

Sporting World: Worlding Sport

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I have always liked this joke: ‘What was the biggest island in the world before Australia was discovered?’ Answer: Australia. The joke nudges us to the abashed acknowledgement that the world was, is, will always have been there anyway, all the time. And yet: can Australia have been there as ‘Australia’? Will the world have been there as world? Did the world not need to be ‘worlded’, made explicitly knowable as world, which is to say not just ‘the world’ but also ‘a world’: an example, even if it is the unique one, of what ‘a world’ can be?

Sport is world-forming. It makes a world apart, a field of actions and operations that are organised according to a set of rules peculiar to itself, despite the fact that they overlap with actions and operations in the real, or nonsporting world. There are no laws that suspend the operation of ordinary civil laws on the field of play, but we act as though there are, allowing actions on the football field that would attract sanctions off it. When there are infractions that seem to go beyond those for which internal sanctions exist in the game, such as Luis Suarez biting an opponent’s shoulder during the 2014 World Cup in Brazil, the offenders are arraigned not for the offences that a civilian might have committed when performing the same actions – use of offensive language, perhaps, or committing grievous bodily harm – but for special sporting offences, which are often offences against sport itself, by governing bodies that act much as ecclesiastical courts used to act in Europe. Sports create and operate in parallel worlds.

But these worlds are not content to remain merely adjacent or isomorphic to the real world. Sport seems to have built in to it the desire to become identical with the world as such. It seems to have worldness implicit in it, such that the question and horizon of the world are always at issue. This is made apparent by the difficulty of searching for internet material relating to sport and the question of world; there are so many conjunctures of sport and world – World Associations of this and that sport, magazines and websites devoted to the ‘World of Cricket’, or things called ‘Archery World’, or ‘Ice-Hockey World’, that any kind of conceptual reflections on the association between the notions of sport and world are swamped.

The mundophagic nature of sport becomes particularly clear when particular, more or less enclosed or indigenous sport-worlds come into contact with larger, and more expansive worlds, worlds which lay claim, and often through sport, to the condition of The World itself. This is most unignorably apparent in the hearty, swaggering march of what J.A. Mangan calls ‘Homo Ludens Imperiosus’, sweeping away, mostly through cricket and the varieties of football, local games and pastimes both in Britain and the countries of the British Empire (Mangan 1997, 174). It would be easy to see this as a contingent phenomenon, in which sport is merely the vehicle for a globalising appetite that belongs more properly to the imperial drive. But even in nations that have no or at least more modest imperial ambitions, the settings and practices of sport can tend towards a cosmic condition, the arena or stadium often

doubling as a kind of *mappa mundi*, and the practices of sport often being synchronised with celestial rhythms and movements.

Much valuable work has been done to confirm what few can ever have been inclined to doubt, the intertwining of the idea of sport with the establishment of the first truly global Empire in human history, the British Empire, even if it turned out to be, perhaps for that very reason, one of the most short-lived. To be sure, struggles for self-assertion in sport continue to mimic political struggles (one need think only of the symbolic importance of West-East clashes in sporting competition during the Cold War). But we should not be tempted to assume that this is a matter simply of sport being gobbled up by geopolitics, lest this distract us from recognising what might be thought of as a kind of inner imperialism within sport itself, in which what matters is not the struggles to resist or assert dominion of other nations through sport, but the struggle for dominion of particular sports over all other sports – the properly totalitarian desire to become The World of Sport. The sport of which this is currently most true is soccer, or football on the non-American variety. This is not only the sport that is most widely played and most widely watched, in many countries it also exercises an aggressive and destructive domination over all other sports, driving them into minority in schools and on the sports pages.

For sport to tend in this way toward a world condition means that it must depend, like all world-aspiring practices, upon more or less brutal and more or less absurd metonymies, and so is open to presumption and bathos when the whole and the part do not seem naturally and convincingly to align. It has sometimes been maintained, for example, that the first World Cup in football was played, not, as official histories claim, in 1930, in Uruguay, but in 1909, when Sir Thomas Lipton set up a competition for representative club sides from Italy, Germany, Switzerland and Britain. The British Football Association sniffily declined to supply a team, so Lipton asked West Auckland FC, an amateur team composed principally of Durham coal miners, to represent Britain. West Auckland FC in fact not only won the four-way competition, but successfully defended their title in 1911, trouncing the not-yet mighty Juventus 6-1, after which they were allowed to retain the trophy, though they had to pawn it to the landlady of a local hotel to cover their expenses. There is little danger of West Auckland's trophy ever being taken as the authentically first World Cup (not least because what is nowadays on show is a replica, the real cup having been stolen in 1994 and never retrieved). There is always the shadow of absurd presumption in anything that designates itself as the world, for example the World Series of baseball, a phrase about which other, non-baseball-playing nations like to snigger. But England, the crucible of so many sports, had from the very beginning, a habit of setting up matches on patches of sheep-nibbled furze between teams representing England and 'the Rest of the World'

On the one hand, sport has a hunger to encompass the world; on the other hand, sport can only ever represent a kind of synecdoche or stand-in for that world. Traditionally, there is violence in this gap, the violence that Peter Sloterdijk has characterised as the zealous monotheist's allergy to the number two and striving to bring 'everything down to the number one, which tolerates no one and nothing but itself' (Sloterdijk 2009, 96). The one who holds aloft the World Cup aims to show that they represent the world, in the sense both that they substitute for it, and that they are it. But the one who strives to represent the world must therefore also strive against their representation of the world, for such a representation doubles and

therefore betrays it. And yet, since the world is not self-indicating and self-representing, there can only ever be a world if it can be doubled in representation as doubled as 'the world'. There will always be the possibility of some rival form of world championship, as in the absurdity of the various ways there have been for many years of claiming to be the heavyweight champion of the world in boxing. The world can only come to be the world in the finality of the Final, in which a rival for the title of the world is seen off. Much is said of 'world-class' competitors in various sports, but one wonders quite what this is meant to mean: does it imply that one would be in the line-up for a team that played Mars or Jupiter? One can only, it seems, be in the world by stepping to one side of it. The design of stadiums, in ways that increasingly resemble space ships, with rectangles being replaced by circular forms suggestive of planetary orbits, intensifies the sense of this world-within-a-world *mis-en abîme*.

This doubling is strongly apparent in the constitutive association between sport and media. One of the most obvious ways in which sport invades and strives to become the world is through its permeation of the space of print, audio-visual and digital media. Sport exhibits a double movement, of condensation followed by dilation. The codification of sports that took place during the nineteenth century produced an ever stricter sense of the boundaries within which the sporting event was to occur, and in which its laws might be enforced. The 'touchline' has this name because there used to be a space that went beyond the field of play, in which the first player to touch the ball would get the advantage of possession – this is why one speaks of kicking 'into touch'. As games evolve, they are confined more and more absolutely within the space and time of play, from which spectators are kept at bay. This is in accord with the spatial segregation of sporting activities for economic purposes: when owners of sports grounds like Thomas Lord in London realised that they could charge spectators to watch a game, it became necessary to enclose them.

But this sequestering of sport in particular spaces almost immediately produces an explosive radiation of the play from the field of play into the discursive fields of reporting, and representation. Sporting professionals must live and breathe their sport, while sporting fans increasingly mimic that condition in their devotion to the histories and potential futures of their teams. The live commentary and the interior big screen signal this collapse of the enclosed and the expanded, the heterotopia becoming pantopic.

There is undoubtedly a kind of violence both in many sports and in this growing assimilation of the world to sport. George Orwell insisted in his essay 'The Sporting Spirit', prompted by a fractious tour of soccer team Dynamo Kiev to Britain in 1945, that 'international sporting contests lead to orgies of hatred', adding that '[i]f you wanted to add to the vast fund of ill-will existing in the world at this moment, you could hardly do it better than by a series of football matches between Jews and Arabs, Germans and Czechs, Indians and British, Russians and Poles, and Italians and Jugoslavs, each match to be watched by a mixed audience of 100,000 spectators' (Orwell 1998, 442).

But the violence both of sport and of its spectators is paradoxically licensed by its concentration in the particular times and places of its occurrence. No matter how real the suffering, aggression and injury of sport, its violence is not usually to be regarded as any kind of violation. It is this which may make the violence of sport a

kind of Girardian sacrificial ritual, which allows the impulse to general violence, the *bellum omnes contra omnes*, to be both indulged and contained.

Sport is also immunised against its own violence by the fact that that violence is exercised inwardly as well as outwardly, depending as it does on the internalised stress of regimes of training. For Peter Sloterdijk in *You Must Change Your Life* (2013) the most important aspect of sport is not its codes of functioning, or the forms of its appearances, the spectacle of the match or the event, but the regimes of training that turn sport literally into a life-style, a formalising of life. Sloterdijk argues that, despite appearances, there has never been any religion that we may take seriously on its own self-account, for religion has only been a transcendentalist disguise for all kinds of practices of *ascesis* or self-formation through training. Recent times have seen these forms of ascetology becoming ever more independent of its anyway incidental religious frameworks. The nineteenth century produced what Sloterdijk describes as ‘a training camp for human improvements on a number of fronts, whether in the school and military context, the world of workshops or the idiosyncratic universes of newer medicine, the arts and sciences’ (Sloterdijk 2013, 334-5). Sloterdijk follows the later Foucault in seeing this more in terms of self-production or care of the self through internalised power than the disciplining force of power exerted asymmetrically as discipline on a passive subject. Sport both joins this anthropotechnic world and provides it with its most autotelic and autonomous form, ‘comprising no less than the pure representation of modern heightening behaviour in specific theatricalized forms’ (Sloterdijk 2013, 335). Sloterdijk sees the ‘cult of sport that exploded around 1900’ as the most important feature of an epochal change of human behaviour, which he describes as ‘a re-somatization or a de-spiritualization of asceticisms’ (Sloterdijk 2013, 27). Sport has often been thought of as a kind of theatricalisation of human relations, but on this account sport is the performative allegory of the ever more strenuous disciplines of self-making that characterise modernity. For Sloterdijk, the globalisation of modern sport is to be explained by the fact that ‘[i]n sport, the spirit of competitive intensification found an almost universally comprehensible, and hence globally imitated, form of expression’ (Sloterdijk 2013, 335).

Sport may therefore be seen as both part of and the expressive totalisation of the move from productive work to freely self-gratifying, yet also intensely self-restraining exercise, in which the performative supervenes on the production-centred logic of work-discipline. Sloterdijk suggests that ‘the sports system has developed into a multiverse with hundreds of secondary worlds, in which self-referential motion, useless play, superfluous exertion and simulated fights celebrate their existence somewhat wilfully, in the clearest possible contrast to the utilitarian objectivism of the working world’ (Sloterdijk 2013, 213). To those who would cleave to an Adornian denunciation of sport as just the extension of ruthless market discipline to every instance of leisure or free time, Sloterdijk might answer that sport is just the somatic equivalent of the manifold forms of ‘egotechnic’ self-production, whether in art, or therapy, or psychosexual technics, or political consciousness-raising, which have radiated from the modernist avant-gardes throughout the societies of the developed world.

It would be easy to be uneasy with Sloterdijk’s promotion of sport as the master-principle of this anthropotechnic multiverse. Is this not simply an unusually explicit expression of the ‘fascist longings’ (Sontag 2009, 95) that Susan Sontag sees in the

fascination with bodily beauty, Nazi physical jerks upgraded with a dose of Foucauldian self-fashioning? It would not be the first time that Sloterdijk has been seen as flirting with fascism in his efforts to provoke (Fisher 2000). In fact, however, sport involves for Sloterdijk very much more than the perfecting of the body, even if he does allow himself some impetuous blurtings in this line: ‘sport’, he tells us, ‘is the most explicit realization of Young Hegelianism, the philosophical movement whose motto was “the resurrection of the flesh in this life” ’ (Sloterdijk 2013, 27). Or, again, reading the Rilke poem which furnishes the title of his manifesto of anthropotechnics, *Du mußt dein Leben ändern*: ‘A god was always a form of sportsman too... the athlete’s body, which unifies beauty and discipline into a calm readiness for action, offers itself as one of the most understandable and convincing manifestations of authority’ (Sloterdijk 2013, 26).

This is toe-curling, even sinister stuff indeed. And yet, for all his credulous exorbitance, it should be recognised that the anthropotechnic practices typified in sport for Sloterdijk involve in principle, if not always in his own rhetoric, more than those ‘situations of control, submissive behaviour, extravagant effort, and the endurance of pain [which] endorse two seemingly opposite states, egomania and servitude’ that Susan Sontag sees as characteristic of fascist body aesthetics (Sontag 2009, 91). For Sloterdijk, sport is typical of the many forms of human self-performing not because it involves the delirious dissolution of reflection in physicality, but because it typifies the convergence of pedagogy and physicality: ‘training’ here encompasses not just Sylvester Stallone surging triumphantly up the steps of the Lincoln Memorial, but the entire panoply of techniques and technologies, biomedical, discursive and cultural-political, that are remaking the body, or making it available for remaking.

These techniques are summed up in Sloterdijk’s announcement of the arrival of *homo immunologicus*. Sloterdijk relates the rise of panathletic anthropotechnics to the development of the sciences of immunology at the end of the nineteenth century. Immunology was the biological discovery that would make it clear henceforth that all cohesive systems, whether an individual organism, a subjectivity, a society or a language are in fact immune systems, which defend against external threats by internalising them. Even the lowliest creatures have evolved to take external threats into account, folding a sort of foreknowledge of dangers, including especially the greatest external threat of all, that of death, into the maintenance of their modes of life. Sloterdijk believes that these relations of the organism to what lies outside or beyond it may be seen as ‘organismic early forms of a feeling for transcendence ... For every organism, its environment is its transcendence’ (Sloterdijk 2013, 8).

Where most organisms have immune systems that are unconscious and automatic, even if they are also primed to learn through the internalisation of external threats, human beings are characterised by their many ways of making explicit their relations to their environments and thereby bringing them under conscious control. *Homo immunologicus* lives in a world maintained not by instinct but by ever more extensive engineering, of itself and of its environments, though modes of habitation, technical systems (air-conditioning, traffic regulation, smoke alarms), and a host of symbolic ways of maintaining solidarity and stability in the face of destabilising external threats or endogenous threats like that of intrahuman violence. So *homo immunologicus* is characterised at once by a literally ‘surreal’ kind of vertical tension, impelling a reaching for transcendence, and by the subtle and complex homeostasis

that are the end of its efforts to maintain itself in being, through selective and managed exposure to jeopardy. Its inoculatory excursions are its insurance policy. How to protect against death from peanut-induced anaphylactic shock? Feed peanuts to babies as early as you can. The strivings of sport are part of this dissipation of risk in engineered exposure.

Terry Eagleton offers a surprisingly useful explication of the place of sport in this deterrence in the course of his denunciation of football in the run-up to the World Cup of 2010. The burden of this denunciation is that football is a means of holding back ‘radical change’. Eagleton admits, ironically to be sure, but perhaps even more ironically than he wants to recognise, that ‘[n]o finer way of resolving the problems of capitalism has been dreamed up, bar socialism. And in the tussle between them, football is several light years ahead’ (Eagleton 2010). The terms in which he discusses football are deliberately, but suggestively overstated: football ‘blends dazzling individual talent with selfless teamwork, thus solving a problem over which sociologists have long agonised’; it ‘mixes glamour with ordinariness in subtle proportion’; it ‘combines intimacy with otherness’. Eagleton even punningly anticipates Sloterdijk’s claim about the convergence of the athletic and the aesthetic at the end of the nineteenth century: ‘football steps in to enrich the aesthetic lives of people for whom Rimbaud is a cinematic strongman’. Eagleton even seems to agree with Sloterdijk that sport has taken over the function of religion, concluding that football is ‘the opium of the people, not to speak of their crack cocaine’. Tellingly, he also notices that sport involves very much more than the worship of physicality, since ‘[m]en and women whose jobs make no intellectual demands can display astonishing erudition when recalling the game’s history or dissecting individual skills. Learned disputes worthy of the ancient Greek forum fill the stands and pubs. Like Bertolt Brecht’s theatre, the game turns ordinary people into experts.’ And yet it is precisely because football offers so many simulated satisfactions, or pseudo-resolutions, that it must be resisted and that ‘[n]obody serious about political change can shirk the fact that the game has to be abolished’. The whole piece might seem like a rejoinder in advance to Sloterdijk’s jeer that that ‘[o]f the two great ideas of the nineteenth century, socialism and somatism, it was clearly only the latter that could be widely established’ (Sloterdijk 2013, 27).

But the fact that sport represents such a distraction, that it is a performance that is at once real and unreal, that may be its most important immunological feature. A world focussing so much of its energies on the paradoxical production of sporting techniques and actions may begin to be a world better able to tolerate complexity than one built around any allegedly radical principles, either of assertion – the emancipation of ‘man’ – or of exclusion – the defeat of polio or ‘capitalism’. The growth of the sporting world represents a deepening and dispersal of an immunitarian principle that stands in stark contrast to such reactionary radicalism – and perhaps all radicality is reactionary insofar as it craves the reduction of complex problems to simpler root problems and therefore recoils from the move forward into complexity. This means that Sloterdijk’s world of sport is characterised not by the violent allergy to any number but one, but rather by ‘polycosmic agglomeration... an assemblage of assemblages, a semi-opaque foam of world-making constructions’ (Sloterdijk 2004, 64; my translation). This allows him to mediate between what can seem at times like the totalitarian world-domination of sport and what he calls ‘existence capable of world-flight’ (Sloterdijk 2013, 439), that is, the many forms of retreat from the managed One World, which are producing a multiverse. For it is the

coordination of these eccentricities, or flights from 'the world' which may allow us to create a world complex enough to be sustainable. Under these circumstances it becomes possible (but also imperative), not just to dominate, but to protect the world. 'Humanity becomes a political concept. Its members are no longer travellers on the ship of fools that is abstract universalism, but workers on the consistently concrete and discrete project of a global immune design' (Sloterdijk 2013, 451). It is in this sense that the worlding of sport may play its part in a bringing into being of the world through general immunology. It may help enable the move away from the world as picture to the world as arena of practices, whose immunological interrelation will make the world capable of supplying entertainment and sustenance, both words that signify ways of being held in being.

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