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Saverio Battente

Abstract

Springing from an understanding of the meaning of sport in contemporary societies, this article proposes an analysis of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on sport, evaluating its capacity to influence and alter sport practices, and consequently to interfere with the societies of which sport is an expression. Of particular importance is sport's function as a form of cultural diplomacy and soft power, both domestically and internationally. Acknowledging the changing nature of sport over the course of time, the article takes a diachronic comparative view to analyse the effects of various pandemics in history, from antiquity to the contemporary era. At the same time, a synchronic comparison of various case studies from the COVID-19 pandemic period has been carried out, again to verify its impact both domestically and internationally. The aim of the study is to evaluate whether the idea and the function of sport, and consequently the society of which sport is an expression, were altered during the recent pandemic, or whether the event simply spurred trends already in progress that can be traced to the general state of Western society, where societal progress and development are associated with a conception of sport as synonymous with character formation, and decline with sport as mere amusement and entertainment.

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Introduction

The sudden and violent onslaught of COVID-19 on a planetary scale upset national and international equilibriums at every level, from the social, cultural and anthropological spheres to the political and economic domains. In this context, sport can be the basis of an original interpretation that can contribute to the analysis of a continuously-evolving situation, due to the centrality and importance that the practice of sport has had and increasingly has in society (Huizinga 1938; Mandell 1984).

Physical activity, which at some point flowed into the concept of sport, has in fact been an important expression of Western culture, reciprocally being shaped by it and contributing to its definition (Guttman 1978). Sport is an original kaleidoscope through which to analyse the dynamics and changes of history writ large, having taken on multiple and multifaceted meanings in the societies of which it was an expression. Its ethics-oriented educational and cultural substrate, and its characterisation in social, political, anthropological and even economic terms, have made it a particularly useful tool for exploring issues within individual societies as well as relations among them (Battente 2019). In this sense, sport can serve as an agile, pervasive and unique instrument of cultural diplomacy and soft power, but it has also been used a pragmatic washing tool by some countries (Guttman 1994; Nye 2004). In addition, sport has come to have a clearly established value as entertainment and spectacle, sometimes linked to its identity-related and educational function, and sometimes with an emphasis on recreation for its own sake. It has been hypothesised that the prevalence of the educational, formative connotation of sport is associated with developing and dominant societies, while the emergence of the entertainment aspect is related to contexts in crisis or in decline (Battente 2020).

While social sciences have the task of analysing the present, history can undoubtedly offer a contribution as well, not by focusing on the current situation – which is not its domain, as Benedetto Croce noted (Croce 1917) – but on the contrary, by proposing a diachronic reading useful for comparison of different periods and cases. In this perspective, the spread of COVID-19 did not reinvent the idea of sport, but more simply demonstrated the role and relevance of the phenomenon of sport over time. Major pandemics have been watershed events throughout Western history, capable of changing the course of historical events and modifying the societies they strike in virtually every aspect (Cunha Ujvari 2020), including sporting activities.

It is therefore interesting to determine and analyse the impact of pandemic events on sport over the course of history, from a diachronic and synchronic comparative standpoint: the specificities of the phenomenon of sport provide stimulating cues and insights concerning links between causes and effects in endogenous transformations in the West and, through them, in the globalisation process. The practice of physical activities we now call sport, a sort of sensor of Western civilisation, did not come out of the pandemic unscathed, as it had to adapt to the new context and rules introduced to allow sporting activities. It will be useful to ascertain whether an external event like a global pandemic was a factor capable of altering trends linked to sport in the societies studied, or simply accelerated or decelerated phenomena already in place. It will thus be necessary to determine whether changes in sport brought about by pandemics throughout history were consistent with the pre-existing general underlying situation specific to each society, or were actually profound transformations.

In other words, this study aims to verify whether pandemics have been capable, within individual countries, of imposing new trends on practices of physical activity to the point of generating completely new and original connotations, or rather they were accelerators that hastened processes already begun. On the international level, we will try to ascertain whether pandemics contributed to the radicalisation and insularity of individual models of sport, or facilitated the growth of macro-models that were able to impose themselves culturally on others, thus generating universal, globalised models. By studying the microcosm of the phenomenon of sport, we can gather useful information for analysis and understanding of individual societies as a whole, and their relations with others. Historical science methodology will be applied in carrying out this study.

Sport and identity

In the ancient world, physical activity – not yet definable by the term sport – took on a value that was closely tied to the identity of the society of which it was an expression (Battente 2020). In the ancient Greece of the *πολεις*, as canto XXIII of Homer's *Iliad* nicely encapsulates (Homer 8th-7th cent. B.C., in Angeli Bernardini 1988), athleticism was closely tied to the sphere of religion and the idea of death, as one of the essential bases contributing to the moral training and practice of warriors. The underlying spirit was not so much one of competition, but of antagonism, centred around the idea of dominance, which was of course in harmony with a military mindset (Bilinski 1960; Angeli Bernardini 2016).

In Sparta, this military approach was paramount, intended to defend and hold together a pyramidal, aristocratic society (Sansone 1988). Structured physical exercise was in fact reserved for the noble elite as part of their education and training, and was for a clearly defined group of males of a certain age. In Athens, on the other hand, physical exercise was part of a more general path aimed at not only training soldiers, but above all at generating proper citizens, here too with an ethical, civic-oriented approach (Golden 1998). Not coincidentally, athletics was practiced in *gymnasia*, as part of the education of Athenian youth.

