**Is Sport War?**

The study was prepared within the framework of the Academic Fund Program at the National Research University Higher School of Economics (HSE) in 2015 (grant № 15-05-0069) and supported within the framework of a subsidy granted to the HSE by the Government of the Russian Federation for the implementation of the Global Competitiveness Program.

This presentation is a part of research project I pursue this year with my colleagues and students of faculty of humanities. This project focuses on determination of war concept, we’d like to question what is war in 21st century and how has it changed since ancient times and since the modern era. So we would like to get overall notion of war. And I believe certain traces of war and combat may be found in the field of sport.

First of all I’d like to say a few words on war.

21st century is a hard time for war. The concept of war is itself very powerful, impressive and I’d say difficult, that is why people use and try to avoid in the same time. It is often replaced by euphemisms. On the one hand, when the fight for some good purpose is a question, for example when the matter concerns struggle with drugs, illegal migration or corruption, then it is common to use the word “war”. But when people can be involved in the conflict with doubtful purposes, with guaranteed heavy casualties or when the government would like to reduce the tension in the society, then there appears concepts such as counter-terrorism operation, police action or humanitarian intervention.

So we may conclude that we usually use the term "war" in order to describe areas of power acting or spheres that deal with violence in one way or another. And it is not necessary that violence have a real expression in physical oppression on group of people or on an individual person, violence can have only a potential character. It is not necessary that people meet their «sadistic pleasure in witnessing violence»[[1]](#footnote-1), as George Orwell wrote, and that becomes apparent in combat sports that now appear to be a show similar to gladiatorial fights. That is enough for people to feel that this desire can be satisfied.

But can we say that sport is a sublimated form of armed conflict? Or at least, if the sporting event was not understood initially as a political or social collision, is not it now a symbolic replacement of power struggle? If we give an affirmative answer to the last question, we will be faced with the necessity of moral evaluation of sport. And therefore we come to discussion on dual nature of sport that in turn complicates an unambiguous solution to the problem of ethical meaning and value of sport.

On the one hand, sport meets public demand for violence as it allows you to transfer aggression to a peaceful course, reducing collision to the form of a game. In this sense, sport helps to remove stress since it is a struggle that implicates a peaceful outcome. That was proved in the 19th century when development of mass sports affected to a certain extent decrease of social tension as sports offered an alternative way of entertainment. Instead of spending time visiting pubs or committing different sorts of crimes, young people from working-class neighborhoods were invited to join in sports clubs, first of all football clubs[[2]](#footnote-2). That allowed transferring power acting from the streets to stadiums and sports fields. Sport was used as a measure to control and rule the poor, and the latter were enthusiastic in accepting sport. We may find here similarity with the processes that were typical for ancient Greece, where the lower strata of Greek society (that hated aristocracy) in the course of time began to accept positively and support athletes who came from noble families[[3]](#footnote-3). Sports have been democratized, becoming accessible to a wide range of masses. At the same time, sport suggested some social and even humanistic way of acting since it demonstrated how beautiful and strong a man is.

One more point of this humanistic component of sport finds itself in practice of aiming a good purpose. Sport of our days involves a common cause - the competitors not only compete with each other, but they also fight for some good purpose: for mutual understanding between all people on the Earth, for unity and equality, for a victory over racism and so on. That is literally Renaissance ideals. These principles were postulated by baron de Coubertin, and then were confirmed and developed by the International Olympic Committee, FIFA, UEFA and other global sports organizations. But it may be that these positive tendencies were artificially added to sport competitions by the sporting officials and do not yet correspond with the genuine nature of sport.

These are just the extraneous features generated by the influence of the Western world moral maxims. This world pretends to be democratic and tolerant, and therefore implies all relevant forms of social activity should correspond to liberal ethics. Can we say that sport is actually subject to the rules of fair play and ‘implements the principle of unity and friendship among people of different social groups or nationalities? I mean that the reverse side of the positive influence of sport activities is always presented as well. Competitions launch an ongoing process of rivalry, which may open the way to different forms of strife such as football hooliganism or even a real war, as happened in 1969, when Football War between Honduras and El Salvador started.

When we say that Olympic truce (έκεχειρία) has been always established during the Olympic Games in Greece, we must not lose our vigilance and consider sport as a measure that sets the real peace. Even in ancient times the Olympic truce did not mean violence was banned absolutely. We know how ancient Greeks were eager to win. So sport itself characterized deliverance of power or appetitive (έπιθυμητικόν) aspect of the soul in Plato’s terminology.

I would like to examine sport as violent activity or war in two ways: the elements of the struggle can be found both in competition itself and in the movements of sports fans. In turn, the morale of the fans can manifest itself in the direct actions of violence (like hooligans clashes) as well as psychological empathy for violence they observe while watching events (primarily watching martial arts competitions or ice-hockey).

Spanish researcher Francisco Javier Lopez Frıas correctly mentioned that the majority of people notable for the extreme misbehavior are not a threat to society in everyday life and obey the law and comply with all regulations until they get to the stand or meet their adherents outside of the stadium[[4]](#footnote-4).

