

Paradise (Totally) Lost

Kalevi Heinilä's

Totalization Theory

Revisited

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“The good old days.” We hear that expression all too often, and it may refer to any aspect of human life. Probably people in the good old days also longed for the good old days. But was it really good in the good old days? It is tempting to dismiss the issue because of lack of relevance. The historical perspective is indeed important, knowledge of how things used to be helps us understand the present. But to consider the past as good, and thus implicitly rating the present as not so good, is often part of a political, or ideological, agenda. Something is conceived as having changed for the worse, and consequently it was better before it changed. But in reality it rarely was better before, except in very limited ways and for small, well-defined groups. No, the single most important factor behind the perception that things used to be better is that the affected party used to be better – in other words, it expresses a nostalgic desire to return to a stage in life when you were younger, happier, felt better or had more fun.

When the Finnish sports sociologist Kalevi Heinilä studied the development of sports during the 1900s, and with regrets came to the conclusion that sports had seen much better days, it is slightly more complicated to sort out what he means. Heinilä, according to Erkki Vettenniemi arguably the most famous and internationally recognized Scandinavian sports sociologist, is chiefly known for his sweeping theory of the process of totalization, the process by which competitive sports are increasingly becoming a matter of national prestige, and individual athletes are pawns in a larger game who, for their success, require financial and other support to such an extent that can only be achieved by a well-developed support system at the national level. Heinilä's ten totalization theses were published in 1984, and sums up a range of trends that are usually, not least in this journal, described in terms of professionalization, medialization, commercialization, etc.

How firm a basis the eminent sports sociologist had for his comparisons of sports then and now is discussed by Erkki Vettenniemi in the article aptly entitled “Paradise (Totally) Lost”. Vettenniemi's close re-reading of Heinilä's *œuvre*, still cited in sports science articles, also on idrottsforum.org, uncovers a number of problems in the theory construction. One of these is fittingly summarized in one of the subtitles, “A Theory in Search of History”, that is to say that Heinilä's theory is based on a misinterpretation of the history of sports. A second problem is another noticeable trend in international sports, globalization, which challenges the image of a clash of nations conjured up by Heinilä. Erkki Vettenniemi's articulate and painstakingly substantiated critique of Heinilä's theory of the totalization of sports is an important contribution to the history as well as the sociology of sport.

In the Shadow of a Statue

When the decision was made in 2000 to raise a bronze cast of Paavo Nurmi's statue in front of the University of Jyväskylä's Faculty of Sport and Health Sciences, the retired sports sociologist Kalevi Heinilä picked up his pen and begged to disagree. For some reason the polemic was not immediately published, but the following year Heinilä had it printed in an anthology of his, an anthology that became recommended reading for sport science students at the University of Jyväskylä.

Nurmi, of course, is the most celebrated athlete ever born in Finland, while Heinilä is arguably the most widely recognized Scandinavian sports sociologist, and his totalization theory has stood the test of time as a seminal contribution to the sociology of sport. Indeed, Heinilä's stance on the statue issue was in line with the main thrust of his theory. According to Heinilä, Nurmi had deliberately ignored the Olympic ideals established by the French sports leader Pierre de Coubertin; for Nurmi, running represented a full-time occupation rather than a joyful pastime. Besides, since Nurmi ended up having his amateur status suspended in 1932, the University of Jyväskylä honored a cheat by welcoming his statue into the campus area.

In this article, I reconsider the historical validity of Heinilä's totalization theory, henceforth "the theory." First, I present an outline of the theory and discuss its paratext (Genette 1997), that is, Heinilä's other writings having to do with sports history. Then I look at the current status of the theory, including the criticism it has so far incurred. In the third section I propose a revision of my own, keeping in mind, though, that any shortcoming of the theory does not necessarily invalidate it as a whole. On the contrary, as I affirm in the concluding remarks, the totalization thesis can still be put to good use in sport studies.

I should also point out that the present article grew out of a handful of earlier attempts to reevaluate Heinilä's thought. I reviewed both the 2001 anthology and a subsequent monograph of his (Vettenniemi 2002 and 2004), after which I carried on the critical commentary in a minor article (Vettenniemi 2007b) and a monograph of my own (Vettenniemi 2007a, 16, 309–310). All of them were written in Finnish and remained limited in their scope, which makes the paper at hand the first thorough revision of Heinilä's theory of totalization conceived more than forty years ago.

Although Heinilä's key text dedicated to the theory was published in 1982, he had coined the term "totalization" (or its variant) in a 1966 article reprinted in the textbook anthology *The Sociology of Sport* (1971). His major academic articles have been conveniently collected in *Sport in Social Context by Kalevi Heinilä* (1998); another anthology of his writings came out in 2001, albeit only in Finnish; and three years thereafter he published a monograph titled *Centennial International Sport in Critical Focus*. Those are the texts I chiefly draw upon in the following discussion.

Evolution of a Concept

"The totalitarization of a national sport system," Kalevi Heinilä wrote in the 1960s, "refers to the fact that success in international competition is no longer as it was in the past – as in

the era of Paavo Nurmi – a matter of the individual effort and resources of the participant [...]” What has become decisive is “the effectiveness and total resources of the whole national sport system.” Coaching expertise, training facilities, and scientific research are some of the factors behind any country’s sporting success. (Heinilä 1998, 104–105.) Incidentally, Heinilä’s wording (“totalitarization”) changed into “totalitarianization” when his English was polished for the reprint of the article (Heinilä 1971, 348). Both versions betray the obvious source of inspiration, i.e. the totalitarian school of thought in political science exemplified by *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Hannah Arendt’s instant classic published in 1951.

National systems aside, another prominent feature of the totalization process is professionalism, or, a farewell to the “days of real amateurism,” as Heinilä put it. “Further, the heightening level of demands as a necessary condition for success [...] tend[s] to upgrade victories to the extent that unfair behavior and disloyalty to rules are likely [...]” As regards the famously vague concept of “unwritten rules,” though, there “hardly exists sufficient consensus on fair play [...] even among the athletes themselves.” (Heinilä 1998, 104–105.)

Those were the basic ingredients of the theory at that stage. The spillover effect of the Cold War was a relatively recent phenomenon in the world of sport, and the East Germans had yet to develop their “national sport system” that took the Olympics by storm in the 1970s. In that regard the totalization thesis appears to have been a rather prescient prognosis.

More than a decade later the Finnish scholar penned the most detailed description of the theory, and, curiously enough, dropped the original spellings of the key word. “Totalization,” Heinilä stressed in 1982, “has made the increasing intervention of society unavoidable,” since no country can build a competitive sports infrastructure without sufficient funds. Heinilä went on to show pity for the individual athlete for being reduced into “the object and subject of the system’s production machine”. Given that national systems cannot help seeking continuous success, “Coubertin’s idea of ‘participation and fair play’ is no longer enough – if it ever was”. (Heinilä 1998, 131–133.)

At least it did not seem to have been enough for Paavo Nurmi. In Heinilä’s view, Nurmi and the other world-beating Finnish runners of the early twentieth century “lived in difficult circumstances” and related “seriously” to sport. On this point Heinilä followed *War without Weapons*, a book written in the 1960s by two Englishmen. The way Nurmi and his compatriots practiced sport was “far removed from the gentlemanly ways of most of their fellow competitors, who regarded their sport as hobby and recreation,” Philip Goodhart and Christopher Chataway had argued. In Nurmi’s time, nevertheless, athletic success still depended on the individual’s talent and effort, Heinilä assumed; coaches and other “background forces” were not yet involved in sporting encounters. (Heinilä 1998, 127–128.)

The old and the new model of sport differed from each other in terms of media coverage, too. “Whereas previously a competition was primarily intended for the athletes themselves, it is now increasingly aimed at the public.” In addition, the more pressure there is on the participants to succeed, the more likely it will be that the “humanistic norms of fair play” will be ditched. They are bound to be substituted by “dubious means,” such as the “misuse of pharmacological products.” To sum up, competitive sports under the influence of to-

talization tend to measure the gains made through “fraudulent” means by the participants rather than their innate talent honed by diligent training. (Heinilä 1998, 126, 135–137.)

