

# Sport, body and ethics

## - between public, commercial and civil logics

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### Abstract<sup>1</sup>

How can sociology talk about ethics without just reproducing or affirming the moral-pedagogical discourse about Olympic fairness? We shall approach this question by referring to the popular games, which contrast the sport of competition and fairness. There is not only *one* ethics, as there is not just *one* sport. Sociology stands against any epistemological monotheism. Different intellectual strategies seem likely.

One is to think ethics in dialectical terms - or trialectical. State, market and civil society are not only sectors, but dimensions of social practice. They develop different ethical codes, which are related to the inner tensions inside the democratic triad of Liberty, Equality, Fraternity.

Another strategy is to understand ethics not primarily as a set of abstract ideas or values, which are ideally directed against the body. But ethical behavior is based on bodily practice. That is why ethics has to be thought from its bodily-material basis, i.e. in materialistic terms.

Finally, if ethics is to be understood in relation to body, game and movement, this cannot be only a serious matter. Sports and games have their roots in carnival, in a popular culture of laughter. Without reflection on laughter, the sociology of ethics would be ridiculous...

**Keywords:** popular games, fairness, doping, state, market, civil society, body culture, religion, materialism, dialectical method, trialectics, laughter

### 1. The ethical challenge of popular games

#### A case: "You can't catch me!" - Losing, winning, third

Let us observe children playing the game "You can't catch me!" The object of the game is to tag or touch other players - and to run away from each other in order to avoid being caught oneself. Usually one player 'is it' and has to chase and tag the other players, one of whom then becomes the new person who 'is it'.

This seems to be a simple game following a simple principle. At a closer examination however, chase and tag is impossible if all participants really act according to the rule of running away as quickly as they can. In this

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case, the slowest runner would very soon stay behind in tears, and the game would end abruptly. Chase-and-tag is an 'impossible game'.

If the game shall continue, the players must act against the rule of speed and winning. Instead of excelling in achievement, the quicker runner will approach the slower one, teasing and mocking: 'You can't catch me, tralala!' The quick runner provokes the situation of being touched because only this brings flow into the game. It is in the interest of all players that *no* absolute loser is produced.

No loser - this is a deep social quality of play. Evidently, there is something more important in the game than winning: it is the game itself.

The ethical contents of this social game is, however, purely bodily. It is not written down in a book of rules. It is not part of an explicit awareness, which could be learned in the style: 'Thou shall not make the loser sad!' Or: 'To participate is more important than to win!' The ethics of the game is purely practical.

And: The game of run and catch is basically non-sport or even anti-sport. The point is: 'Don't just win!'

### **Sports of fairness and sport of 'non-fairness'**

Games imply, thus, very different ethical appeals. It is not so easy to understand this diversity if one follows the modern assumption that there exists one universal set of ethics. This idea is deeply rooted in Western tradition. The universal construction of 'one ethical norm' was fixed in the Ten Commandments of Christianity and in the Categorical Imperative of Kantianism. From this ethical 'monotheism', the Olympic ideology of sport fairness with its universal claim took its pattern.

Facing this mainstream of ethical discourse, the sociologist has a rather unpopular job to do. Sociologists have to take the 'one' ethics analytically from each other. The popular games help us in this job. There is not only *one* ethics, as there is not just *one* sport. Let us have a closer look at three important patterns of game in modern culture: sport, gymnastics, and popular games.

#### *(1.) Sport as fair competition*

The ethical focus, which is central in modern sport, is fairness. Sport expresses the human striving to win: 'You shall excel in achievement - and do it in a fair way!' The individual as athlete is incited to produce its best, to show its own result off as being better than the others - but fairness should be the athlete's creed.

The code of fairness is urgently needed because sport implies a permanent temptation to win by other means than one's own bodily excellence - by bribery and cheating, by doping or corruption. A whole industry has developed around these techniques of fraud in the world of sports - another system for controlling it - and a further system for controlling the controllers, for

questioning the results of control, and for informing the public about the hidden practice behind the ethical rhetoric.

But there is a deeper need for the explicit appeal towards fair behaviour in sport. It lies in the basic configuration of sport itself: Sport is a social technique to create inequality. The principle of performance aims at the production of asymmetrical outcomes and hierarchical structures - gold, silver, bronze. Competitive sport makes systematically some individuals better than others - and this is a fundamental problem, which the ethical code of fairness works upon.

*(2.) Gymnastics ‘without fairness’ - ethics of integration*

Besides the sport of competition and fairness there exist also other types of sport, practiced all through modernity: By non-competitive gymnastics, *Turnen*, mass exercises and “Sport for all”, people train and demonstrate collective fitness. These forms could be titled as ‘sport without fairness’. Traditionally, gymnastics do not produce inequality, which would demand fair behaviour. But gymnastic performances rather demonstrate equality of all participants, joint rhythm, at some times even uniformity in rank and file. By disciplinary means, gymnastics aim at making people equal on a joint high level of bodily excellence, without giving gold, silver and bronze to individuals (though sometimes giving awards to teams).

That is why there is no need to establish any special code of fair behaviour in gymnastics. Gymnastics and Sport for all demand, indeed, social-ethical behaviour, but this has another character. It is about engagement, cooperation and integration, mutual help and recognition, national solidarity and intercultural exchange.

This means that there are other ethical patterns existing, which do not place fairness in their centre. The ethics of fairness are bound to the monotheism of achievement, to the performance principle. The world of ethical codes is much larger and more diverse.

*(3.) Popular sport ‘without fairness’ - ethics of balance*

The children’s game of chase and tag, as described earlier, is a sport ‘without fairness’, too. But it follows again quite another configuration than the rhythmic-gymnastic production of equality. Chase and tag does not train the players to become equal in shape, rhythm and achievement. Rather, the game plays on inequality - and it plays on the sensitive-ethical balance between the stronger and the weaker co-player.

Chase and tag represents a broad range of popular games and folk games all over the world, which, if seen in modern sportive perspective, could be regarded as a moral problem because they contrast the ethic demands of fair winning. As they do not produce winners, they seem to produce a loser and, thus, favour an unfair attitude against the weaker player.

Indeed, many village games have not a victor as outcome, but they seem to determine a sort of 'victim'. In the end, there is not one winner standing on the podium receiving the gold medal, but one player will 'be it' and can be mocked: "You can't catch me!" He or she will remain in the centre, at the non-wanted place of the game - as 'the bull' or the blind-man's-buff. That is why one has classified these games as scapegoat games. They seem to tell us: 'Run quickly and use your skills to avoid becoming the outsider!'

However, as we have already seen, the social appeal of these popular games can also be read in quite another way. They create experience in keeping the flow of the game. They teach us to avoid making others the loser. They build a sociality of balance between strong and weak, between quick and slow, between 'you' and 'me'.

There is one further social-ethical aspect in the folk game, deserving attention: laughter. Losing can be funny; it has features of the grotesque. If the quicker runner is touched by the slower one, whether voluntarily in order to make the game go on or involuntarily because of some fortuitous situation, this will create a ridiculous atmosphere of joking, mocking and teasing. It makes the players laugh. The play of chase and tag can be heard on distance, and it is another sound than the running on the athletic track. Instead of winning and instead of avoiding the position of the scapegoat, the deeper appeal of the game is something third: Don't take it seriously!

Again this ethical behavior is purely practical. It is not explicit in the style: 'Thou shall laugh!' The social quality of laughter is implicit. This ethical behavior is learning by doing.

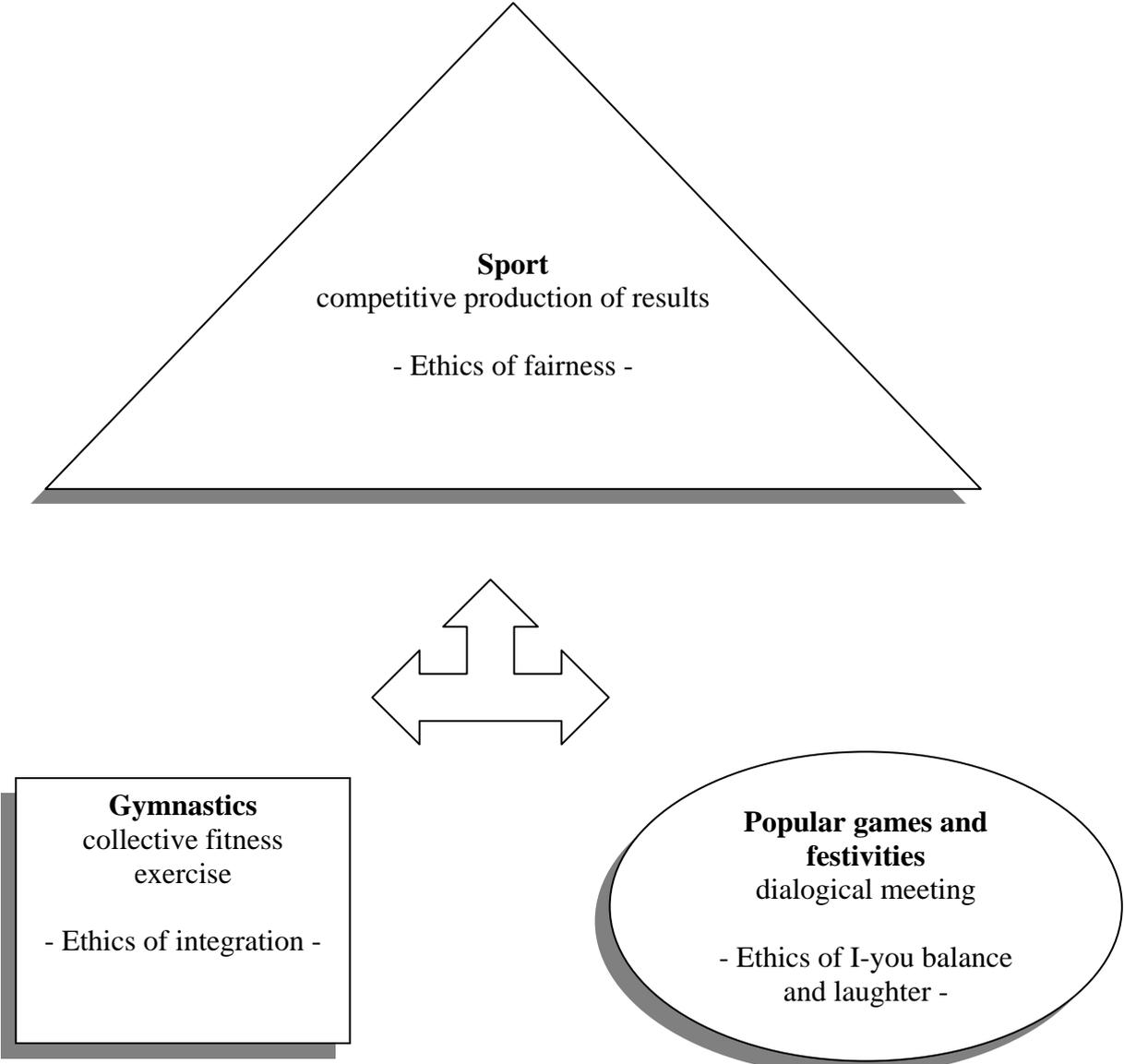
The culture of laughter was an important element in pre-modern games, which were a part of popular carnival. But it is not just historical. Laughter is an underground dimension of new games as well.

Confronted with the ethics of fair winning and the construct of 'mocking the loser', the inner logic of popular games - to keep the game go on, to balance 'you' and 'me', and to laugh - shows again that ethics is not one single fixed set of rules. Ethics is derived from complex social relations and practices. Games are a rich world of experimentation in the field of practical ethics, ethics in plural.

The task of the sociologist in the field of ethics is not to reproduce the affirmative moral-pedagogical discourse of the one Olympic fairness once more again, following in the pedagogical foot-track of Pierre de Coubertin. Sociology has to deliver a critical analysis of ethical norms in relation to bodily-cultural practices.

When challenging the cognitive monotheism of ethics, we shall here follow three different lines of argumentation. At first, we shall look at societal contradictions of ethics, i.e. the dialectical way. Then we look at the body as material basis of ethics, i.e. the materialistic way. And finally we touch the relation between ethics, seriousness and laughter.

Figure 1: Contradictions in the ethics of movement culture



## 2. Contradictions of ethics - the trialectics of societal spheres

If ethics is related to different social relations and practices, the sociologist has to be aware of contradictions, which may result from diversity. This is the field of dialectical thinking.

Contradictions of sports show up very clearly in relation to violence. While society strives to prohibit violence of people against people in everyday life, violence is tolerated and to some degree even cultivated in the world of sport. This is most obviously in boxing which ethical campaigns now and then have tried to exclude from lawful sports - but in vain. Sport is an exception.

The dialectical approach to these and other contradictions leads at a closer examination towards a more complex, trialectical analysis. In modern society, human action develops in three sectors of different rationalities, which create different conditions for ethical behaviour - state, market and civil society.

### *(1.) Public logic and equality*

One is the ethics of the public sphere or the state. The public sphere consists of activities occasioned by political decisions. Ideally, public activities aim at social integration, safety and justice. Public economy is determined by political values and regulations. The public sphere has a monopolistic structure: There is only one state in a territory. This monopoly is also the source of state authority, of power and its hierarchical gradation.

In the state, a general ethical consensus about right and wrong is demanded - and it is created on the basis of representation and identity building. These ethical norms are in force for all citizens, they follow the principle of equality.

An example of public ethics is the prohibition of violence: 'Thou shall not kill nor hurt any other human being!' This general rule is, however, reduced by special exceptions related to the state monopole of violence inside the modern territorial state on one hand (police) and to a certain permission of outward-directed violence on the other hand (military). In the world of police, even torture is not quite banned, and in the world of military, soldiers are trained to kill. Sport with its limited toleration or even exhibition of violence constitutes a further sphere of exception whose place inside the public pattern is up to discussion.

The top-down power of egalitarian public ethics has become increasingly strengthened by the expansion of the welfare state into classical private domains. There is an inner connection between the modern state logic and the ethics of equality.

### *(2.) Market logic and liberty*

The ethics of the private sphere differs from public ethics. Here the 'individual' is 'its own legislator'. Where ethics is 'private', there is no reason to make us equal or to treat us as equals. We act as free and

responsible individuals in the given inequality of class, gender etc. Freedom, not equality, is the ground-word here.

This understanding of individual privacy, freedom and inequality is connected with the market in modern capitalist society. The market contrasts the state by its multiplicity of competing actors. Producers or suppliers are engaged in a mutual contest. Their survival as participants in the commercial game depends on their success in the market. The actions on the market are not determined by political decisions, but by the expectation of profit and by the intended optimisation of the profit-and-loss ratio. In the market, human action aims at productivity, effectiveness and free disposition.

Survival in the economic competition on the market makes it difficult to define a general ethical framework. As far as violence for instance has a market appeal and horror is 'selling', these are accepted possibilities, in the name of freedom - freedom to profit.

### *(3.) Civil logic and solidarity*

A third type of ethics develops in civil society. Civil society consists of voluntary networks and associations like social societies, clubs, co-operatives and formal as well as informal collectives. Voluntary, club-based sport generally follows the logic of civil society. The activity of these units of civil society follows the principles of nearness and of temporary community, which can be compared to the social patterns within a family. Civil society is near to what in Danish is called *folk* and *folkelig* - the 'warm' dimension of society.

In civil society, the human being acts as 'brother' or 'sister' in a voluntary association. The inner contradiction of this sphere is between in-group fraternity and out-group conflict with 'the others'. In this framework, civil ethics are in high degree related to the solidarity inside certain groups, i. e. to those who are 'we' for each other. Civil ethics of bonding and bridging include a certain ethical relativism. Civil society includes potentials of internal conflict between different habitus, different tastes and different morals. There is not only mutual help in the warmth of family-like relations, but the violence of soccer supporters and skinheads is 'civil', too. The popular game of chase and tag shows how children balance between violence and laughter, producing solidarity.

The world of ethics, thus, does not only consist of equality and freedom, but also of solidarity. The classical triad of revolutionary democracy, *Liberty, Equality, Fraternity*, has a deeper ethical meaning. And it points towards a potential of inner tension and contradiction, which is related to the different societal spheres.

An example from real life in our days can illustrate this conflict: Lara, five years old, came home from school reporting proudly that she had received five crowns from her friend Luise. Luise had had a fall, and Lara had helped and

comforted her, that is why they agreed about the reward. - This event tells about practical ethics. Among friends and comrades as well as inside the family, we form relations and interact according to mutuality, avoiding the principle of monetary reward. It is self-evident that friends help one another without being paid for their assistance. This is ethical in civil society. The case of Lara and Luise shows, however, that this mutuality is no longer self-evident. It has to be learned - especially in a time, where the logic of the kiosk and the supermarket invade civil society. Commercialism is ubiquitous and increasingly normalized. Ethics is confronted with contradictions.

### **A case: The controversy of doping**

The trialectical relation of ethics reveals in the doping question. Though functionaries of elite sports have called the struggle against doping "one of the most urgent tasks of sport", people do not at all agree with each other about what is good and bad in this field. In the controversy about doping, different ethical positions oppose each other.

#### *(1.) Doping as free choice*

One position in the current controversy is that doping should be regarded as a question of free choice and private decision. Sport expresses the freedom of achieving whatever one can by whatever means available. *Citius, altius, fortius* - quicker, higher, stronger. Suicide and (self-) manipulation are manifestations of human freedom, and the same is true for the (self-) transformation of humans into drug abusers.

That is why the state should keep a certain distance from this field and leave it to private self-administration, to the individual. This position corresponds to the liberalism of the market - *laissez faire*.

#### *(2.) Doping as crime against health and educational values*

The position of 'free choice' is vehemently opposed by those who insist on the struggle against doping. We must protect the health of the athlete, the principle of equal opportunity in sports and the safety of the young generation in sport. Sport is and should be educational, and doping is countering this pedagogical task. These concerns are typically public-political in character. On the basis of arguments about people's health and educational values, one calls for control and sanctions, for quarantine and punishment of guilty individuals. This way of control has the character of quasi-state interventions and dominates the actual policies of anti-doping: The athletes should obey the rules, which are formulated by experts and (quasi-) public authorities.

Yet, it is well-known, how close the top-down strategy of public intervention has been to state doping as practiced in the state-monopolistic countries of Eastern Europe. And not only in Eastern Europe.

Furthermore, the mania of control seems as dangerous for the self-determination of the human beings as doping itself. It is not far from

authoritarian repression against individuals and groups. This may turn attention towards a third approach, which has its starting point in the social relations and the inner diversity of civil society.

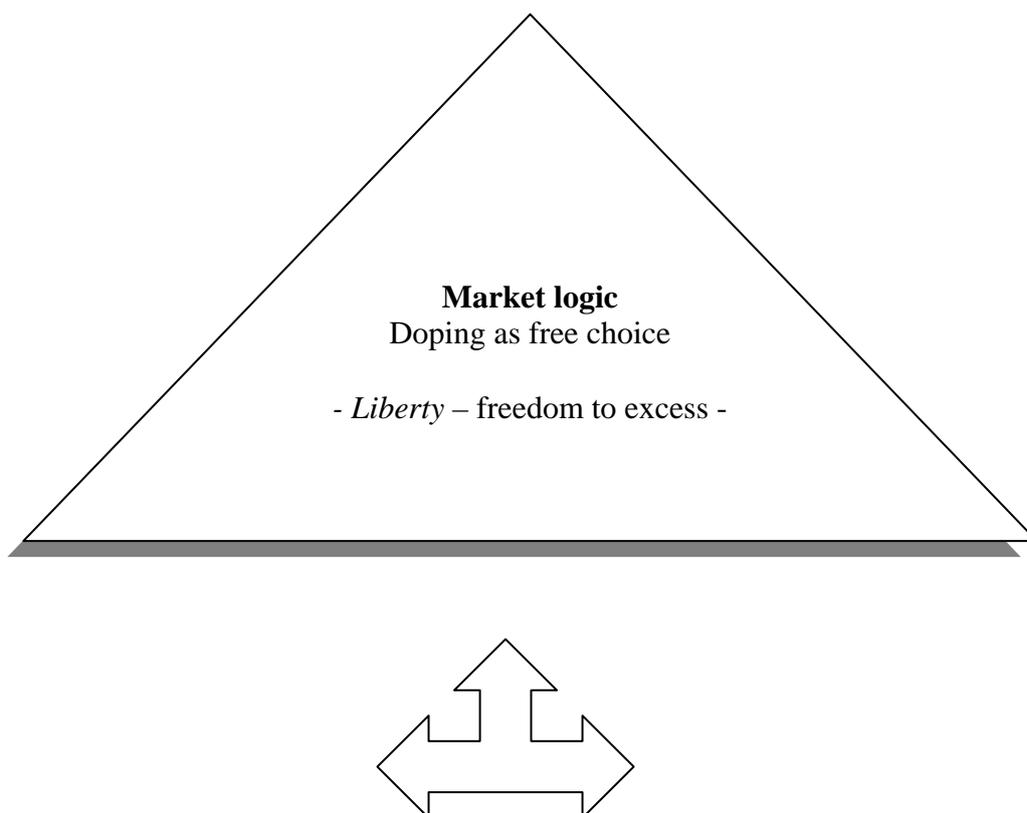
*(3.) Doping as problem of civil sociality*

Doping is an urgent problem in elite sports, but not in the same way in folk festivity and popular associational sports. In Sport for all, the stress of achievement and its body-display are absent. So, people don't need drugs for *this* purpose. However, also youth culture is invaded by doping. Drugs appear in body building and health centres, among high school pupils, and especially in groups of young males who cultivate a body image leaning to Rocky, Rambo, Superman, and Terminator. Their doping is mainly of cosmetic character.

It is unlikely that this type of vanity doping can be treated by control and punishment of the users like in top sport. A more adequate way is in Denmark seen in 'popular enlightenment'. A precondition of more adequate action is that public policy recognises the diversity of the milieus of doping and of sports. Doping is a problem of civil sociality and should be treated on this level, in differentiated ways.

Free choice, safety and sociality - it seems not to be accidental, that this threefold relation to sport and doping, again, parallels the democratic triad of *Liberty, Equality, Fraternity*. This triad is not a Trinity, it is not one connected ethical main title of democracy. But it represents the inner diversity and contradictions of democratic life - and of modern sports.

Figure 2: The trialectics of societal spheres



**Public logic**  
Doping as crime against  
health and educational  
values  
  
- *Equality* -

**Civil logic**  
Doping as problem of civil  
sociality  
  
- *Solidarity* -

### 3. The material basis of ethics - bodily practice

Ethics is not only a set of values, which are defined by philosophers, or which are constructed as ideas on the basis of the abstract ‘individual’. Ethics are related to bodily practices, to inter-bodily relations.

The relations between bodily-practical basis and ethical-ideological superstructure are, however, not simple. Some ethical norms, which were influential in the history of mankind, have not been developed ‘from the body’, but definitively ‘against the body’. Especially some monotheistic religions, Christianity and Islam, have developed a critical stand against the ‘sinful’ bodily existence of the human beings.

#### A case: Puritan ethics against the dancing body

“The Free Presbyterian Church bans sex because it might lead to dancing!”

This is a joke from Belfast, a city troubled by sectarian conflicts. It was reported in connection with an event in 2001, when the controversial reverend Ian Paisley - once more - condemned dancing as “sinful as any other type of dancing, with its sexual gestures and touching”.

The action of the fanatic Presbyterian was directed against a dance festival, which was arranged as part of a WHO (World Health Organization) initiative for active lifestyle. What was a social, healthy and moral arrangement for the one, was unethical and a ‘sin’ for the other.

Though this sectarian attack against dance awakened amusement in our days, it has deeper roots in European history, especially in a certain Puritan horror of dance. Though this was radically anti-Catholic it had, ironically, its correspondence on the Catholic side. There is a long tradition of Catholic condemnation of dancing as a sinful activity. In 1925, the Catholic archbishops and bishops of Ireland issued a statement on the “evils of dancing”, which was

to be read at messes during the Ecclesiastical Year and warned of the “occasions of sin” involved in night dancing.

In a similar way, dance - together with body cultural practices like sports, music, games and popular festivity - has recently come under ethical attack by Muslim fundamentalism. