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# *Integration by Sport Activities: Resource or Only a Paradox?*

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## **Abstract**

Nowadays in Europe sport and physical activity represent a strategic tool for public health policies that aim to promote the wellbeing of population, supporting dialogue for social cohesion and, at the same time, represent an important economic sector. The acknowledgement of sport capability to be a vehicle for integrating diversity- confirming the attention to intercultural dialogue at European level –in an evidence of its importance in the current debate on integration and multiculturalism.

Through comparing different sports models of integration within the EU, this paper is going to discuss some questions: what connection is there between the construction of a multicultural society and the diffusion of sports practices? What meanings, values and paradoxes coexist today in the culture of integration implemented in Europe? Is the “sports” habitus a field of competition between migrants and natives, or a space of integration for generations of new citizens?

**Keywords:** Sports practices, European society, integration models, sports habitus.

## *1. Introduction*

Sport is one of the most widespread activities in contemporary society. It is a tool to improve the psycho-physical well-being of the population (healthy lifestyles); and plays an important role in social cohesion by providing opportunities for meetings and exchanges between people of different genres, cultures, capacities, nationalities [...] strengthening the “culture of living together” (Council Europe, 2013, doc. 1, p. 2). In this perspective sport is a phenomenon of great social, economic and cultural importance in all the countries of the European Union and by all the acknowledged members of the Council of Europe. This is because the European institutions consider sport as a central value of the so-called “European society”. A series of legislative and regulatory measures for sport and physical activities have been developed in the new millennium,

in order to go beyond the merely economic dimension of sport<sup>1</sup> and enhance its social, cultural and political aspects. The White Paper on Sport (2007), as well as the Treaty of Lisbon (2009), have in fact formalized the interest in sport at the European level due to its important social function and the ability to promote a shared cultural identity (Rogulski & Miettinen, 2009).

As a response to the fragmentation of national communities observed in many European countries, sport has often represented a model of integration especially for immigrant populations, strongly shared for the social and educational values that sporting practice can generate and for the ability to create social bonds (Gasparini, 2008).

Overcoming common sense, the purpose of these reflections on the relationship between sport and immigration, is an attempt to reflect on sport as tool of integration or not, and how can it decline its practices according to the specificities of the territory. This means considering sport beyond material aspects, in order to understand the socio-cultural aspects that facilitate the integration of immigrants, new actors of global civil society.

In this paper I will try to explore what opportunities sport and physical activities offer, in order to increase the social and cultural capital existing both among the immigrants (and refugees), and among the autochthonous people, in order to facilitate the social integration. In specific, my reflection will start from this point of view: social ties are created and regenerated even, and especially, during free time. Therefore, it is important to observe the place that sporting activities give to generate social capital, and to encourage –or to hinder– the integration of this people.

For this purpose, the empirical research in most of the European states, is implied. Also, my paper will attempt to outline and answer to some questions. What connection is there between building a multicultural society and the diffusion of sports practices? What meanings, values and paradoxes coexist today in the culture of European sports integration? How effective is sport in describing a multicultural society?

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<sup>1</sup>For example, the spread of physical activities among the population is an indicator of a socio-cultural change showing how sport and wellness industry is one of the fastest growing sectors in the world economy (Rutgers, 2018).

In this context, is the “sports habitus” acting as a field of competition between migrants and natives or, in contemporary society, is it a space of integration for generations of new citizens? I will try to answer these questions in the following paragraphs.

## *2. Sport as European category? Comparing models*

Since the late 1980s of the XX century, there has been a growth in comparative studies produced by international organizations aimed at understanding the political effects and cultures of the groups studied (sports participation, or sports socialization for example). The comparison makes it possible to understand what is foreign as obvious (Bourdieu 2000), making comparable units of analysis deeply anchored in history, individual languages and different categories comparable.

Beyond these aspects, European studies have focused on both sport and the construction of European sports policy. From this perspective, following Gasparini (2011), some questions have arisen: how to overcome a normative and institutional approach to European sport? How to draw the lines of a critical sociology of a “Europe of sport” and of the functions that European institutional actors attribute to it? For this purpose it is necessary to overcome the analyzes that focus only on “objectified structures” and, conversely, consider the symbolic, ideological resources of sport, as well as the crucial role of individuals and groups that create the culture of sport that circulates in Europe.

In particular, in sport field what do the categories of cultural dialogue and integration mean? They are not just categories discussed in the social sciences, but they represent national categories that take on different meaning according to the individual territories. In fact, these are not European transnational categories: their definition and use, is the result of symbolic struggles whose purpose is the legitimate European definition of the “model of European integration through sport”. In this perspective, the democratic management of a growing cultural diversity, amplified by the globalization process, has become a priority of the Council of Europe since 2008, facing an always greater presence of ethnic minorities and immigrant communities. Concerning the latter, there are many examples of sports practices that confirm that sport is a tool of social integration for

immigrants, of skills development and identity. On the other hand, it is well known that sport can also be the field of exacerbated nationalism, exclusion and discrimination (Gasparini & Cometti, 2010).

Most of these studies take as their central theme, the interaction of migration, migration policies and social protection in European countries. In that view “migration and social policy governance in EU result in differentiated but co-existing modes of integration and segregation, inclusion and exclusion for migrants, with considerable variation between and within member state of EU” (Carmel & Cerami, 2011, p. 1). Consequently – in the field of *sociology of globalization* – a multidimensional approach is required, and it involves an exploration of the synergies that exist between migration policies at local, regional, national and transnational level, for the significant implications of migrants’ lives, as well as the possibilities of enhancing their well-being through social and cultural contexts.

An interesting comparative study carried out by the European Commission in 2003 on sport as a tool for multicultural dialogue, has highlighted how sport has been used in the countries of the European Union in order to reduce intercultural tensions. In particular, it has shown the existence of four different models of nationality and citizenship within the EU (the French republican model, the pluralist English model, the German nationalist model, the post-communist model). From these models, traditional approaches to sports policies emerge, aimed on the one hand at reinforcing diversity and cultural pluralism; on the other hand, to reinforce instead the concept of social cohesion. As William Gasparini states (2011), this result shows that a single model of integration through sport does not exist in Europe and that sports policies develop between convergences and divergences.

In doing so, discussing sports and immigration highlights the multidimensional nature of sport, its being a “total social fact” (Mauss, 1965), where it appears as a place of inclusion, and on the contrary, of discrimination and “ordinary racism”. From this point of view sport is a mirror to show a multicultural society as it happened in France for example. In fact, during the twentieth century, a model of secular cultural integration was established in France through the two major educational agencies: school and sport. This model, while acknowledging the “dual identity” for immigrants, has also shown its limitations: the presence of

strong stereotypes or the failed attempt to acknowledge equality and diversity in all ethnic groups in the nation. All of this did not stop the birth of a sports culture of integration that found its main stage in playgrounds: football, more than other sports, is a way of “ethnicization” for French society, as states W. Gasparini during an interview about the role of sport in the process of integrating immigrants (Russo, 2016).

But what’s happening in Italy? With respect to most continental European countries which experienced mass migration starting from the end of the Second World War (as the South of Europe in generally) Italy can be considered an “almost new” country of immigration, since significant flows in the second half by the ‘70s. Italy has been a frontier territory for migrations for several decades: the continuous flow of people of different origins now defines this country as a “society of cultures” in progress, within a framework of European and national mobility that is not easy to solve. In the European context, however, Italy’s role is above all that of a “transit country” for migration flows (UNHCR, 2015).

As it emerges from the 22nd ISMU Migration Report, the migration phenomenon in Italy appears to be constantly changing. Today it is possible to talk about a new cycle, whose dynamics are mainly related to the geopolitical transformations and conflicts of the countries of the Middle East and sub-Saharan Africa and, on the domestic front, to the impact of the economic crisis on the Italian labor market. This complex and diversified scenario is the result of the following reasons: significant increase in migration flows; strong reduction of people entering the country to look for work; consolidation of family units; overall increase in emigration from Italy; significant presence of migrants from the new European Union countries in Italy (Cesareo, 2016).

In this framework Italy is changing its configuration. Over 5 million immigrants live in Italy today. Despite the rhetoric that it is being invaded by foreigners, their presence in the country is almost unchanged (IDOS, 2018): at the end of 2017 there were 5,144,000 foreigners residing in Italy, 97,000 more than in 2016 (+1,9%) with an incidence of 8.5% on the total population (8,3% in the 2016)<sup>2</sup>. Today Italy is one of the

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<sup>2</sup> The increase of percentage is mainly due to the progressive decrease of Italian citizens, who are getting older (25% of Italian people is over 65, while among foreign are only 1 out to 2) and have an increasingly lower birth rate. Moreover, many Italians are beginning to emigrate again from the country (almost 115,000 during the year).

top eleven nations in the world that has welcomed the highest number of migrants since the 1990s onwards along with Spain. The reasons that support migration flows are specifically the following: work (52.5%), family (34.1%), and since 2014 also asylum requests (7%) - compared to previous years - these have overtaken the study motivation. But the migration issue is not only important due to its numerical and structural dimension: the relevance of the socio-cultural aspects is of primary interest for the social integration of immigrants, being a resource and a challenge for the host country (Martelli, 2015).

The visible presence of immigrants/refugees in Italian towns, as well as the social tensions that are emerging as spontaneous reactions of the autochthonous people, or as programmed interventions promoted by “political entrepreneurs” for own electoral goals, raise important questions, such as whether, and how, the integration of immigrants and refugees into the Italian society is possible, and if this event is desirable. These questions are part of the wider ongoing debate on the transformation of the European society into a multi-cultural or multi-ethnic one. It is indeed a problematic phenomenon, to be investigated indepth with multidimensional approaches being able to shed light on immigrants as new actors in global civil society. If it is true then that studying integration is today an inevitable issue, this happens not only because of a better knowledge of the dynamics of interaction with the economy, but above all because of the territorial policies of social and cultural inclusion aimed to the well-being of local communities and its main actors.

From this point of view, it is useful to explore the daily socio-cultural practices of migrants in the host country, paying attention to the social ties that are created and regenerated in free time. Sport is therefore an innovative social space, suitable for observing opportunities to meet natives and immigrants for its ability to generate social capital, favoring - or combating - integration.

In fact, sport offers extraordinary possibilities of knowledge, encounter between cultures, contamination of “socially responsible” sports practices. In this perspective it can be understood as a vehicle of positive values, the exercise of civilization and humanity, an arena for socialization but also for education and openness to others. On the other hand, the sporting reality brings with it a reality made up of forms of discrimination with its signs of

stigmatization (à la Goffman): external marks that mark the difference (skin color, language, build, gender, etc.)

It is therefore legitimate to ask: what is the real goal that is achieved on the playing fields? The social space of sport today reveals a complexity that refers to signs, practices, languages, different images of a context that sets itself the difficult objective of interculturality and that, in fact, is in a continuous search for identity. I think this is the real bet that we are living on the football, basketball and cricket fields. In stadiums, in gyms, in public spaces where physical activity or sport is practiced, in reality we mostly play “identity games. The stakes are in fact the type of identity that can be created and built starting from the social positions available in the different realities” (Zoletto, 2010, p. 45).

The game of integration is therefore a match - a battle? - in which we try to overcome a border, fill a difference between “we” and “them”, turn a stigma upside down, go beyond discrimination. Sport is in fact a cultural field in which, as Pierre Bourdieu (1998) affirmed, actors with specific interests connected to the position they occupy in the social space are faced: a field of competition, whose goal today turns into a sign of coexistence civil.

Sport and physical activity are in fact “capable of integrating, of symbolically converting” those outside “into instruments capable of giving identity, of generating identification in individuals [...] of making them participate, even symbolically, in a same reality, to share, to feel part of something common: ultimately to live together” (Xavier Medina 2002, p. 22).

### *3. Sport as an integration practice*

This is why, especially in the last twenty years, there has been a wide flowering of studies dedicated to the role of sport in migratory processes (push towards globalization, etc.). The fundamental theme of this literature is represented by studies on sports practices that involve groups of migrants (in particular refugees and asylum seekers) and on the effect that such practices can have on integration processes in the contexts of arrival.

In most of these studies, sport is presented as a factor that positively influences these processes. However, there are also contributions that - even in the light of empirical analyzes on specific territorial areas - state

that this assumption should be critically assessed or, at least, subjected to more careful checks. Among the reasons that are evoked to highlight the positive role of sport, many concern the development of skills and attitudes of migrants who, on the one hand, favor the improvement of their living conditions and, on the other, qualify the contribution that they can bring to the territorial contexts they belong. This increase in skills is often categorized as an increase in various forms of personal “capital”. Thus, for example, Henry (2005) speaks of a triple kind of capital, to which the sport of migrants can contribute. The first is a physical capital: sport and, more generally, physical activity promote a harmonious physical development and improve the state of health, making available to migrants easily accessible resources, even to those living in unfavorable conditions. A second type of capital is the psychological one. Sport can contribute to the improvement of psychological well-being and self-esteem, factors often jeopardised by the traumatic experiences suffered. Finally, there is social capital: sporting practice often has the effect of widening the subjects' relational network. This is particularly valuable in the initial phase of the migration path, in which the weakness of relationships is an obstacle to the resolution of basic problems, such as access to work and the opportunities offered by the context.

It may be added that the personal social capital thus understood can receive further articulations (in this sense the works of Putnam, 2000; Woolcock, 2001). Three types of social capital can therefore be distinguished: “bonding”, “bridging” and “linking” social capital. The first type consists in strengthening ties between subjects already connected by ties of kinship, friendship, cultural affinity. In the case of the sport of migrants, sports practices that strengthen this type of ties are those that involve the game in teams of subjects from the same geographical areas, establishing links of mutual solidarity between individuals, which can also act in other fields of social life (examples are the game of cricket or basketball). They also have the effect of increasing the visibility of the group, making it emerge from anonymity, even with the correlated risk of bringing out factors of contrast and rivalry between groups.

Bridging capital, on the other hand, involves the creation of links between different subjects, in a heterogeneous social context. It can be augmented by activities or sporting events that bring mixed teams together and that create a common ground of collaboration between migrants and

natives, and between groups of different geographical origin (in Italy the example of the anti-racist World Cup which for over 20 years has represented one of the most important events in sporting area with the aim of integrating migrants through sport). Finally, linking capital refers to building relationships with institutional subjects and organizations with power. In this regard, the theme becomes that of sports associations (Granata, 2013) and the relationships that it defines in urban areas with various structures - institutional, private or third sector - that allow migrants to enter into relations with power, in its various forms.

In any case, the reference to these different types of social capital does not imply that they cannot overlap and mix, but contribute to highlighting the complexity of the forms of relationship that sporting activity generates (Vermuelen & Verweel, 2009; Walseth, 2007; Janssens & Verweel, 2014). Through the categorizations now referred to, or others, sport is often presented as an essential means to promote social inclusion policies, with reference to the different dimensions that inclusion implies (Bailey, 2005). From this point of view, the function that can be performed towards migrants concerns social or gender inequalities, or vis-à-vis persons with disabilities (Haudenhuyse & Theeboom, 2015). In this regard, however, as some point out, critical attention is required to avoid excessive emphasis on the effectiveness of sport in any case. In addition to the obvious fact that even in the sports field the access barriers and structural inequalities present in the whole social system are reproduced (Elling & Claringbould, 2005), it can also be argued that some prior degree of inclusion is necessary to be able to access sports practices that can produce further integration (Coalter, 2015).

It may still be added that, although sport is intrinsically connected to values such as loyalty, cooperation, equality on the playing field, in contemporary societies it is also the subject of practices and representations that exalt competitiveness instead. In this case, sport becomes an instrument of individual promotion and that exacerbates the dimension of rivalry and conflict, to the point of generating forms of effective and symbolic violence (Cushion & Jones, 2006). This is visible mainly in professional sports such as football, but it is also there at an amateur level and, in any case, it concerns precisely those disciplines that, due to their popularity and international diffusion, lend more easily to relating subjects of different origins.

However, an essential variable that affects the function of sport with respect to migrants concerns the status of the latter and the phases they reach in the migration path. For groups and communities that have come to root in local societies, the problem that arises with regard to sports practices is part of the more general condition of ethnic minorities (Long *et al.*, 2009). In the case of asylum seekers and refugees the situation arises in different terms. Sport is sometimes the object of projects and policies aimed directly at them (Amara *et al.*, 2005), but it can also be the means by which informal practices are spread, which bring migrants - even at a time when their future destiny is still uncertain - to relate to the public spaces of the city in which they are hosted and to take advantage of opportunities, also offered by places not specifically equipped.

### *Conclusion*

Observing the relationships between sport and migration means understanding the importance and the multidimensionality that sporting practices can bring with them, within contemporary cultures and societies. The acknowledgement of sport capability to be a vehicle for integrating diversity- confirming the attention to intercultural dialogue at European level – in an evidence of its importance in the current debate on integration and multiculturalism.

From a different point of view, I tried to explain how sport can be a generative place of inter-culture or, on the contrary, a space of discrimination and/or cultural claim. The intent is to go beyond the stereotypes, clichés, paradoxes and ambiguities that migratory reality and its social practices pose daily as a point of contemporary reflection. In recent years, the growing presence of immigrants, refugees and asylum seekers in Europe has led to reflect on new possibilities for integration models. Analyzing the contribution of sports practices can provide innovative tools to the issue. On these premises, I believe there is an unquestionable value: the effort to change the “skin to the culture”, where the study of sport and physical activity becomes the spokesman of new social requests to provide concrete answers to a different question of quality of life for natives and immigrants.

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