Physical practices were thus not a profession, but an element of individual growth that was instrumental in instilling maturity and a specific individual as well as collective, shared identity (Golden 2004). Athletics was associated with the achievement of fame, honour and glory for the athlete, his family and his city, to the extent that great poets were entrusted to narrate athletic feats (Weber 1992). In short, it was the principle of *καλος και αγατος* as synonymous with beauty and physical, intellectual and moral superiority, with which the ruling class substantiated its primacy.

At a level above that of individual and city, the Olympic spirit, although limited to Greek culture, had a well-defined identitarian, political and philosophical value as the encapsulation of a civilisation, albeit an adversarial one (Finley and Pleket 1976). As a subordinate, secondary consequence, there was also a component of entertainment and spectacle entailed in the primary idea of competition.

As far as women were concerned, the role of physical activity was mainly leisure, and a means of ensuring health for future childbearing (a sort of ante litteram eugenics), with no hint of competition, as exemplified by Homer in canto VIII of the *Odyssey* (Homer 9th cent. B.C., in Guttmann 1991; Hargreaves 1994; Arrigoni 1985).

While in ancient Greece physical activity had thus anticipated many of the typical features of concepts of sport as diplomacy and soft power, both domestically and internationally (Young 1984), in ancient Rome its practice took on a completely different meaning, presumably inherited from the Etruscans. Competition no longer involved free men, but slaves – gladiators – battling for survival in simulated military combat inside an arena, like the Colosseum, for an audience that had to be entertained (Thuillieir 1985; Gori 1988). Within the same pseudo-military competitive scenario there were also horse races. The concept was *panem et circenses* – bread and circuses – as Juvenal famously put it in *Satire X* (Juvenal 50-140 B.C., in Weber 1986).

Setting Hellenistic culture apart and defending our *mos maiorum*, physical activity was not relegated to the sphere of military training for legions. It was also spectacle and entertainment, which the ruling class used, with demagogic, populist intent, to gain consensus and control the populace. Gladiatorial games, however, also had an educational function for the Roman citizenry: their gruesomeness was not mere brutality, but a reminder that it was crucially important for Rome to maintain its primacy so as to not end up crushed (as per the principle of *mors tua vita mea*), and that Rome's rulers were granted the power and means to ensure it.

In addition to these two predominant meanings of physical practice and vigour in the ancient world, another one tied to the idea of health and prevention had also made headway, in which physical activity, in this case disengaged from competition, was associated with physical health, as expressed by the motto *mens sana in corpore sano* (a healthy mind in a healthy body), also coined by Juvenal (Battente 2019). In Rome, thus, physical activities took on cultural traits linked to a specific view of society and its internal identity, and to an awareness of its instrumental use on an external level to facilitate the acculturation of all the various populations within the perimeter of the Roman *limes*. Neither the Greeks nor the Romans used sport as a means of exporting their values or transmitting their identity, but rather to protect themselves from external contamination and to acculturate 'outsiders' who came into contact with the dominant society. Physical activities, representing a particularism to be promoted and glorified, contributed to presenting that trait as universal, thus creating a bond between different peoples brought together under the umbrella of a single institutional political subject.

The impact of Christianity, on the other hand, was decisive in undoing centuries of tradition tied to physical activity, downgrading it without exception to the status of something pernicious for the mind and the soul. In fact, the universalist religious milieu was instrumental to the spread of this conception in distinct national societies (Huizinga 1946).

In the Middle Ages, athleticism was replaced by a physicality linked to the traditions of individual barbarian *nations* – an expression of an undeveloped, warlike world as compared with Greek and Roman civilization – and lacked any sort of structured educational value (Balestracci 2003). Arthurian legend encapsulates the evolution of this view of physical games into a synopsis of the chivalric world in which ethics and values are fused into a symbol of an elite warrior society (Goffredo di Monmoith XII sec.; de Troyes 1170-1180; Malory 1485). In *Orlando furioso*, for example, Ariosto (1532) highlighted the entertaining aspect of those games, linked sometimes to Roman tradition and other times to Celtic or Gallic custom. Tasso (1575), however, made stronger reference to their martial nature in *Gerusalemme Liberata*, which told of fights to the death.

From the Middle Ages into the Renaissance, physical activity in the form of hunting, jousting and tournaments was the identitarian paradigm of a noble military society suspended between its oligarchic structure and absolutist aspirations (Cardini 1987). From a cultural standpoint, physical activities acted as a binding force among the ruling class, contributing to the creation of a language that could link nobles of various nations, divided and in competition with one another, but similar from an identitarian point of view (Duby 1985).

Later, the great national monarchies, supported by the Church in the process of centralising power to the detriment of the aristocracy, sought to sedate the martial elements of physical activity, prohibiting duels, whether for sport or honour. Alongside this elevated interpretation of physical activity, another far humbler and proletarian one developed in the Middle Ages, markedly more entertainment- and spectacle-based, particularly in Italian towns and cities (Balestracci 2003). Dante, in canto XV of the *Inferno*, recalled, through the voice of Brunetto Latini, the “green cloth” or “Pallio” given to celebrate Azzo d’Este’s foot race in 1207, and, in canto XVI of the *Paradiso*, had Cacciaguida mention “the annual game”, a horse race held in Florence (Alighieri 1321).

This folkloric conception linked to the microcosmic universe of the *piccola patria* served to unite and defend individual identities, not in pursuit of common ground for dialogue, but imbuing these traditions with a distinctively protective role in a context where, paradoxically, especially after the start of the Renaissance, this particularism stopped taking on innovative characteristics, retreating into a sort of antiquated ‘re-feudalisation’.

Throughout the modern era, the martial aspect of physical activity having been scaled back with the genesis of national armies, a new, health-oriented approach to physical exercise developed among the ruling classes, detached from the competitive component. The Catholic Church, however, continued to maintain a hostile attitude towards physical exercise, considered an earthy distraction from the care of the soul. Only the era of the great revolutions, beginning with the protestant religious revolution, laid the groundwork for a new idea of physical activity, and with it the modern concept of sport. The English word sport, which first appeared in 1532, in fact meant ‘amusement,’ and was linked to the Old French word *desport*, which in turn derived from the Latin *deportare*, meaning to go out of doors, understood as synonymous with recreational activities (Battente 2020).

In England, in the face of grand transformations brought about by the philosophical, cultural, scientific, political and economic innovations of the liberal epoch, the need arose for a new type of education for the younger generations, to serve as the basis of a national identity that could guide them through the challenges of modernisation. Looking to the past through classical studies, the government found a model of reference in ancient Greece, adapting the ideal of the gymnasia to that of modern public schools where sport, as per Thomas Arnold’s definition, found a place as a means of education (Holt 1989, 1990; Mangan 1981).

Domestically, focusing on individual athletics but also drawing on popular traditions of team games played with a ball, sport took on educational significance through competition as an emblem of the meritocratic individualism of the open society; but it also had a social value that helped to mend the fractures generated by the industrial revolution (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1987; Corbin 1996; Eichberg 1974). Internationally, on the other hand, it was a means of consolidating leadership over the nascent British empire, and a very useful, penetrating instrument of cultural diplomacy through which to export the English model in the name of British nationalism and liberalism (Lanfranchi 1989).

In addition to the ethical and educational conception pertaining exclusively to the future ruling class, which had imposed amateurism as a key feature, sport also assumed a new professional connotation, which opened it up to the working class (Holt 1990). In keeping with the development of the leisure society and the modern idea of free time, sport also took on elements of entertainment and 'spectacularisation,' entering civil society and becoming a matter of public opinion (Elias and Dunning 1986). A new sporting universe emerged, made up of places designed for playing and watching sport, of narrators recounting athletic feats through sports journalism, of bureaucratic and regulatory structures to control and supervise, and finally, of associated economic activities capable of transforming sport into business.

The English example was soon taken up by other nations, sometimes imitating the British path and other times trying to forge original ones that harmonised with their own idea of state and nation (Battente 2020). Prussia first, and then Germany, preferred the concept of gymnastics or calisthenics without competition but rather centred on the principle of discipline, as the basis of a military mindset for the army and for society in general (Battente 2019). In this context, the position of the Catholic Church with regard to sport changed: although imposing its own definition, it accepted sport, taking the example of the Protestants. Between the two world wars, the Anglo-Saxon model of sport, melded with the Latin-French one, managed to catch on throughout the West.

Internationally, again with an eye towards classical tradition, a circuit of competitions among nations was created, new, but inspired by the old Olympic spirit in a climate of growing nationalism (Sbetti 2012). During the 20th century, sport came to be employed in support of various political and ideological regimes, as an internal binding force and as a means of soft power in international relations (Rider 2016). Along with liberal democracies, authoritarian and totalitarian regimes also made use of sport, namely Fascism, Nazism and Communism, in Italy, Germany and the USSR (Mandell 1971; Riordan 1980; Dietschy and Pivato 2019).

Finally, after the end of the Cold War, sport once again picked up a direct or indirect national value, often emphasised by the return of nationalisms, although with an attempt to attain a global reach. In this context, sport became more open to the female universe, and also took on a cross-generational connotation. It became an endogenous element of Western society, transforming itself in various ways, but always remaining tied to the society of reference, following, and sometimes conditioning, its developments.

It is interesting to note that major epidemics, like other great historical caesuras, have marked the nature of physical activity and sport over the course of the centuries, at times contributing to altering its basic traits, or simply influencing its practices without changing the underlying cultural and identitarian substance. As described below, COVID-19 did not reinvent the importance of sport, but more simply, its onset highlighted the significance of the phenomenon of sport in contemporary societies. The salient features of sports activities were already clearly established; rather than introducing new meanings or revolutionising the conception of sport, the pandemic was a powerful agent that made those established traits more perceptible. But what really emerged as a result of COVID-19 were the ambiguities and limitations of sport as an expression of contemporary identitarian culture, which were not generated by the pathology, but were elements of disfunction in society itself, or at least its debatably poor state of health, reflecting structural macro-level problems. In other words, the pandemic did not generate a crisis, but it exposed one, or at least heightened the dualisms underlying sport as a cultural medium, with divergent and even antithetical, but already well-known, connotations.

A diachronic and synchronic comparison of case studies can thus be useful for two reasons: firstly, to evaluate the pandemic's impact on the sports system and, through it, on the identitarian model in question; and secondly, to investigate the effects of the pandemic on relations between nations with the same conceptions of sport, or with different ones. Did the pandemic change the nature of sport, and society along with it? Or did it only slow down (or accelerate) processes already in progress at the domestic and international levels? To carry out a long-term comparison, it will be useful to first analyse past cases before turning to the recent COVID-19 pandemic.

Pandemics from antiquity to the modern age

Since antiquity, great epidemics have marked civilisation. Thucydides (1996) called the plague "a terrible epidemic" that struck Athens in 428 B.C., causing the death of Pericles among many others. During this pandemic, Thucydides recounted, people lost their moral compass, oppressed as they were by the fear of death. Even the religious sphere, according to the Athenian historian, was heavily impacted. Normal lifestyles were effectively altered by the presence of the disease. Physical activities and the relative competitions were curtailed in civil society (Thucydides 1996). This is hardly surprising, considering the ethical, religious and educational aspects of athletic practices in the Greek world, thrown into crisis by the contagion. The same attitude was found not only in the city of Athens, but in other towns and cities as well.

Once the emergency had passed, however, athletic and competitive activities were resumed, contributing to ensuring the continuity and stability of the social system of which they were an expression. The Olympics kept to their four-year cycle as was the practice at the time (Young 1984; Weber 1992).

Changes occurred thereafter, with the decline of Greek autonomy and the rise of Rome, which, as noted above, transformed physical activity, separating it from its underlying identitarian structure and re-inserting it into a new tradition of entertainment and 'spectacularisation' (Harris 1972). Rome, too, would come to know the scourge of pandemics. Ammianus Marcellinus described the spread of the Antonine plague through the Roman Empire towards Rome (Clark 1963). In this case again, people were overwhelmed by fear, taking refuge in magic as a possible, albeit irrational, means of salvation, as Lucian wrote (see Thonemann 2021). Daily life in the Empire was severely strained, leading to the suspension of numerous activities, including physical activities for leisure and entertainment; only those involved in the training of army continued. Once the crisis of the pandemic had passed, partly to celebrate its end and especially to restore the previous level of order to society, numerous public gladiatorial and horse-racing events were organised (Eutropius 371 B.C.).

In both of the above examples, Greek and Roman, the pandemic did not undermine the social and cultural system of which physical activity was an element. What did change its meaning were other factors linked to the waning of the two civilisations. In the Greek case, the triggers were the decline of its cities and the fall to Rome. In the Roman case, the influential factors were the crisis of the empire and the rise of Christianity, which eventually became the official, monotheistic religion. Rome's new official religion was in fact deeply hostile to the idea of any sort of physical games and exercise, and laid the groundwork for a caesura in sporting activities (Battente 2019). Hence, sport lost its identitarian value and assumed a

connotation as mere spectacle – not an expression of society, but simply a source of amusement and entertainment.

In the collective imagery and collective fears of the Middle Ages, the plague came to be viewed as one of humanity's most dreaded calamities, as attested by the phrase *a fame, peste et bello libera nos* (free us from hunger, plague and war) uttered in prayers for divine aid and protection. Beginning in 1346 the disease spread in Europe, and in the Islamic world and Asia as well. The cultural impact was enormous: everyday life was radically altered by the great number of deaths, and by the great fear that hung over every level of society. Physical activity, which had been a cornerstone of the chivalric world, lost importance; tournaments and jousts eventually faded away (Balestracci 2003). Moreover, it should be noted that the lack of 'human resources' to make up the ranks of armies was probably one of the factors that led science and technology to seek alternatives, and to the consequent development of new weapons employing gunpowder.

The society that came out of the plague had a more pragmatic, material view of life, as Renaissance art demonstrated (de' Medici 1490). Religion itself was deeply shaken. Physical activity, which had supported and encapsulated the identity of the old feudal system, had been once again virtually eliminated by the plague. The chivalric cycle, which had also characterised domestic and international diplomatic relations in the Middle Ages, yielded to the genesis of modern diplomacy. In the *Decameron*, Boccaccio spotlighted the attempted survival of a system in which physical activity, after having been a bearer of values, was reduced to a hedonistic, subjective type of game, detached from community life (Boccaccio 1349-1353).

Thus, in altering the practice of sport, the pandemic contributed to transforming Western society, bringing an end to the feudal system and opening the way to the system of nation states tied to royal absolutism, which remained dominant until the great caesura brought about by modern revolutions. Alessandro Manzoni (1827), in *The Betrothed*, conveyed a sense of radical transformation of everyday life brought about by the 1630 plague in Milan.

However, we must acknowledge that in the modern age, pandemics have unsettled society, but without disrupting key elements of its identity. Physical activity was suspended in such cases, but never completely erased. In each instance, it was resumed, accompanying the development of culture in Western nations. In successive centuries and into the 20th century, numerous pandemic waves struck Europe and its colonies. But modern sport, linked to nations' culture and identity, was never significantly changed. Sport stopped for the acute crisis period, and then picked up again with the same implications, both domestically within individual national societies and with regard to their international relations.

In the contemporary era, with the new conception of mass society and the individual, pandemics had not only collective but also subjective implications. The Spanish influenza was without doubt the most significant of them, and was made all the more dramatic by the fact that it broke out during the First World War. Its onset in 1918 did not bring about a suspension of sport activities, as they had already been substantially limited by the war. If anything, sport carried on thanks to the YMCA, pulled along by American troops at the front who used it a momentary distraction from the wretchedness of life in the trenches (Battente and Menzani 2014). In 1919, with the pandemic beginning to ebb, sport reprised its course, as testified by the Inter-Allied Games in Joinville-le-Pont, Paris, instituted to celebrate victory over the enemy powers (Battente and Menzani 2009).

After the ordeal of the war, sport reprised its role as entertainment and, increasingly, spectacle, without abandoning its moral and educational structure. It was also a period when European countries were discovering sports from the other side of the Atlantic, like basketball and volleyball, and beginning to become enthusiastic about American culture, although the time was not yet ripe for a worldwide, universal view of sport, as cultural isolationism still remained the dominant force. In fact, Washington did not see sport as an instrument of soft power to employ in an attempt to guide the outcomes of the Paris Peace Conference, nor as a vehicle of cultural diplomacy through which to acculturate Old Continent societies. Basketball, for example, was welcomed by European countries, which created national leagues, each giving it their own local interpretation. Between the two wars, English sport still had a stronger impact in Europe, despite the slow economic and political decline that had been ongoing in the United Kingdom since the Victorian age. Sports more associated with Latin countries also began to come to the fore, such as cycling, on the impetus of the French example of the Tour de France and shortly thereafter the Giro d'Italia, as did Teutonic sports, which still centred around gymnastics.

The groundwork was being laid for intense cultural and ideological competition revolving around sport not only as a diplomatic tool, but also as a method of propaganda to reinforce bonds within individual civil societies, in an antagonistic confrontation between distinct, opposing models that successively escalated into another world war. While in European states sport resumed in terms of cycling, football, other British sports and Prussian-influenced gymnastics, the Spanish flu appears to have had no impact on sport and its role in individual societies.

While sport in the American sphere continued to have a specific function as a sort of national liturgy, a binding force in a multiethnic open society, and thus did not immediately aspire to reaching the international sphere (Rader 1983; Brown 2005), European sport continued to be interpreted as a national phenomenon, emphasising nationalistic differences that could not be resolved within the perimeter of international sports competitions. Such competitions became arenas of confrontation between antagonistic ideological, political, economic and social models, but were unable to establish an equilibrium among them. In this sense, the case of the 1936 Berlin Olympics was particularly resonant (Mandell 1971; Large 2009).

After the Second World War, sport took on growing cultural and political value both domestically and at the international level, marked by the new Cold War climate. Although important, the 1957 pandemic, known as the Asian flu pandemic, did not bring about a stoppage of sports activities, which continued as usual, with no alterations in the system of sports-oriented domestic and international relations of the period, which was considered paramount. Analogously, in 1968, sport was not hampered by the Hong Kong flu pandemic. More than the pandemic, the forces that dictated radical changes at the time were the youth-culture revolution and the economic situation, with the golden age and the gold exchange standard coming to an end (Battente 2019).

In individual national contexts as well as at the international level, sport continued without interruptions, carrying out its cultural functions at home and abroad. Finally, before the advent of COVID-19, the AIDS pandemic did have some impact on sport, although without ever halting it. In this case, it is interesting to note the homophobic, identitarian element derived from the idea that the disease was linked to homosexuality, a belief that led to decisions aimed at curbing and containing certain sexual orientations more than the pandemic

itself. Only later, with scientific understanding of the virus, were choices made to use precautions more targeted towards contact with possibly infected blood. The case of NBA basketball star Earvin 'Magic' Johnson was emblematic in this sense: after testing HIV-positive, he initially had to stop playing, but later played in the 1992 Barcelona Olympics, the first games to take place in a post-Cold War scenario with the illusion of a new world order. In this case, the American Dream Team of basketball champions was certainly a vehicle of soft power and cultural diplomacy, and of US primacy over other nations.

In all of these cases, as we have noted, sport carried on without interruption. In some ways, this was indicative of a new identity for sport, understood as an expression of globalised Western culture that was sensitive to both American needs and, perhaps even more, to Cold War principles of competition and opposition. The economic value of sport as entertainment was an important driver. At the same time, there were hints of the slow decline of the Western model and the rise of new subjects. Sport was becoming a global tool that could be used and exploited by different and distinct cultures, not so much to assert their identities and influence in sport itself, but in a more neutral, soft-power sense.

The Cold War had momentarily set aside the idea of different identity-related *conceptions* of sport in favour of globalised sport that fostered marked identitarian *competitiveness*. Moreover, until at least the 1970s, sport remained a passive mass phenomenon, with few participants and many spectators. This was further evidence of the change in orientation regarding sport, in which ethics and character formation were replaced by spectacle and entertainment. It was not until the end of the 1970s that sport became a mass phenomenon, in particular involving young children, for reasons of education, amusement and socialisation as well as reasons of health and aesthetic canons. This was the beginning of the idea of the American way of life and the American attempt to exercise cultural diplomacy through sport (Guttmann 1994).

Sport and COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic that broke out at the start of 2020 was a tragic period, and also one of interesting developments in sport. Due to the seriousness and rapid spread of the virus, national and international organised sports were in fact brought to a halt. There were certainly some attempts to continue in any case with some form of sport at both the professional and amateur levels. But the danger of contagion forced a full stoppage, although different approaches were taken in different countries.

In Italy, for example, football, gaining leverage from the fact of being an outdoor sport, deferred the cessation as long as possible, until it became mandatory. Picking back up in the late spring/early summer of 2020, the football season was completed in August of that year. Other national leagues, including the English Premier League and Spain's Liga, followed Italy's example. Indoor sports like basketball, however, were forced to cancel the season. One singular example in basketball was the NBA: the season was suspended, then re-started and completed without spectators in the 'bubble' of Orlando's Disney World. Cycling carried on with its season, although it was shifted to autumn 2020, rather than spring as is customary.

In all of these cases, the economic factor was predominant, to the point of bringing about decisions regarding the continuation or interruption of a sport's season, leveraging the use of technology to allow remote viewing for spectators. This showed that while ticket sales

to spectators present in stadiums and arenas were important, and a key element of the basic choreography of sporting events, the truly crucial balance sheet item was television rights. To make up for the absence of in-person spectators, the NBA created virtual ones, to video-game-like effect. Under these circumstances, sport clearly ceased to have any educational or moral value, and became strictly business and entertainment. Sport actually did have a psychological and emotional impact, however, helping to cheer up a demoralised and terrified public and thus indirectly functioning as an element of social cohesion at a critical time.

Although there were significant differences among countries, much of the developed world followed a similar path. Internationally, however, the underlying cultural function of sport seemed to be momentarily lost, bringing forth once again its merely business-economic aspect, linked to the organisation of large sporting events, the cancellation of which, while not destructive for sport itself, was disastrous at the time. Major international events were all postponed to the following year or the end of the current year where possible. The 2020 Tokyo Olympics, for example, was postponed to 2021, and although maintaining the 'Tokyo 2020' name and logo for branding purposes, took place without spectators. The European football championships, originally planned for the summer of 2020, were moved to the following year for reasons not directly linked to COVID-19, but to allow the Champions League and various national leagues to play out first.

Once again, what became most apparent was the predominantly financial, show-business aspect that characterised professional sport, much more than the political and cultural influence of sport. Not that the latter were completely erased; it simply did not appear to be as vital as in the past. This trend was already in progress prior to the pandemic. While in the short term, hosting a major sporting event may not have necessarily been lucrative for the host country, and in fact often ended up bringing financial loss rather than profit, in the medium and long term, it proved to be an investment that could bring development and recovery (Roche 2000). In any case, the outcome was very much influenced by trends in the international economic cycle. In this sense, the mechanism of cultural diplomacy seems to have held up. But at the same time, major events had their own business dimension, often tied to large corporate groups and brands as well as actors pertaining to the world of sport itself, from clubs to federations to leagues, and this was certainly a very important variable at both the domestic and international levels.

More than political or cultural-identity relevance, the business aspect proved to be the driving force, owing to public and private interests seeking to defend their own models or, wherever possible, export them, retaining their own rules and identity (Rook and Heerdt 2023). What became evident, then, was the globalisation of business pursued in distinct or even antithetical ways by subjects with the same financial aims. Sport proved to encapsulate a globalisation process, not in terms of the homogenisation of differences, but rather acceptance of procedures and rules now in force. COVID-19 had not altered the DNA of sport, but had momentarily altered its course, without challenging its meaning, but on the contrary, highlighting its true nature.

In this process, the distinctive national traits of sport have been scaled back in the name of globalisation, and nations, while representing different social, economic, political and ideological models, were considered mere participants aiming to win a competition. While background elements of differentiation remained – e.g., between the BRICS countries and Western democracies – when it came to organising or participating in international events, there was no longer any thought of using them as instruments of cultural diplomacy;

rather, there was general acceptance of the idea of a global business, however countries chose to manage it.

In other words, sport was used to demonstrate that countries could do business, excel, and have dealings without having to legitimise themselves (or delegitimise others) or try to culturally colonise others, each one staying within the bounds of its own distinct model – antagonists, but in economic terms, not ideological terms. The resurgence of nationalism was one sign of this, but the situation was differentiated from the past precisely by this purely economic/financial frame of mind. This was the result of a transformation triggered not by the COVID-19 pandemic, but rather by changes in international relations and the oppositions linked to them. Sport once again had a function similar to the one it had had in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, as well as through two world wars and a Cold War; however, it was no longer a tool for propaganda, but a metaphor for supremacy. COVID-19 had exposed the breakdown of globalisation in cultural terms, and the failure of those who had sought to mould and construct it, as evidenced by the unravelling of a world order tied to it. This order was replaced by a disorder awaiting a new alignment, and the re-emergence of particularisms: in fact, mega-events increasingly demonstrated the presence of the distinctive, original traits of individual countries, within the context of the now merely formal idea of globalisation.

While at the 2014 football World Cup in Brazil, a beer producing-sponsor managed to circumvent the FIFA prohibition of the sale of alcohol in stadiums, in 2022 the same sponsor saw its request rejected – but with an offer of financial compensation for lost sales – by the host country, Qatar, which was more interested in maintaining its religious principles than public order.

It cannot be said that the will, or better, the ambition to use sport as a political instrument in various forms and with varying potential had faded, as had happened in the past. But the end of the world order had also changed strategies with regard to sporting events. While on the one hand such events had begun to take on supranational form, distributed among various countries as a sort of stimulus to generate a society that could overcome divisions and find a new sense of community, on the other, nationalisms had once again claimed a central position. Rather than transforming international tournaments into competitions similar to national championships on a larger scale in a sort of ‘proto-globalisation,’ the situation had brought forth even more markedly antagonistic identities, as evidenced by the hooligan phenomenon, and not just in England.

This was because the predominance of Western culture had stalled: internally fractured, it was no longer capable of finding an expression of its essence that could overcome national and ideological differences, and thus could not exercise hegemony on the international level. The fact that the football world cup tournament was held in Qatar was considered the result of corruption, but not because there had never been equivocal episodes in the tournament’s past. The difference lay in the fact that previous tournaments had been organised by the Western elite; its monopoly had been showing cracks for some time, since the end of the hegemony of Anglo-Saxon countries, to the benefit of other, newer players on the world stage. The widespread criticism of a world cup being held in winter was off the mark – there had been others in the past (including in Brazil), but they had not been ‘Western’ winners.