Interestingly, in a text published in 1996 Heinilä held that “the mass media has been involved in the modern Olympic Games” from the very beginning. “Nationalism has never been foreign to the Olympics,” he approvingly cited Paavo Seppänen, a Finnish colleague of his. That the amateur rules were not respected was an “inescapable” outcome of the media attention and the concomitant nationalistic fervor. “Paavo Nurmi was a superstar of his era,” Heinilä concluded, and so it was “rather obvious that also money was used to ensure his participation” in races. Yet in the same pages he made an observation that did not sit easily with those statements. “There was a time when sport, even at the top level, was primarily seen as a pastime activity to be engaged in for its own sake, for fun, excitement, demonstrating one’s prowess etc.” (Heinilä 1998, 155–157.)

It may of course be that an Arcadian period predated Paavo Nurmi’s years of athletic glory, but that is something the author abstained from elaborating. The reader could either take Heinilä’s word for it or demand evidence of a fun-based period of competitive sport.

Five years later Heinilä zeroed in on Nurmi with a vengeance. An “evil virus” started contaminating Finnish sports in the wake of Nurmi’s “illegal business deals,” he argued in an apparently genuine fit. Pecuniary interests proved to be more alluring than amateur ideals, and other athletes eagerly emulated Nurmi’s misdeeds. A “total metamorphosis” of sport ensued, a metamorphosis that saw play being replaced with work as a dominant principle. (Heinilä 2001, 143–146.)

Such is, then, the context of Heinilä’s censure of the statue project mentioned at the outset of my article. The Turku-born Nurmi had nothing to do with Jyväskylä or the “fundamental values” of the Faculty of Sport and Health Sciences in front of which the statue was to be raised. As a rules-breaker and overtly serious sportsman, Nurmi ought to be remembered as an “anti-athlete” rather than Finland’s greatest sportsman of the past century, a recent selection to that effect notwithstanding. (Heinilä 2001, 192–193.)

Alas, no diatribe prevented the bronze cast from being erected in Jyväskylä. And no amount of contrary evidence (more about which below) persuaded Heinilä to adjust his *idée fixe* either. In the 2004 monograph noted above he repeated the claim according to which the pioneering Finnish athletes lived in “rough conditions [...] and took also their sports seriously as a work while the athletes abroad were still playing.” A reference to *War without Weapons*, the 1968 book encountered a while ago, rounded off the relevant passage. (Heinilä 2004, 47.)

In Heinilä’s scheme, the first period of international sport is synonymous with international Olympic sport, and it covers the years up to the 1936 Games. Since it was “characterized by the great ideals of [Coubertin’s] humanism,” he has chosen to call it the age of idealism. (Heinilä 2004, 62–63.) What follows is a selection of statements on that particular era of modern sport:

Sport was not only conceived as education but also as play engaged in a pastime for its intrinsic values. [...] The maintenance of the proper order in contests was conceived primarily as a matter of proper behavior by athletes of their own accord. [...] Both the amateurism and individualism implemented in the pursuit for success have

their reflections on the overall ethos of sports events. [...] In this conception, spectators are mere bystanders, yet very welcome to sports. (Heinilä 2004, 66–70.)

The chapter devoted to the “idealistic” period is more than twenty pages long and teems with similarly categorical statements. None of them is backed by any text reminiscent of an academic reference. Instead, Heinilä (2004, 73) lamented “the lack of relevant information” that had forced him to base the chapter on “unsystematic observation” and “fragmentary” pieces of information. “Any sport discipline is a human invention and a cultural artifact,” Heinilä (2004, 34) wrote elsewhere in the monograph. “Just like cultural products sport is also liable to change.” That may well be the case, but he still defended without a trace of irony “the sacred ideals and noble aims of the past,” as if the so-called humanistic goals of sport were not human inventions, or as if “the sacred Olympic movement” (Heinilä 2004, 13, 119) had not been established by mortal beings.

Uses of Totalization

Discrepancies in Heinilä’s thought will be tackled more closely in my proper dissection of the totalization thesis. At this point, I turn to other scholars and their uses of the theory. To what extent is Heinilä’s vision still accepted in the heterogeneous and rapidly expanding field of sport studies?

Obviously no satisfactory method exists to measure the precise impact of the totalization theory on sports scholarship. Suffice to say that it is not only widely recognized but also frequently cited by scholars from various backgrounds at the start of the new century.

Thus, Joseph Maguire (2005, 162–163) referred to the theory when taking apart what he called the “sports-industrial complex,” Sigmund Loland (2005, 159) in his learned prediction of the future of sport, and Björn Sandahl (2006) in his essay on the history of drugs in sport. The theory also cropped up in Henning Eichberg’s (2004, 19) article published by Heinilä’s former department at the University of Jyväskylä. Indeed, one might be tempted to think that Eichberg merely paid back the compliment, because Heinilä (1998, 41) had previously named the Danish researcher along with himself as an advocate of “humanistic values” in sports sociology.

From Maguire to Eichberg and beyond, Heinilä’s colleagues resorted to the theory only as far as present-day sports activities were concerned. On the other hand, since none of them called into question the historical aspect of his thesis which they must have been aware of, and which is part and parcel of the theory, it can be argued that they did not see anything wrong with it. A Finnish historian, by contrast, has confronted Heinilä’s vision of the sporting past almost head-on.

Jouko Kokkonen’s compact study of nationalism in sport came out in 2003, and in what seemed to be unqualified support for the theory, he quoted Heinilä’s pet phrase of never-ending “spiral of competition” (Kokkonen 2003, 50). Yet in spite of that, he effectively took issue with the theory in another chapter without naming Heinilä in that particular context. Manifestations of intense and occasionally rabid nationalism have been witnessed in the Olympics since 1908, Kokkonen (2003, 8–11) pointed out. That year the British and

the American teams clashed in an undignified manner in London; the Finns, among other participants, remained bystanders in the grand drama unfolding between the two athletic superpowers.

By way of background, I should mention that Kokkonen had discovered George Matthew's (1980) article in which the controversial London Games were seen through media reports published on both sides of the Atlantic. Judging by those dispatches, the English spectators did not behave in as detached a manner as Heinilä's theory had stipulated, and the participants, for their part, put the fabled virtues of fair play and sportsmanship on hold for as long as the Games lasted.

Two other Finnish scholars have carried out a similarly respectful revision of the theory. Jari Lämsä and Pauli Vuolle applied Heinilä's thesis in their attempt to assess the impact of the totalization process on Finland's sports successes. The analysis started, admittedly, from the 1960s and did not therefore touch on the immediate postwar period, let alone Paavo Nurmi's era. While discussing late-twentieth century developments in international sport, Lämsä and Vuolle recognized globalization, or the advent of a "global system of competition." In view of the increasing mobility of athletes and the capital, battles for sports supremacy are no longer fought between narrowly defined national systems, they concluded. (Lämsä – Vuolle 2000, 35–36, 39–40.)

Heinilä (2004, 14) too has alluded to the concept of sport globalization. In his 1982 totalization text he already highlighted "migrant work" in a number of sports and remarked upon athletes representing adopted countries (Heinilä 1998, 132–134; see also 161–162). But those observations did not prompt him to revisit the theory; to him, globalization of sport merely meant that a growing number of countries had got involved in modern sport.

Regarding Lämsä and Vuolle's notes on globalization, they originated in John Bale's commentaries on Heinilä, a fact duly acknowledged by the two Finnish scholars. A prolific author in various fields of sports studies, Bale was engaged as visiting professor at the University of Jyväskylä in the early 1990s, and soon thereafter he presented a paper on Kenyan athletics with Joe Sang and had it published as a book chapter. They were the first scholars to find fault with the theory; or, to be on the safe side, any earlier criticism has escaped my attention.

"Our basic contention is that it is no longer tenable to attribute national success or failure in international sport [...] to national sports systems alone," Bale and Sang (1994, 219–220) reasoned, "instead, we now need to take into account an international or *global* sports system. The totalization process has transcended national boundaries." A prime example in track and field athletics is, of course, Kenya, with hundreds of young runners studying and training (though not necessarily in that order) at American universities. "We would argue that the world of sport had already moved on at the time Heinilä was writing," Bale and Sang (1996, 104–105) proclaimed in their subsequent book *Kenyan Running*. "By the late 1960s, athletes were increasingly crossing national boundaries, not simply to compete but to train." In their opinion, a "global athletic system" had truly come into being by the following decade.

I can see no reason to disagree with Bale and Sang's argumentation. While the countries belonging to what used to be known as the Eastern Bloc clung to the traditional model until the very end, i. e. the collapse of communism, elsewhere the dynamics of globalization

started undermining the national sports system in which the athletes, according to some observers, resembled the proverbial cogs in the machine.

On a related note, there appears to be a case for tracing the origins of sport globalization further back in history. Kalevi Heinilä was born in the same year that a Harvard University athletics coach looked after Finnish sportsmen as they prepared themselves for the Paris Games. His name was Jaakko Mikkola, and four years earlier, on the eve of the 1920 Games, he had already overseen an Olympic training camp in Finland. (Karikko – Koski 2006, 26, 52.) In other words, Mikkola first exported athletics know-how across the Atlantic, and after having expanded his expertise at Harvard he chose to assist his compatriots in their Olympic quest.

Mikkola's case is but a small example of an early transnational migration in athletics that calls for further inquiry. At the same time, it contradicts an essential aspect of the totalization theory, namely, the notion that the athletes of Paavo Nurmi's generation were self-made champions who did not benefit from the input of "background forces," to borrow the original turn of phrase.

A Theory in Search of History

As we have repeatedly seen in the previous discussion, Kalevi Heinilä's sole authority on the formative years of modern sports is a book written by two Englishmen in the 1960s. Other prominent Finnish academics, among them two professors of history, have also cited Goodhart and Chataway's musings (Ylikangas – Imanen 1982, 37; Hentilä 1996, 54), likewise Lämsä and Vuolle (2000, 39) in their article.

To put it bluntly, *War without Weapons* is a journalistic pamphlet without a single reference to support the extravagant claims made by the authors, neither of whom, unsurprisingly, is an historian. Given that sport history as an academic discipline did not exist at the time, their pamphlet had at least novelty value of sorts back in 1968. Symptomatically, Heinilä (1974, 286) used to regard sport history as a journalistic genre not worthy of academic attention.

In the intervening decades, an array of studies has rendered Goodhart and Chataway's book a curiosity definitely unworthy of serious attention in a scholarly context. Not only academic tomes but common sense should have warned any student of history against elevating a small and peripheral country into a trailblazer in the history of modern sport. That the Finnish athletes of Paavo Nurmi's era were blessed with exceptional athletic talent is, according to Heinilä, nothing but a myth. There may indeed have been people in Finland and elsewhere who believed in such a tale, but when Heinilä insists that the Finns did away with the amateur ethos before anyone else, he merely substitutes one myth with another.

As far as long-distance running is concerned, Finland lagged far behind other Scandinavian countries at the dawn of the twentieth century. Sweden, England and the United States were the main sources of inspiration and training information, as shown by Antero Raevuori (1988) in his biography of Nurmi, a biography that Heinilä (2004, 186) appears to be familiar with. The first phase of modern running in Finland has been subsequently discussed in a more systematic manner by Ossi Viita (1997 and 2003), the acclaimed biog-

rapher of Ville Ritola (Nurmi's foremost rival) and Hannes Kolehmainen (Nurmi's illustrious precursor).

Ironically, Kolehmainen's supremacy at the 1912 Stockholm Games might have been seriously threatened had the multiple world-record holder Alfred Shrubbs of England not been banned as a professional. So much for the legendary adherence to amateurism by the English athletes. It was Shrubbs, not Nurmi, who turned record-breaking into a mathematical formula, and it was Shrubbs, not Nurmi, who discovered the benefits of two or three daily training sessions. (Hadgraft 2004.)

It is nevertheless true that the British were initially not as keen on the modern Olympic experience as the Americans. Mark Dyreson has looked into the years 1896 to 1912 in his monograph *Making the American Team* and demonstrated that Yankee patriotism positively flooded the Olympics from the inaugural edition onwards. For the Americans, performing well and beating the Europeans in the Games was a matter of national priority, and the athletes were appropriately trained for the task. This is what Dyreson (1996, 126) has to say about the Finns celebrating their success in the javelin event in 1912: "The rest of the world had started to appropriate the athletic nationalism that had colored the American approach to international sport since the Athens Olympics in 1896."

When it comes to developing a rudimentary national sports system in amateur sport, Germany may have somewhat surprisingly taken the lead. As part of the build-up to the 1916 Berlin Games (which were eventually cancelled), the German government stepped in and started subsidizing amateur sports. According to Arnd Krüger (1996), nothing of the kind had been witnessed anywhere else yet. Moreover, sport medicine swiftly matured into a field of study in its own right in that country, and the German drug debates of the 1920s were not fundamentally different from the late twentieth-century doping controversies (Hoberman 1992, Ch. 4).

Performance-enhancing drugs did not thus creep into amateur sport in the wake of big money; they were there from the start. And dollars, or the notorious amateur-professional dilemma, takes us back to Heinilä and Nurmi. The previous section showed Heinilä moving from a rather liberal to a harshly judgmental position vis-à-vis Nurmi within five years. In 1996, it still seemed "obvious" to Heinilä that Nurmi had pocketed cash payments in exchange for his running prowess. Any person in Nurmi's spike shoes would have acted in the same way, Heinilä implied. Yet in the 2000 polemic he singled Nurmi out as an "anti-athlete" and held him responsible for the beginning of the end of amateurism.

Absolutely nothing had happened in the intervening years to justify a complete turnaround, unless the mostly uncritical and obsequious celebration of the athlete's centenary in 1997 had persuaded Heinilä to reconsider Nurmi's place in sport history. Be that as it may, amateurism is not a secondary issue in Heinilä's thought; it is a cornerstone of the entire totalization edifice. Under amateurism, peace and goodwill reigned in the world of sport, but once the grip of amateur rulings loosened, unbridled chauvinism, inhuman training systems, and loads of drugs buried Coubertin's ideals.

Although Heinilä termed all sports "social constructs," it apparently did not occur to him that amateurism too might have been such a construct. It is a well-known fact that amateur rules were invented to prevent English working class sportsmen from mingling with privileged upper class athletes. What is regularly overlooked, by contrast, is the actual history of "fair play," despite J.A. Mangan's (1998, 176-183) determined attempt to clarify

the issue once and for all. Basically, the innovation called “fair play” was imposed from above to ensure that the unruly nineteenth-century ball games ended without casualties. The saintly latter-day interpretations of fair play are therefore totally unconnected with the human – all too human – beginnings of the notion. No wonder athletes themselves have yet to reach agreement on the finer points of “unwritten rules” of their game, to quote Heinilä’s characterization of the concept.

Curiously, Pierre de Coubertin explicitly dissociated himself from the hallowed tenets of amateurism. “Realizing the importance attached to [the amateur issue] in sports circles, I always shared the necessary enthusiasm, but it was an enthusiasm without real conviction,” Coubertin (1997, 199) revealed in his memoirs. When righteous sports officials started harassing athletes for the sake of a few illicit dollars, the supreme Olympic leader “lost even the little interest” he had had in the amateur topic (Coubertin 1997, 120).

Does Heinilä wish to rewind the clock backwards and return to the days of “real” amateurism? If the totalization process truly has annihilated the alleged “humanistic” values of sport, that would appear to be the only way out of the current misery. Crucially, Heinilä never suggests turning back time, which I construe as an indirect admission of the unproductive idealism inherent in his theory.

Positivism and Its Limits

To fully appreciate the ideological underpinnings of Heinilä’s thought it seems essential to bring Douglas Booth’s essay on the “consecration of sport” in social theory to bear on the discussion. “Modern sport developed concomitantly with the social sciences and it is no coincidence that they have the same philosophical and theoretical orientation,” Booth (1993, 1–3) asserted. Positivism, faith in progress, and a firm commitment to social engineering through scientific analysis are some of the legacies of the first-generation social scientists to sports studies.

As a sociologist and sports scholar, Heinilä undoubtedly belongs to the positivist current of thought. He majored in sociology and perfected his academic tools at the University of California in the 1950s (Heinilä 1998, 13). Hence the frequent occurrence of key words borrowed from classical sociology in his writings, expressions such as “anomaly,” “regulation,” “implementation,” and, with a respectful nod to the late Frenchman of Olympian fame, “international understanding.” Any “malfunction” or “adverse effect” of sport (or society) needs to be rigorously analyzed by properly trained scholars, after which, thanks to their scientific recommendations, wrongs can surely be put right.

“Sport, once solely conceptualized within an idealistic framework which highlighted its positive contributions to human welfare, has more recently been shown to embody a range of both positive and negative values,” Heinilä wrote in the opening pages of his 1998 anthology. “Traditionally, sport has been conceived as an enterprise for promoting health and education,” he ventured to suggest in the same book. (Heinilä 1998, 8, 161.) In truth, such statements provide further evidence of the blind spots of his theory in particular and his understanding of history in general.

To claim that there was a time when “sport” was universally accepted and that the alleged values of sport were left alone until “recently” is to ignore a host of historians and their discoveries. In the apposite words of Douglas Booth (1993, 3), historical analysis is “the sole antidote” to the myopia induced by positivism. Modern sport has always been contested terrain. Heinilä seemed to be familiar with Henning Eichberg’s academic renown, but if he had got around to reading Eichberg’s oeuvre (e.g. 1973, 1987 and 1998), he would have learnt about the controversial nature of sport and the crucial differences between body cultures of which competitive sports constitute only one and relatively recent branch.

In Finland, the “idealistic framework” of sport was taken apart by Viktor Heikel towards the late nineteenth century. Head of the Department of Gymnastics at the University of Helsinki, Heikel (1904) saw the emerging sports mania as a health hazard and moral wasteland. Competitive sports, he held, were a corrupt form of gymnastic exercises. They not only compromised the physical welfare of the participants, but they also inculcated vanity, pride and selfishness. Moreover, when the Finnish government commissioned Paavo Nurmi’s statue in 1924, Heikel came out of retirement and heaped scorn on the project, not unlike Heinilä who would denounce the fifth cast of the statue a few generations later.

Yet the anti-Nurmi tirades of the two men bore no more than superficial similarities. While Heinilä chided Nurmi for accepting illegal payments and deviating from a playful concept of sport, Heikel’s (1924) Nurmi stood for everything that was wrong with modern sport in the first place. The 1924 Games reminded Heikel of a circus in which athletes, assisted probably by stimulants, performed “soulless” tricks with the stopwatch and yardstick as the only criteria to separate winners from losers. And while Heinilä still heeded the “sacred” ideals of Coubertin, Heikel dismissed the “so-called Olympic Games of our time” as a cheap imitation of the ancient (and for him sacred) Games.

Whether Heikel’s interpretation of the ancient Olympia was as illusory as Heinilä’s view of the Coubertinian one is beside the point. What is worth noting here is that he refused to be blindfolded by the modern Olympic mythology that “continues to distort a true understanding of the Olympic Games themselves, and the reality of world-class, high-performance sport more generally.” Thus wrote the Canadian scholars Rob Beamish and Ian Ritchie (2006, 114) in their trenchant critique of today’s elite sport, and the lesson can certainly be applied to the totalization theory as well.

