen sportsmen from their respective youths, but it was their meeting at the University of Leicester that arguably turned both of them into sociologists of sport. This essay recounts the beginning of their contributions to the field, stressing the indissoluble links between their writings on sport, the theory of civilizing processes, and what came to be known as 'figurational sociology'. It concludes by emphasizing that Dunning's writings have not been confined to the sociology of sport, but also include major contributions to sociological theory – notably his early debates with John Goldthorpe over the 'convergence thesis', Popper, and developmental sociology – and to the study of race relations.*

From his schooldays, Eric Dunning was always a sportsman. But it was his encounter with Norbert Elias at the University of Leicester in 1956 that eventually turned him into a sociologist of sport. Arguably, it was the encounter with Eric that turned Elias into a sociologist of sport too.

Eric had arrived as an undergraduate with the intention of specializing in economics, but Elias's introductory lectures made such an impression on him that he switched to sociology. He had the advantage (unusual among British students then as now) of reading and speaking German, and was thus able to follow up Elias's vague reference to having written 'something on civilization' by borrowing Ilya Neustadt's copy of the original 1939 edition of *Über den Prozeß der Zivilisation*. After taking his first degree, Eric enrolled for an MA under the supervision of Elias. He recalls walking across Victoria Park one day, watching boys playing soccer, and very hesitantly asking, 'Dr Elias, do you think it would be a good idea to study the sociology of football for my thesis?' Somewhat to his surprise, Elias was enthusiastic. But that was characteristic of Elias. Just as in his Frankfurt days, when he had for example encouraged Gisèle Freund

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to study photography and Ilse Seglow the theatre from a sociological point of view, so in Leicester Elias continued to encourage students to work on topics of which they had personal knowledge. Thus in a way Elias's response was predictable. But, given the then prevailing mood of British sociology more widely, Eric was right to be apprehensive. I well remember, in the late 1960s right at the start of my own academic career and before I had met Eric in person, hearing it said mockingly that 'Ah, Eric Dunning, he's interested in the sociology of football, ha ha!'. The clear implication was that *real men*, or real sociologists, study important things like social stratification, not frivolous things like football. That in itself is some measure of the extent to which Eric became the founding father of the entire burgeoning sub-discipline of the sociology of sport.

As for Elias himself, he had been a keen sportsman, losing the sight in his right eye in a skiing accident in his youth, and remaining a strong swimmer until the last years of his life. Yet he came late to sport as a topic for sociological investigation. He had made some passing mention in *The Civilizing Process*[1] of how the modern boxing match represented a strongly tempered form of aggressiveness compared with the bloodier spectacles often enjoyed in earlier days. But it was only in the 1960s, after Eric had joined the staff of the Department of Sociology at Leicester, that Elias began to write at length – alone and in collaboration with Eric – about sport, and only in 1986 that a good proportion of their essays were collected in book form as *Quest for Excitement*. Although some of the chapters appear under both names, some under Elias's alone, and some under Dunning's with or without other collaborators, the book essentially represents a single joint corpus of thinking and writing about sport, and so in the sketch that follows I shall make no attempt to disentangle Dunning's contributions from Elias's.

### The Quest for Excitement in Unexciting Societies

The problem that Dunning and Elias – and a very few other pioneers – faced in persuading fellow sociologists to take sport seriously as a subject for sociological research was that games and sports are too stubbornly familiar a part of life in contemporary societies. They are too easily taken for granted. Moreover, though enjoyed by so many people, they are often regarded as a trivial aspect of life – or were a few decades ago. It was necessary to make an effort to stand back and view them in a more detached way in order to see their peculiarities and the important sociological questions that need to be asked about them.

The common characteristic of games and sports is that they involve competition: in them, people as individuals or as teams use bodily strength or other skills in competing against each others, or perhaps – as in mountaineering – against dangerous forces of nature. Beyond that, Elias and Dunning make a threefold distinction between 'sports', 'games', and 'sport-games'. In their usage, 'games' are activities in which the competition between players is *not physical*: games like chess and draughts for example. 'Sports', on the other hand, always involve *physical* competition but they are not games and are not exactly 'played': boxing and athletics are examples here. 'Sport-games' involve physical competition but *are* 'played': examples are soccer, rugby, baseball, and both the words 'sport' and 'game' apply to them.

One peculiarity of many sports and sport-games is that there are rules constraining contestants with the aim of reducing the risk of physical injury to a minimum. In some, such as boxing or American football, violence is intrinsic to the activity, yet even there rules are designed to keep such practices under control. In spite of this minimization of physical danger, sports are *exciting*, and across the world vast numbers of people give up part of their leisure time to sport, either as spectators or as participants themselves. What kind of society must it be, for people so much to enjoy the excitement and tensions engendered by physical contests where no blood flows and contestants do no serious harm to each other? This is the question underlying Elias and Dunning's investigations into sport.[2]

An answer to this question necessitates comparisons with other kinds of society, past or present, where sports in quite this form are not found, or not to the same degree. An answer to this question, moreover, leads beyond a better understanding merely of sports themselves: Elias and Dunning contended that it also makes a contribution towards a sociology of the emotions.[3]

Elias had sought to show in *The Civilising Process* that people in contemporary 'advanced' societies have to be able to maintain a fairly even and stable control over their more spontaneous libidinal, affective and emotional impulses and over their fluctuating moods. Social survival and success depend on 'a reliable armour, not too strong and not too weak, of individual self-restraint'.[4] This applies both to occupational roles and to many private relationships and activities. Indeed, they give satisfaction, both from the standpoint of each individual and from that of the others with whom he or she associates, only subject to such a pattern of restraints. In these societies, there is relatively small scope for showing strong feelings, strong dislikes of people, let alone 'hot anger, wild hatred, or the urge to hit someone over the head'.