So, what came to the fore was a conception of a cultural diplomacy of sport as a derivation of business competition. While not exceedingly different from the model adopted in the late 19th and 20th centuries, this new process diverged from it, in that now, there were

no longer nations with very similar cultural backgrounds – albeit distinct ideologies – in competition, but different cultures, societies and even civilisations. Large international sporting events of ever-growing economic dimensions had in fact also maintained features of cultural diplomacy, in the sense of legitimisation of hosting and participating countries. Once again, the case of Qatar is emblematic: having managed to organise its world cup during a pandemic and come through with a successful event, it was able to improve its diplomatic legitimacy, as evidenced by its role as mediator during the intensification of the Israel-Palestine conflict in 2023.

The conception of sport as spectator entertainment and business is in some ways nothing more than its encapsulation according to the American model. The exporting of this conception was thus simply the fruit of a soft power process revolving around American cultural hegemony that had begun with the golden age of the American way of life and then shifted towards globalisation, quite successfully, albeit not without some resistance. Although the same thing may have happened as a result of a process of cultural diplomacy, here the difference lay in the fact that the economic, entertainment-oriented side was not accompanied by true cultural homogenisation, as further evidenced by upheavals in America's domestic order and the world order it had led (Huntington 1997).

The 2021 European football championship, for example, did not engender a sense of a unified European identity, even though it took place in several nations, making them the equivalent of cities competing in a national tournament. In the same way, the idea of a football world cup being held in Canada, the US and Mexico is unlikely to draw together such different nations. Kissinger, who had seen sport as such a powerful political force that he wanted the football world cup to be hosted by the US in the early 1990s to consolidate the American image after the end of the Cold War, again promoted the tournament's return to the country in an attempt to contribute to creating a new world order based on a new idea of the Americas. This aim is unlikely to be achieved, but the conception of sport as business is still very much on the table. The decision regarding the football world cup has much to do with an awareness that it would be much more difficult to use an 'American' sport for this purpose, as opposed to one already played on a worldwide scale. In this sense, football, despite having interiorised aspects of 'financialisation' and 'spectacularisation', has not lost its intrinsic identitarian nature, at both the hometown (*piccola patria*) and home country (*grande patria*) levels.

In contrast, amateur sport, in which professionalism and the economic aspect were not significant, underwent a forced stoppage almost everywhere during the pandemic, ceding to the primary need for health and safety. On a day-to-day level, however, a notable portion of the population had no intention of giving up the possibility of doing physical exercise individually, such as running, calisthenics or cycling, albeit with restrictions on travel. Hence, two connotations of sport emerged from the pandemic period: sport as business competition, and sport as a wellness and health activity.

What was completely lacking in this circumstance was the underlying meaning of sport as a transmitter of character formation, discipline and ethics. In fact, even in its wellness matrix, physical exercise did not play an educational or moral role, but was limited to having an impact on health and beauty, as would be expected for a hedonistic society. The fact that many of these practices and impacts are subjective and personal further highlighted the individualist bent of modern Western societies. However, communication technologies allowed the competition connotation of sport to survive thanks to television, radio and the Internet, bringing sporting events into people's private realms; thus, sport continued to be a subject

of national public opinion, even though citizens could not aggregate to watch it in stadiums and arenas. Another element that COVID-19 accelerated was the rise of virtual video game competitions, entertainment transformed into electronic sports, with specific national and international competitive circuits.

The pandemic thus brought out the specific nature of the practice of sport in society. There were no longer appreciable differences between nations regarding what had now become a universal definition of the idea of sport as a result of globalisation, which had been unanimously accepted in the sphere of sport. Yet, the globalisation of sport did not entail the erasure of national differences or conflicts, which actually increased in the climate of international tension produced by the fraying world order. This was perhaps the result of a universal application of a single model as a vehicle for hegemonic ambitions, at least in the sports world, a model that also had the effect of reducing the distance between ideological, political, social and economic categories, sometimes irrespective of forms.

Within various disciplines and at major worldwide events, sport took on a significance that was more economic than value-driven, skewed towards a substantive, unreserved professionalism. At the same time, the distinctive element was definitively entertainment and 'spectacularisation'. Sport ceased to be a means of character-forming or ethical grounding, except perhaps in an abstract, rhetorical way. Competition, however, did not completely lose its cultural diplomacy function, although the latter was subordinated to the economic aspect. The governments of various countries, rather than supervising or regulating sport, attempted to establish conditions in which sport could continue to govern itself and maintain its increasingly business- and entertainment-oriented activities. Sport as entertainment was of course a pre-existing offshoot of Western culture and not a force for social adhesion capable of smoothing over domestic and international frictions. The sport that emerged during the COVID-19 pandemic is a phenomenon in which entertainment is an end in itself. Its proliferation paradoxically diluted its fundamental values, leading to a two-pronged reaction of habituation and dependency, teetering between the desire for more sport and boredom induced by more sport.

At the same time, the idea of sport as something not necessarily competitive but fundamental to health and beauty came to the fore, to the point that it began to be perceived as indispensable. It no longer had to do with a collective or individual cultural process aimed at ethically educating and training future generations, but rather with a material sense of necessity linked to the physical body. These characteristics were not imposed by COVID-19, but gained greater visibility and accelerated as a result of the pandemic.

Conclusion

Over the centuries, sport – or physical activity, before it was known as sport – has been interwoven with the societies of which it was expression: sport has been an instrument contributing to the genesis of collective and individual identities, taking on distinct values at different times, including character-forming and moral ones, medical-health ones, and finally, entertainment and 'spectacularisation'. Owing to these connotations, sport has had significant meaning, helping to create social adhesion within increasingly complex societies as a sort of synopsis of culture, and also contributing to defining international relations, as a result

of both the distinctive traits sport assumed for individual nations and its universalisation over time.

In the past, major pandemics had always imposed a hiatus in the practice of sport. The dramatic advent of disease rendered physical activities untenable in the face of the more pressing need to survive. Pandemics sometimes influenced the social systems they struck, and even created the conditions for their decline. Other times, however, they merely accelerated a process of crisis already in progress in a system of which sport was an expression. But in most cases, the pandemic only momentarily interrupted sporting activities, which picked back up once the emergency had ended. This could be observed both domestically, where sport was understood as a social adhesive for individual societies, and internationally, where sport could be utilised as a diplomatic relations tool even between dissimilar models of society.

We might venture to say that in societies that were on the rise and/or flourishing, the pandemic was merely a momentary disturbance; sport was interrupted, but without obliterating the identity of which it was both an expression and a source. The ethical and educational element remained strongly attributed as the primary feature of sport, and the play/entertainment aspect was secondary. In contrast, if a system was already in crisis, sport followed the same path of decline, and the spectacularised entertainment aspect was emphasised.

On the international level as well, the 'spectacularisation' of sport appeared to anticipate societal crises that the pandemic had only slowed, or worse, exacerbated.

Finally, some further reflections spurred by the COVID-19 pandemic. First of all, it highlighted ways in which sport had changed even before its onset, which simply accelerated dynamics already set in motion. In fact, the pandemic stigmatised the importance of physical exercise definable as 'fitness' as an essential part of everyday life in Western society, albeit with varying gradations. This was not real sport, but rather a health-and-wellbeing prophylaxis with an additional aesthetic component. This was perhaps the most novel feature arising from the COVID pandemic. Sport has had an increasingly diluted and reduced significance in terms of education and value-building, with its aesthetic and hedonistic aspect as an end in itself taking on greater and greater importance. In other words, all that remains of the ancient *καλος και αγατος* is the first part of the term, in keeping with the contemporary society of which sport is now an expression.

With COVID-19, the entertainment and spectacle of sport came to the fore, leaving its civic and maieutic aspects in the background as pure theory. Sports competitions showed their purely economic, business side, as evidenced by the resistance to a forced stop in response to the spread of the virus. Immense investments in sporting-sector events are not only demonstrations of soft power in the service of various aims; such events are above all capable of moving massive amounts of money and generating enormous profits.

Technology made it possible to carry on with the seasons of various sports, after the shortest possible hiatus, precisely to keep the business running and the money flowing. One of the results of this situation was a magnification of the generation gap based on different levels of familiarity with digital innovation.

The economic side of sport revealed the existence of a disconnect between the 'rank and file' and the governance of sport, the decisions of which were not always understood; in this sense, sport reflected what was happening in general between institutions and civil society. Finally, the COVID-19 pandemic brought to light both the persistence of the substantial

globalisation of sport and the re-emergence of its nationalist implications, not as an original, individual interpretation, but as an apparently neutral, universal means to defend an identity.

In diachronic terms, then, COVID-19 was substantially in line with previous pandemics, and did not alter the identities of individual societies or their interrelations through sport, but simply slowed or accelerated existing phenomena. Synchronically, there appear to have been no substantial differences between individual nations, nor among various disciplines, bearing in mind pre-existing particularities, and this was synonymous with a general, globalising homologisation resulting from a long-term process in Western civilisation. This globalisation of sport did not erase or reduce the manifold cultural and ideological expressions that characterise individual national societies outside the perimeter of Western civilisation, nor some meaningful distinctions within it, such as Russia. Some countries – Turkey, China and India, just to give a few examples – clearly resisted homologisation, even as they accepted the same conception of sport. In fact, the BRICS countries set themselves up as alternative models to the Western bloc, using sport as a playing field on which to meet its challenges without being culturally colonised by them. Numerous (certainly not all) African countries proved to be more receptive to homologation, even while attempting to safeguard their ethnic traditions. The case of Arab countries, on the other hand, is unusual: after having invested in Western sport as part of a sort of cultural/soft power policy, they are now investing in their own national sports competitions.

In conclusion, over the course of time, sport has sometimes withstood the impact of pandemics, and other times has had to transform itself under the weight of tragic events. The COVID-19 pandemic specifically did not change sport, but simply accelerated trends that had already been set in motion, expressions of a Western society profoundly struggling with its structural equilibrium and identity. Applied to sport, spectacularism, entertainment, hedonism and commercialism independent of any ideological involvement are, in the best hypothesis, typical traits of a changing society; in the worst hypothesis, they are evidence of societal crisis and decline, as history has shown. The underlying cultural diplomacy in sport was no longer able to substantiate an exportable model, and was used by other social models as a basis for asserting the autonomy they had achieved. The fragmentation of sports leadership may also be a sign of the decline of the old international order and the beginning of a new, multi-polar system of models that are separate and different, but united by acknowledgement of the globalisation of the concept of sport.

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