I suppose this phenomenon may be explained by important social role that was fixed for sports (but that is not associated with it in a natural way). We are talking about the sport as a mean to remove stress. In this sense sport as anti-stress measure allows people to blow off steam. Sport could be treated in this way due to the remaining demand for violent behavior that has society and that is combined with the undying interest to traditional values. In turn, the demand for violence can be attributed to the gradual suppression of violence by state and social institutions. For a long time state kept a unique right to use of force, prescribing other institutions to act peacefully and humanely. Therefore violence was forced out to the illegal zone; it could be characterized as either a criminal offense or as an action serving the state. So right to do violence received army, police and rescue service. However the spread of mass sports allowed people to discover the possibility to splash their aggression or excessive internal energy peacefully or at least without breaking the law. Sports thus became a sublimated form of violence and war, while Freud denied the use of term sublimation in relation to violence and war.

Ethics of communitarianism manifests itself in sport more than anywhere else. I suppose that it is to some extent due to disappointment of some percent of population in the project of state. As it is obvious for some people that state does not serve the common good, as Aristotle or John Locke assumed. Hence, the common good can only be obtained in a smaller group or community, like a gang of fans.

If we turn to the problem of interest to traditional values, it is worth to note that conservatism of groups united around the sport does not have much in common with the classical form of conservatism presented by Edmund Burke. Modern traditionalists need to claim rhetorically that they are committed to old values, while these traditional values could be easily mixed with actual trends and could be interpreted very freely. So actual restoration of the old order is not the aim of contemporary sport conservators. However sport reserved now the possibility to demonstrate nationalism and nation unity that was a privilege of state and found itself in war. There are a lot of examples confirming this statement. For instance, one of the most dramatic and impressive moment of European Championship 2012 was not the victory of Spain or terrible football of Russian team but Irish fans singing Fields of Athenry while playing and losing against Spain 4:0. All the fans united – very powerful feeling.

In addition, sport is a fun; it's a game, which, according to Johan Huizinga, has pre-social roots[[5]](#footnote-5). This activity is irrational since it goes beyond the limits of the human, but in my opinion the game contains a certain kind of rationality, subordination to the rules and principles of conscious. In addition, the sport is a certain set of values represented by athletes; it is a promotion of healthy lifestyles. So sport is both irrational activity and way of postulating a special law of existence.

Recognizing that sport is a game we need to note the special nature of this game, as conflict of interest is always hidden there. Again referring to Huizinga, the game always contains an element of fun, a state of "in pretence", and at the same time there is always potentiality of approaching to the very serious state of affairs when blood could be shed. The border between the state of subordination to rules limiting violence and the use of force is very blurry. So sport, like other forms of fighting, is always associated with tension and resoluteness.

And if sport is war, then that is a form of war that does not correlate with Clausewitz’s classical understanding of war but with Schmittian concept of unjust modern war that does not focus on making peace. It is appropriate to mention here that Nicholas Dixon correctly compares fans and partisans[[6]](#footnote-6) in a very Schmittian way. Fan is a kind of partisan, a guerrilla warrior who is fighting with the establishment, routine and boredom. All four characteristics of partisan described by Schmitt apply to sports fans.

Schmitt refers to irregularity, high level of mobility, political engagement and telluric character as key criteria of a partisan[[7]](#footnote-7). Guerrillas are fighting in a new political space - in irregularity sphere – and therefore they deny all classical conceptions of war. In the same way fans also break views on ordinary way of living, making lots of trouble and starting lots of fights. Born by state that tried to restrict the use of force, fans now confronts state and its values presenting themselves as men of honor and courage.

In conclusion I will say that in this perversion we may find the complexity of sport’s nature. And sport therefore combines dialectically unifying and splitting principles, and although the competitive physical activity should solve an important social problem, some sports will always keep potential to cause unfair violence actions. And the face of war may be seen in sports.

1. Orwell G. The Sporting Spirit. The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell: Vol. IV: In Front of Your Noise 1945-50, edited by S. Orwell and I. Angus. London: Secker and Warburg, 1973. P. 73. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. ##  Taylor S. Sport and the Decline of War // Psychology Today. https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/out-the-darkness/201403/sport-and-the-decline-war

 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. David M. Pritchard (2009) Sport, War and Democracy in Classical Athens, The International Journal of the History of Sport, 26:2, 212-245. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Frías F. The Psycho-Biological Bases of Sports Supporters' Behaviour: The Virtuous Supporter, Sport, Ethics and Philosophy, 6:4, 2012. Pp. 423-438. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Huizinga J. Homo Ludens, a study of the play element in culture. Boston: Beacon Press, 1955. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. ##  Dixon N. The ethics of supporting sports teams. Journal of Applied Philosophy 18 (2): 149–

## 158. 2001

 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Schmitt C. The Theory of the Partisan, New York: Telos Press. 2007. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)