People strongly agitated, in the grip of feelings they cannot control, are cases for hospital or prison. Conditions of high excitement are regarded as abnormal in a person, as a dangerous prelude to violence in a crowd.[5]

One of Elias and Dunning's first papers was originally entitled 'The Quest for Excitement in Unexciting Societies'; they were being ironic when they spoke of 'unexciting societies'. Life in constantly changing complex modern societies is very often 'exciting' in most senses of the word. It is, for instance, intellectually stimulating. What they meant was that opportunities for a more unreflected expression of excitement are, in many spheres of social life, severely limited.[6] Yet containing strong feelings and maintaining an even control of drives throughout life is likely to lead to emotional staleness in most people (the extent varies between individuals). How is this to be handled socially?

Other sociologists theorizing about leisure had often viewed it as simply providing opportunities for the *relaxation* of tensions generated in the work sphere of life. Polarizing work and leisure as opposites, they had implicitly used a scale of values in which work was rated the most important part of life, and leisure viewed in effect as a means to an end, in terms of its functions for work. Tensions were viewed as something bad, something to be got rid of.[7]

Elias and Dunning's view is different. In modern societies, there is a historically unparalleled variety of leisure activities and an important class of them – including sports – serve not simply to dissipate tensions generated in other spheres of life, but to provide opportunities for pleasurable excitement. They meet a socially conditioned psychological need in their own right, and if they also relax the tensions arising from work, it is an indirect result of the *generation* and resolution of exciting tensions in leisure. More exactly, argue Elias and Dunning, the leisure sphere in modern societies provides an enclave within which *a controlled and enjoyable decontrolling of restraints on emotions is permitted*.<sup>[8]</sup> Leisure activities generally allow the emotions to flow more freely in a specially constructed setting in some ways reminiscent of non-leisure reality. Sports are an especially clear illustration of this: they always consist of a controlled struggle in an imaginary setting.<sup>[9]</sup>

Apart from sports and games, many other kinds of leisure activity are also designed to appeal directly to people's feelings and arouse them in various ways, eliciting excitement resembling that produced in 'real-life' situations, but without its risks and dangers. Concerts, opera, plays, films, dancing, paintings, card games, novels, detective stories, thrillers – all these can perform a similar function. Elias and Dunning use the term *mimetic* for this class of activities. Literally, that means 'imitative', and Elias explains the use of the term as follows:

If one asks how feelings are aroused and excitement elicited by leisure pursuits, one discovers that it is usually done by the creation of tensions. Imaginary danger, mimetic fear and pleasure, sadness and joy are produced and perhaps resolved by the setting of pastimes. Different moods are evoked and perhaps contrasted, such as sorrow and elation, agitation and peace of mind. Thus the feelings aroused in the imaginary situation of a human leisure activity are the siblings of those aroused in real-life situations – that is what the expression 'mimetic' means – but the latter are linked to the never-ending risks and perils of fragile human life, while the former momentarily lift the burden of risks and threats, great or small, surrounding human existence.<sup>[10]</sup>

Thus, as Aristotle first argued in the *Poetics*, a tragedy enacted in the theatre may evoke in the audience mimetic tension, feelings of fear and pity closely related to those experienced in witnessing the predicaments ensnaring people in real life – feelings lightened in the situation of a theatrical setting by music, movement, poetry and other mimetic symbols. In the concert hall, too, the music plays upon the audience's emotions, building up tensions which are finally relieved in applause. In the same way, at a football match spectators savour the mimetic excitement of a battle swaying to and fro on the field, knowing that in this battle little real harm is likely to befall either the players or themselves. Torn between hopes of success and fears of defeat, they openly manifest their feelings in the company of many other people, something which is all the more enjoyable and liberating because in society at large people are more isolated and have few opportunities for collective manifestations of strong feelings.<sup>[11]</sup> For participants as opposed to spectators, however, it should not be forgotten that some sports and sport-games differ from other activities of the mimetic type in that they do involve real, *not* imaginary, danger to life or limb.

### The Spare Time Spectrum

To appreciate the full significance of the mimetic class of activities, the argument continued, it was necessary to make a thorough break with the misleading static polarity of work versus leisure. It was a mistake to imagine that there are only *two* strongly contrasted categories of activity: on the one hand 'work', socially highly subject to rigid time discipline and where the function for others or for impersonal social units is paramount; and on the other hand 'leisure', meaning everything we freely choose to do, primarily with ourselves in mind, in our pursuit of the excitement and pleasure absent in work. Not all forms of work are always entirely devoid of excitement and pleasure, and there are many other intermediate kinds of activities. Elias and Dunning conceptualize them in a 'spare-time spectrum'. Many domestic activities – financial transactions, household maintenance, housework and so on – have to be performed like work whether one likes it or not, and this category of 'private work and family management' tends to take up more time as the standard of living rises. Then biological needs have to be catered for – sleeping, eating, drinking, washing and caring for one's body, making love. These needs recur, and satisfying them is pleasurable. Eating, cooking and making love shade into the pleasures of general sociability. But they also become highly routinized and not particularly pleasurable. They

can all be, and usually are, routinized up to a point, but they can also be de-routinized from time to time in a more deliberate manner than is often the case. At the same time, they all have this in common with the mimetic class of activities: they can provide heightened enjoyment provided one is able to cater for them in a non-routine manner, such as eating out for a change.[12]

Routinization recurrently afflicts leisure activities of the mimetic type too. Concerts, plays, football matches may sometimes be found unexciting and boring. The perpetual tension between routinization and deroutinization *within* leisure activities is a principal source of their dynamics; it is seen, for instance, in 'going to the brink', which Elias and Dunning see as an intrinsic feature of them.

It can thus be seen that the connections between activities across the spare-time spectrum are fairly complex. Moreover, the forms of activity in which excitement is found change in the course of social development.

Pressures and restraints have existed in all human societies, and so, it would appear, have leisure activities as a social enclave within which restraints may be loosened. The Dionysian festivals of the ancient Greeks – times of religious excitement or 'enthusiasm' – and the carnivals of medieval Christendom are examples of religious activities with functions analogous to the mimetic class of modern leisure activities. Here, as in other aspects of civilizing processes, there is no zero-point. However, argues Elias, the character of leisure pursuits changes in the course of the process, along with the balance between external constraints and learned self-restraints. Close analysis of the long-term civilizing process indicates that as restraints on people's behaviour become more all-embracing, more even, and internalized as a more or less automatically operating self-control, counter currents appear towards a balancing loosening of social and personal restraints.[13]

New forms of relatively uninhibited music and dancing are symptoms, and so perhaps is the more active spectator participation in sports events seen in many countries.

At the same time, the overall trend of the long-term civilizing process is reflected in ways that, in order to provide a *pleasurable* excitement, modern leisure activities have to conform with the comparative sensitivity to physical violence which is characteristic of people's social habitus in the later stages of a civilizing process. Gladiators fighting to the death, Christians fending off hungry lions, public hangings, or the burning alive of cats[14] would produce not enjoyment but severe revulsion in nearly all modern spectators. So the rules of modern sports always more or less curb the use of physical violence by participants against each other. At the same time the tension of the contest has to be kept up, both for players and spectators: the rules are usually adjusted in an attempt to ensure reasonable equality between, say, boxers of similar weight, between attacking and defensive functions in soccer (for example, the offside rule) or between batsmen and bowlers in cricket (for example, the lbw rule), in order to achieve relatively unpredictable contests.

A contest may also be *too* exciting – perhaps not so much because the rules maintain too high a tension as because of developments in society at large:

if tensions arise in the wider society, if restraints on strong feelings become weakened there and the level of hostility and hatred between different groups rises in good earnest, the dividing line separating play and non-play, mimetic and real battles may become blurred. In such cases a defeat on the playing field may evoke the bitter feeling of a defeat in real life and a call for vengeance. A mimetic victory may call for a continuation of the triumph in a battle outside the playing field.[15]

These hypotheses arose out of, and in turn led to further testing in, comparative and developmental investigations of many particular forms of sport.

### **Earlier Forms of Games**

Game contests and forms of competitive physical exercise are ubiquitous in human societies. They were found in many small-scale tribal societies. They were found in the ancient world. Are not the modern Olympic Games a conscious 'revival' of those of ancient Greece? Was not football, albeit of a cruder kind, played between rival villages or rival guilds in the Middle Ages? Yes. But were they quite the same thing as what today we call 'sports'? The ancient Greek equivalents of boxing and the form of wrestling called the pancration, which was among the most popular of the contests, would scarcely qualify. The level of violence was much higher than permitted today. Modes of attack forbidden in the modern forms of contest – such as head-butting, the use of legs and dangerous holds – were allowed. There were no time limits and contestants were not necessarily evenly matched in weight and strength. Deaths and permanent injuries were far from uncommon. Limbs were broken, eyes gouged out, people strangled. In one instance a boxing match ended when one fighter struck his opponent with his outstretched and leather-armoured fingers below the ribs, penetrated his abdomen and proceeded to disembowel him.[16] Baron Coubertin did not revive this form of contest!

These contests were not in fact totally unregulated. There was a judge, and people were not actually encouraged to gouge out each other's eyes. But these things happened in the heat of battle. Moreover, the contestant who killed or maimed his opponent went unpunished. It sometimes happened that the dead man's corpse was crowned as victor if he died especially valiantly, but loss of the crown was the most the killer would suffer. There is no evidence that the spectators or participants felt the horror and repugnance that we would feel today at such 'brutalities' (as we would consider them).

In fact people today might easily find it difficult to reconcile these seemingly brutal facets of the Greeks with the much-admired literature, philosophy and art of the same people. The contradiction stems entirely from the standpoint of our own values. For them there was no contradiction. The skills, physical and temperamental, used in the game contest were closely related to skills necessary in 'real life'; the mimetic distance, so to speak, was relatively small. In Greek society, if murder was committed, it was the *duty* of the victim's kin – not of the state, for the state monopoly of violence was little developed – to exact revenge. Greek citizens also fought for their city in hoplite armies; it was not exceptional for all the males of a vanquished city to be slaughtered *en masse* and the women and children sold into slavery. Such instances of genocide did not, any more than deaths and maimings in the games, bring forth the moral revulsion they would today. Greek literature affords plentiful evidence of the pity and compassion which could be felt for the victims, but very little of feelings of horror and indignation towards the perpetrators. All this, Elias points out, is very much in line with what the theory of civilizing processes would lead one to expect. The level of physical insecurity was much higher, and both state-formation and conscience-formation were much less well advanced. The level of internalized inhibitions against physical violence was lower, and the associated feelings of shame and guilt weaker, than in the relatively developed nation-states of the twentieth century.

Unlike the Greek games, the folk football of medieval and early modern Britain was not very directly related to any military skills, although certain other early pastimes such as archery very obviously were. While the authorities sought to encourage the latter, they repeatedly issued edicts – which had little or no effect – making football illegal, because from their standpoint it was inherently riotous and destructive. The modern reader, thinking of football hooliganism, may be tempted to remark, '*plus ça change ...*'; but in fact the game itself, in spite of the continuity in the name, was very different from its modern successor.[17]

Games with some generic resemblance to football were widespread in Britain, and indeed in Europe. They were much less highly regulated than their modern descendants, but not completely anarchic. They were governed by local custom and tradition. It was common, for instance, for a game to be played on certain holidays, such as Shrove Tuesday. The games themselves varied a good deal from place to place. According to local custom, the game could involve at one and the same time elements which to modern eyes are reminiscent of soccer, rugby, hurling, hockey, even polo (if some participants rode on horseback). Above all, however, the games were much more violent: they seem always to have involved fighting between the players, and not

necessarily in the immediate vicinity of the ball! Often the struggle was pursued over several miles of terrain, with an indeterminate number of participants, and its very loose structure afforded plentiful opportunities to settle private scores. Such as they were, restraints were imposed not by highly elaborate formal regulations, which require a high degree of training and self-control,[18] but by custom. A high level of violence was customarily accepted. Injuries were sustained, blood flowed, and the people – often with the connivance of the local gentry – persisted in playing their games in the face of sporadic attempts by ineffective authority to suppress them. If the state apparatus was insufficiently developed to enforce a ban, how much less likely was it that common national codes of detailed rules, written down and subject to criticism and revision, could be developed and observed? Such codes, now taken for granted, were then inconceivable.

Just as the violence of the Greek games seems to modern eyes at odds with Greek art and literature, so the violence of medieval and early modern folk games may be at odds with the nostalgic image of a harmonious folk society shared by many laymen and some social scientists. Elias and Dunning[19] take the opportunity to criticize the once-influential model of ‘folk society’ developed by Robert Redfield on the basis (among other things) of Tönnies’s notion of *Gemeinschaft*, and of Durkheim’s idea of mechanical solidarity. The country people and townsfolk who took part in these semi-institutionalized fights between local groups lived for the most part in settlements that, by twentieth-century standards, were no more than villages and small towns, strong candidates for inclusion in the list of ‘folk’ or ‘traditional’ societies. It has often been said that such societies were permeated by feelings of great ‘solidarity’, which can easily be taken to mean that tensions and conflicts were less strong and feelings of friendship and unity greater than in the large-scale mass societies of today. ‘As they intimately communicate with each other, every member claims the sympathy of the others’, wrote Redfield.[20] But the term ‘solidarity’ is misleading, for this social closeness may foster inescapable enmities and hatreds as well as friendships.

One can, indeed, often observe expressions of strong and spontaneous ‘fellow feeling’ in traditional societies. But such expressions of what we might conceptualize as ‘strong solidarity’ were perfectly compatible with equally strong and spontaneous enmities and hatreds. What was really characteristic, at least of the traditional peasant societies of our own Middle Ages, was the much greater fluctuation of feeling of which people were then capable and, in connection with this, the relatively greater instability of human relationships in general. In connection with the lesser stability of internalized restraints, the strength of passions, the warmth and the spontaneity of emotional actions were greater in both directions: in the direction of kindness and readiness to help as well as in that of unkindness, callousness and readiness to hurt.[21]

The folk games of medieval and early modern times were thus one manifestation of people in an earlier stage of the civilizing process. They were indeed *game* contests. But were they *sport* contests in the modern sense? If not, how did the latter develop out of the former? The word *sport* acquired its modern meaning, and many of the activities to which it has applied took shape, in England during the eighteenth century. Elias

regards England as having played an especially important part in what he calls the *sportization* of leisure as we know it today.

### The Significance of England

Why is English the international language of sport, in much the same sense that French is the language of cookery and Italian of music? That was one of the questions which led Elias and Dunning to examine closely the part Britain played in the sociogenesis of so many sports which are now widely played in more or less identical ways in many parts of the world.[22] The list of sports which first assumed their modern, internationally recognizable form in England is impressive: soccer, rugby, horse-racing, wrestling, boxing, lawn tennis, fox-hunting, rowing, cricket, athletics and (from Scotland) golf. The very word *sport* is English, and though recorded as early as 1440, only in the eighteenth century did it acquire its specific modern connotations of a pleasurable pastime involving competitive physical exertion and skill, but with a relatively moderated use of violence.

Why should it have come about that 'the civilizing of game-contests and the restraint on violence to others through social rules which require a good deal of individual self-control developed first in England'?[23] There is no suggestion that the need for pastimes of this kind was unique to England. The speed with which, mainly from the mid-nineteenth century onwards, other countries adopted many of the English models of sport (sometimes then further adapting them for their own tastes, as in for instance American football) suggests that they corresponded to some human social requirement by then more widespread. Nevertheless, why was it that highly regulated contests requiring physical exertion and skill, and known both in performer and spectator forms as 'sport', first appear among the landed aristocracy and gentry of eighteenth-century England?

An answer can be found in the link between 'sportization' to 'parliamentarization'. The parallel has often been noted between, on the one hand, political conflicts played out according to agreed parliamentary rules and on the other hand, sporting contests played according to the rules of the game. But this commonplace idea is only at the level of analogy. *Quest for Excitement* gives it a specific historical context and explanatory weight. The parliamentarization of political conflict in eighteenth-century England was a relatively rare route out of a cycle of violence. Whigs and Tories peacefully relinquishing office to each other, the use of debating skills in place of force, the gradually increasing level of mutual trust, depended on the two sides being essentially members of a single dominant class of landowners. The argument is not that parliamentarization *caused* sportization, still less that the sportization of pastimes caused parliamentarization of politics! Rather the explanation is that the *same people* were caught up in two aspects of a broader process of development. This is an illustration of the principle that figurational sociology is concerned with *people in the round*; they are not separate political, economic and sporting beings.

It was simply that the same class of people who participated in the pacification and greater regularization of factional contests in Parliament were instrumental in the greater pacification and regularization of their pastimes... Sport and Parliament

as they emerged in the eighteenth century were both characteristic of the same change in the power structure of England and in the social habitus of that class of people which emerged from the antecedent struggles as the ruling group.[24]

There were other respects in which social and political circumstances in eighteenth-century England favoured sportization. One was the relatively early establishment there of freedom of association. Political clubs began to be formed during the Commonwealth and Restoration periods, but it was only as the cycle of violence gradually subsided that they came to be seen as a normal and legitimate part of political life rather than as subversive; sociologists from Alexis de Tocqueville to Jürgen Habermas[25] have emphasized the role of clubs (another English word which has spread internationally) in political development. The same social device was readily employed in the emerging organization of sport.

Another aspect of English society facilitated the involvement of the landowning class in sports. The free English peasantry as a class had been all but broken by enclosures. Landowners no longer had any great fear of revolt by the agrarian lower classes. By and large, their employees knew their place. That made for easier relationships, and helps to explain how noblemen and gentry came to be involved in organizing both participant and spectator sports. Cricket matches were organized between retainers of two gentlemen, and younger gentlemen might join in with no fear of social derogation. The first cricket clubs were also formed in the eighteenth century. Similar involvement can be seen in other sports too. Often the customary rules of folk sports and sport-games were modified in accordance with the needs of gentlemen. Boxing is an example. Tighter sets of rules were developed, eliminating among other things the use of the legs; later, gloves were introduced and competitors matched according to weight. The new rules both conformed with a higher sensitivity to violence *and* made for a more even and exciting contest. Gentlemen promoted contests between lower-class professional fighters, when betting enhanced their excitement as spectators, as in horseracing and other sports. At the same time, however, boxing also became the 'gentlemanly art of self-defence', gradually used in place of the duel in settling disputes between at least younger males of the gentry class.

The involvement of members of the upper classes had one other consequence. When contests in whatever sport began to be arranged between parties at a greater distance than the neighbouring villages which had been the usual range of folk games, purely local, widely varying, customary rules were no longer adequate. Gentlemen's clubs (for example in cricket) and the public schools and universities (in soccer and rugby) came to lay down standard sets of rules which made possible competition among individuals or clubs no matter from where they came. Later came county and national associations.

Foxhunting, so peculiarly English a pastime and so prominent a part of the lives of the landowning classes in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, is an especially clear illustration of sportization as a civilizing spurt.[26] That may seem strange. Foxhunting is today somewhat marginal to most people's conception of 'sport', and indeed many people regard it as barbarous rather than civilized. Other subsequent civilizing spurts

have intervened to change our perception of it, and today it is the subject of political controversy in England. Nevertheless, when compared with *earlier* forms of hunting, foxhunting as it became codified in the eighteenth century is a good example of what sportization involves.

The puzzlement of foreigners at foxhunting is a long-standing joke. Elias relates the story of the Frenchman who heard an Englishman exclaim 'How admirable! the sport which the fox has shown in this charming run of two hours and a quarter'. The Frenchman replied: '*Ma foi*, he must be worth catching when you take so much trouble. *Est-il bon pour un fricandeau?*'.[27] There are several other distinctive features, apart from the prey not being eaten. Why, if during their pursuit of the fox the hounds disturb some other animal – such as a hare, which *is* eatable – are they whipped away from it, back on to the scent of the fox? Why, as far as possible, do huntsmen try not to 'switch foxes', keeping the hounds on the track of the first fox detected? Why was it such a severe breach of the gentlemanly code to shoot a fox? Why, indeed, do the humans take no direct part in killing the fox? And why, above all and increasingly in the course of time, have huntsmen dwelt more on the pleasures of the chase than on the killing itself?

These things were not always so. Earlier forms of hunting imposed fewer restraints:

People enjoyed the pleasure of hunting and killing animals in whatever way they could and ate as many of them as they liked. Sometimes masses of animals were driven near the hunters so that they could enjoy the pleasures of killing without too much exertion. For the higher-ranking social cadres, the excitement of hunting and killing animals had always been to some extent the peacetime equivalent of the excitement connected with killing humans in times of war. As a matter of course people used for both purposes the most suitable weapons at their disposal. After firearms had been invented, foxes were shot just like other animals.[28]

The fox was not even considered absolutely inedible, at least among the poor in times of dearth. By the eighteenth century, however, not only did members of the nobility and gentry never eat foxes, but they even killed them by proxy, delegating the function to their hounds. 'It corresponded better to the sensitivity of civilized gentlemen to let the hounds do the killing and confine their own activity to assisting them, to the anticipatory excitement and to watching the killing.'[29] Their sensitivity was lower than that of many people nowadays, but already higher than that of their forebears. It already represented an example of the long-term shift towards visual pleasures to which Elias referred in *The Civilizing Process*. Today, for many people – probably *most* non-hunters – there is no pleasure even in watching the kill.

Furthermore, a shift from even visual pleasure in the kill towards the pleasures of the chase is evident among eighteenth-century foxhunters, and still more in the nineteenth. The emphasis is more and more on the fore-pleasure and less on the consummation. Killing foxes is actually rather easy, and if it were only a matter of protecting farmers' poultry they would certainly be shot. The various rules of hunting are all designed to make it *less* easy, at some cost in mortality among poultry, but with considerable gain in the excitement, the competition, and even the danger to life and limb among the riders making up 'the field'.

Foxhunting demonstrates a general principle in sports: rules are developed which serve to generate and prolong a tension-equilibrium that is pleurably exciting for participants, and with a good chance of a culmination in pleasurable catharsis – release from tensions. That is why most sports, like good wines, need time to mature. Basketball is an example of a sport which was simply invented by a particular person[30] but that is rare. ‘As a rule, sports have gone through a period of trial and error before reaching a form which secured sufficient tension for sufficient time without fostering tendencies towards stalemate.’[31]

That can be seen in the history of rugby football. In *Barbarians, Gentlemen and Players* (1979), Dunning and Sheard provide another demonstration of this process of development through trial and error, of the civilizing and sportization of older and more violent folk-games, and of England’s peculiar role as a seedbed of modern sports.

They show how rugby was one of the less violent codes which emerged in the nineteenth century out of the common matrix of traditionally more violent folk-games; how the bifurcation took place between rugby and soccer (a still less violent and more restrained code); how later in the century, when rugby had come to be played by many working-class men, the tension between middle-class players and their social inferiors – and, as an expression of this tension, the conflict over amateurism and incipient professionalism – led to the split between the Union and League forms of rugby; and how both codes have continued to modify their rules in order to achieve the optimum tension-equilibrium both for spectators and players.

Dunning and Sheard are especially interesting on the part played in this story by the English public schools, and how the development of the games cult there was linked to broader developments in English social structure.[32] Rugby, of course, took its name from one of those schools. Many of the public schools had their own variants on traditional folk games, and in the first quarter of the nineteenth century they seem to have been played with great ferocity: ‘hacking’, or kicking on the shins with iron-tipped boots was commonly an essential part of the game. Indeed some resisted eliminating this, on the grounds that anything gentler was less ‘manly’.

How, nevertheless, did violence in play come to diminish? Little credence need be given to the story of how rugby was invented one day in 1823 in Rugby when an individual boy, William Webb Ellis, picked up the ball and ran with it. The process was much more gradual, though it is true that a set of rules for the game was for the first time written down and published at Rugby in 1845. Nor is it quite adequate to depict Dr Thomas Arnold, headmaster of Rugby 1828–42, as the ‘inventor’ of the games cult generally.

Dunning and Sheard’s explanation in summary is as follows. The public schools had during the eighteenth century become extremely disorderly places. Out and out rebellions by the boys were quite frequent – sometimes they even had to be put down by soldiers. One reason seems to have been that sons of the aristocracy had come to constitute a large proportion of the pupils, and they despised the masters as social inferiors. Effective control tended to pass to the older and stronger students; bullying and ‘fagging’ were rife. Dr Arnold was one of several headmasters in the 1820s and 1830s who attempted to come to grips with the problem, setting out to reform and,

quite literally, pacify the schools. He reached in effect a compromise settlement through the prefectorial system: the dominance of the older boys in matters outside the classroom was legitimized, the authority of the masters in class accepted. Circumstances at Rugby were especially favourable. It was not then one of the most prestigious public schools, and had a relatively low percentage of aristocratic pupils.

Moreover, in the wider society, the process of *embourgeoisement* had by now proceeded to a point where the power-ratio between the landed upper class and the commercial and industrial middle class was much more nearly even than formerly. The aristocracy was less able to treat the middle class with such unqualified contempt, while on the other hand the middle classes still differentially sought to emulate the aristocracy.

In this context, Dr Arnold's principal direct contribution to the growth of the games cult lay in his effective suppression of *field-sports* among the pupils – forbidding them to keep the guns and packs of hounds characteristic of the pastimes of the gentry. Once this had been achieved, games of the football type proved acceptable functional equivalents for enough of the boys.

Football nevertheless began to change markedly. Several innovations characteristic of rugby, notably the oval ball and the H-shaped goal posts, were made by the boys over a period of time. And various restrictions on violence were embodied in the rules, the observance of which required they be learned and internalized with a considerable measure of restraint. (For this process of the growth of rules and their internalization – in contexts besides sport too – Elias uses the term *regularization*.) These innovations possibly arose because by now the violent traditions of folk-football had lower class connotations: to play according to those codes was ungentlemanly. In turn, when the rules of what was to become soccer were first codified, notably at Eton a few years later, the wish to differentiate a still more restrained, *gentlemanly*, code from the rugby code associated with relative *parvenus* seems to have played some part.

Even if circumstances there favoured the development of the game which bears its name, Rugby School was not unique. The sportization of games proceeded in several other schools. And what was happening in the schools was part of a more general civilizing spurt in nineteenth-century England, now affecting many strata of society; the social historian Harold Perkin remarked, somewhat colourfully, that between 1780 and 1850 'the English ceased to be one of the most aggressive, brutal, rowdy, outspoken, riotous, cruel and bloodthirsty nations in the world, and became one of the most inhibited, polite, orderly, tender-minded, prudish and hypocritical'.<sup>[33]</sup> England was not unique. Not all modern sports originated there. Ruud Stokvis pointed out that in Germany an ideology of 'keep fit' and gymnastics was developed, with a much more directly nationalist and military flavour, in rivalry with the English ideology of sport as increasingly a non-military end in itself.<sup>[34]</sup> But sports and games in many other countries were probably moving in the same direction as in England,<sup>[35]</sup> and, where regularization was first achieved in England, it may simply have been convenient to impose the English codes on diverse native variants in order to facilitate competition at national and international level. In other words, there is an element of path-dependency here. Thus the French variety of boxing gave way to the

standardized English form, as did the Italian *calcio* variant of football. England's political and economic position as a world power at the time also had some bearing on the spread of sport and, as Stokvis argues, on the ideology of amateurism.

Amateurism is originally an English phenomenon. At the end of the nineteenth century Great Britain was the most influential and powerful country in the world . . . England's worldwide prestige heightened the esteem in which her sportsmen were held. As a consequence of this the English were in a position to demand that amateur conditions be introduced in other countries also. If this was not done, the English refused to come to these countries for competitions, and sportsmen from these countries were not granted admission to competitions in England.[36]

### **The Unsporting Dunning**

In the 1980s and 1990s, Eric Dunning became especially well known for his research – alone and in collaboration with colleagues in Leicester – on sports-related violence, and notably on football hooliganism. Because other contributors to this *Festschrift* discuss that corpus of work in detail, I shall not – at the risk of this essay presenting *Hamlet* without the Prince of Denmark. What I have done is sketch the foundations of Eric's contributions to the sociology of sport, stressing especially his early work with Norbert Elias. By extension, I have emphasized how closely those contributions are bound up with the wider intellectual project of the theory of civilizing processes and of 'figurational sociology'.

The figurational sociology of sport is itself controversial – witness for instance the volume of critiques and counter-critiques of *Sport and Leisure in the Civilizing Process*[37] – but debates centring on sport are only part of the much wider-ranging controversies about the theory of civilizing processes. That is very apparent in the essays collected in Eric's book *Sport Matters*. [38] Indeed Eric accepts the label 'sociologist of sport' only as a matter of convenience; he has always seen research on sport only as a means of contributing theoretically and empirically to the development of the discipline of sociology as a whole. It would be easy for readers of this collection of essays to overlook the fact that Eric has written extensively on subjects other than the sociology of sport.

In fact the first time that I, as an undergraduate in Cambridge, heard the name of Eric Dunning, was when he and Earl Hopper published their article 'Industrialisation and the Problem of Convergence',[39] a hard-hitting critique of John Goldthorpe's then-recent (1964) and celebrated dismissal of the notion that the USA and USSR must necessarily converge under the impact of economic development.[40] (Both Goldthorpe and Hopper were former colleagues of Eric's at Leicester and were jointly responsible in 1965–66 for delivering the main final-year sociology lecture course to my cohort of students; Eric's involvement in this debate with Goldthorpe and Hopper imprinted the name of Dunning on my mind several years before I actually met him.) Subsequent history appears to have vindicated Dunning and Hopper rather than Goldthorpe.

I did not know it at the time, but since around 1960 Eric and John had been locked in intellectual combat in the debates within the Department of Sociology at Leicester about the whole nature of the sociological enterprise. Central to these debates was what Elias[41] was later to call 'the retreat of sociologists into the present' and Goudsblom

to criticize as the discipline's tendency towards 'hodiecentrism' or today-centredness.[42] On the one side were functionalists like the anthropologist Percy Cohen and, especially, Popperians like John Goldthorpe who, though originally a historian himself, has throughout his career maintained a sceptical stance towards historical sociology. On the other side were developmentalists like Elias, Ilya Neustadt and the young Eric Dunning. Eric recalls how, in British sociology at the time, the very term 'development' was anathema through its historical (but not logically inevitable) connection with 'progress theories' of the Victorian kind – at one conference, his use of the word was enough to provoke shouts from the audience of 'Hobhouse! Hobhouse!' So some of Eric's earliest essays were concerned with defending the concept of development.[43] Eric's paper, 'In Defence of Developmental Sociology'[44] is a notably ambitious demolition job on Karl Popper's *The Poverty of Historicism*,[45] a book which, throwing out the developmental baby with the bathwater of 'inexorable laws of historical destiny', helped to impress hodiecentrism on a generation. But, as Elias once commented, 'Es gibt Fortschritten, aber kein Fortschritt' [there are progressions, but no progress]. At a minimum, Elias, Dunning and other figurational sociologists would contend that time is always one axis in any sociological explanation. In that sense, the Dunning and Hopper critique of Goldthorpe on convergence belongs in the same category: basically they argued that future trends could not be predicted from the study of two functional systems at one point in time. As a reminder that there are continuities as well as developmental trends over time, Eric's debate with John Goldthorpe has continued until as recently as 2000, when he reviewed the latter's book *On Sociology*. [46]

These early battles in which Eric championed a developmental sociology have been continued in his various defences of Elias against what he (and I) see as misunderstandings of Elias's work. Thus we jointly wrote a critique of Zygmunt Bauman's work on Elias,[47] while elsewhere Eric defended Elias's theory of state formation against misunderstanding in the pages of *Sociology*[48] and, more recently, fended off the charge of Eurocentrism levelled at Elias by one of Britain's most distinguished anthropologists.[49] Easier to overlook, but at least as important, is Eric's essay 'Some Comments on Norbert Elias's "Scenes from the Life of a Knight"' [50] which – though its title does not reveal this – is Eric's critique of the attempt by Tony Giddens (another former colleague in Leicester) to create a 'social theory' purged of all elements of development and evolution.

More of Eric's time off the sports field (so to speak) has been taken up in translating and editing Elias's work. With Robert van Krieken he translated the essay 'Towards a Theory of Social Processes'[51] and with me 'On the Sociology of German Anti-Semitism'. [52] Much greater labours were our translation of *The Germans*[53] and revised version of *The Civilising Process*. As a result of our work on *The Germans*, Eric has in recent years read deeply in the history of the Holocaust. Although he has lectured on the subject, his planned book on the subject is still on the stocks. I hope I am not giving away secrets if I reveal that Eric's distinctive insight into the puzzle of how ordinary civilized Germans were able to participate in genocide is through a connection he forges with a darker side of play and the quest for excitement.

One other area in which Eric has had a longstanding research and teaching interest is race relations.[54] This dates back to the year he spent in the 1960s at Washington University, St Louis, when the battle for civil rights in the South was at its height, and when he married his first wife – a scion of what, following E. Franklin Frazier, he always refers to as the ‘black bourgeoisie’. But readers of this *Festschrift* can be expected to be familiar with Eric’s interest in race relations because, like his writings on violence in Britain[55] and his fine essay on ‘Power and Authority in the English Public Schools’,[56] they crosscut with his writings on sport.

What are the underlying links between the sporting and the unsporting Dunning? One of them certainly lies in the sociology of emotions. The picture of human emotions that emerges from the work on sports and leisure by Elias, Dunning and their associates is not especially attractive:

I have not *chosen* to discover that struggle and the enjoyable excitement produced by it provide an indispensable complement to the equally indispensable restraints of life. If I were free to choose my world, I would probably not have chosen a world where struggles between humans are found exciting and enjoyable ... I would probably have chosen to say: avoid struggle. Let us all live in peace with each other.[57] (my italics)

But they present the world as they find it. Quite apart from the enjoyable excitement of sex, human beings also need other forms of enjoyable excitement, including the excitement of battle. In relatively highly pacified societies, the need has come to be met – in a quite unplanned way – by the provision of mimetic struggles, enacted in a specially constructed context with a minimum of injury to human beings. And that is the context for the ‘controlled decontrolling of emotional controls’, not only for routinization but also for deroutinization.

A final point: that memorable phrase – the controlled decontrolling of emotional controls – first formulated in the context of the sociology of sport and leisure, has been taken up and developed as a conceptual tool in understanding many other aspects of modern life. A notable instance is Cas Wouters’s influential work on the so-called ‘permissive revolution’, or more exactly the waves of informalization and reformation that have washed over and transformed manners, sexual mores and emotional habitus in contemporary societies.[58] Eric Dunning is a key founding father of the sociology of sport but, precisely because he has never been *only* a sociologist of sport, through his broader interests and writings he has helped to ensure that the still fairly new sub-discipline has had a wider influence, and has indeed moved steadily from the periphery towards the centre of sociology itself.

## Notes

- [1] Elias, *The Civilizing Process*, 170–1.
- [2] Elias and Dunning, *Quest for Excitement*, 1.
- [3] *Ibid.*, 59ff.
- [4] *Ibid.*, 41.
- [5] *Ibid.*, 41.

- [6] Ibid., 71.
- [7] Ibid., 92–3.
- [8] Ibid., 65ff., 96.
- [9] Ibid., 50–1.
- [10] Ibid., 42.
- [11] Ibid., 43.
- [12] Ibid., 69.
- [13] Ibid., 66.
- [14] Elias, *The Civilizing Process*, 171.
- [15] Elias and Dunning, *Quest for Excitement*, 43.
- [16] Ibid., 140.
- [17] Ibid., 175–90; Dunning and Sheard, *Barbarians, Gentlemen and Players*, 21–45.
- [18] Elias and Dunning, *Quest for Excitement*, 183.
- [19] Ibid., 179–81.
- [20] Redfield, 'The Folk Society'.
- [21] Elias and Dunning, *Quest for Excitement*, 180.
- [22] That question was, at any rate, the way in which Elias broached the issue with me in one of our earliest meetings in the early 1970s.
- [23] Elias and Dunning, *Quest for Excitement*, 24.
- [24] Ibid., 40.
- [25] de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*; Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*.
- [26] Elias and Dunning, *Quest for Excitement*, 150–74.
- [27] Ibid., 160.
- [28] Ibid., 161.
- [29] Ibid., 163.
- [30] Ibid., 297n.
- [31] Ibid., 157.
- [32] See also Dunning, 'Power and Authority in the Public Schools'.
- [33] Perkin, *The Origins of Modern English Society*, 280.
- [34] Stokvis, *Strijd over Sport*; R. Stokvis, 'Debates on Sport', 95–8.
- [35] Even the Spanish bullfight, now regarded by many people as still less civilized – in the colloquial sense – than foxhunting, has shown long-term civilizing tendencies, according to Driessen ('Civiliseringstendensen in het Spaanse Stierevecht'). Driessen argues that besides civilizing pressures, the cultural mechanism of ritualization also played a part. Nevertheless, he says that since the eighteenth century bullfighting has developed increasingly towards professionalization, specialization, differentiation, sequestration in permanent bullrings, and more restrictive regulation. All of these developments, he says, can be interpreted as part of the civilizing and state-formation processes. The present stylized form in which the bullfighter allows the bull's horns to pass close to his almost motionless body demands very great self-control.
- [36] Stokvis, 'Debates on Sport', 96.
- [37] Dunning and Rojek, eds. *Sport and Leisure in the Civilizing Process*.
- [38] So much is Eric Dunning a team player that *Sport Matters* was his first – and so far only – sole-authored book.
- [39] Dunning and Hopper, 'Industrialisation and the Problem of Convergence', 163–86.
- [40] Goldthorpe, 'Social Stratification in Industrial Society', 97–122.
- [41] Elias, 'The Retreat of Sociologists into the Present'.
- [42] Goudsblom, *Sociology in the Balance*.
- [43] Dunning, 'The Concept of Development'.

- [44] Dunning, 'In Defence of Developmental Sociology'.
- [45] Popper, *The Poverty of Historicism*.
- [46] Goldthorpe, *On Sociology*. Dunning, 'Goldthorpe's View of Sociology'.
- [47] Dunning and Mennell, "Figurational Sociology": Some Critical Comments on Zygmunt Bauman's: "The Phenomenon of Norbert Elias".
- [48] Dunning, 'A Response to J.R. Robinson's "The Civilising Process"'.
- [49] Dunning, 'Some Comments on Jack Goody's "Elias and the Anthropological Tradition"'.
- [50] Dunning, 'Some Comments on Norbert Elias's "Scenes from the Life of a Knight"'.
- [51] Elias, 'Towards a Theory of Social Processes'.
- [52] Elias, 'On the Sociology of German Anti-Semitism'.
- [53] Elias, *The Germans*.
- [54] Dunning, 'Dynamics of Racial Stratification'; 'Race Relations'; 'The Figurational Dynamics of Racial Stratification'.
- [55] Dunning *et al.*, 'Violent Disorders in Twentieth Century Britain'; E. Dunning *et al.*, 'Violence in the British Civilizing Process'.
- [56] Dunning, 'Power and Authority in the Public Schools'.
- [57] Elias and Dunning, *Quest for Excitement*, 59.
- [58] See for example C. Wouters, 'Formalization and Informalization: Changing Tension Balances in Civilizing Processes', and 'Developments in Behavioural Codes between the Sexes'.

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