As far as the theory builds on misplaced nostalgia for a lost sporting paradise and inculcates a handful of Finns for degrading amateurism, it is an exercise in the “good old days” genre and should be used with utmost care. If we seek to make sense of the twenty-first century elite sport, let alone do something about it, we should probe its evolution in a manner that challenges rather than surrenders to preconceived notions about the past.

A Never-ending Nightmare?

What needs to be stressed is that Kalevi Heinilä’s theory describes a process instead of an outcome. No full-fledged totalitarian sports system ever existed either in the West or in the East. True, some countries over the past one hundred years have been referred to as totali-

tarian, but the appellation merely conveys a desire for total political, economic and cultural control. If the totalitarian project had succeeded, countries such as the Soviet Union would still abound with their seamlessly centralized sports systems.

Sigmund Loland (2002, 80) seems thus entitled to suggest that the theory is about a “nightmare” yet to be fully experienced. There are, nonetheless, stages of totalization that look nightmarish enough for observers in any given period. In Viktor Heikel’s eyes, modern Olympic sport had become terrifyingly brutal and vacuous by the 1920s, but before smiling at his ostensible naivety, we would do well to take a detached view of *our* sports. Could it be that some people in a not-so-distant future will wax lyrical about the early twenty-first century high-performance sport? Perhaps they will envy the participants of the 2008 Beijing Games, some of whom lived with their parents, regularly associated with non-athletes, and did not travel to every meet with coaches, physicians, and psychologists in tow.

Sweeping theories tend to be vulnerable to the ironies of history. When Heinilä posited an athletic Arcadia in an unspecified past, he became a victim of such an irony. Since post-war sport seemed an excessively serious affair to him, he conjured up a more modest era when races were entered for the fun of it and appearance fees were unheard of – except, of course, in the case of Paavo Nurmi. Any evidence to the contrary remained largely absent for the simple reason that no evidence to the contrary was accepted to interfere with the neatly Manichean view of history.

For all the failures of the theory as a history treatise, it has not lost its bite as an analysis and conceptualization of contemporary sport. The totalization momentum is far from being exhausted at the beginning of the millennium. Even so, adjustments need to be made in view of the globalization of sport that began to erode national sports systems decades ago, as other critics of Heinilä have pointed out.

If the idea that sport is or has originally been synonymous with play has weakened, it still endures. The belief that sport has lost its innocence somewhere along the way is pervasive no matter how often it is subjected to ridicule by researchers with myth-debunking proclivities. A moment ago, I cited Rob Beamish and Ian Ritchie’s verbal attack on the peddlers of Olympic mythologies. “Vague notions of ‘pure’ or universal athleticism [...] only divert attention away from the real constitutive practices in high-performance sport today,” the scholars stated further in their academic pamphlet (Beamish – Ritchie 2006, 115). What about yesterday’s “real constitutive practices,” then? Were they fundamentally different from those that prevailed in the second half of the twentieth century?

According to Beamish and Ritchie (2006, 19–20), “the cult of victory” and “cold, calculated” pursuit of gold medals had replaced the Coubertinian model of amateur sport by the mid-twentieth century. But no evidence is produced to support the bold assertion, and nothing concrete is said about the nature of the previous Games. In other words, Beamish and Ritchie just assumed that Olympic champions of Paavo Nurmi’s caliber had not been universally adored in their heyday, and that their prodigious feats had resulted from less than calculated efforts. They also wished to think that Coubertin’s vision of chivalrous amateurism had been originally accepted by all and sundry, although the Frenchman himself did not quite believe in it.

That two scathing and in many ways perceptive critics of the idealistic tendency in sport studies ultimately agreed with Kalevi Heinilä’s notion of a paradise lost (without mention-

ing him by name) is an eloquent testimony to the persistent impact of his theory of totalization.

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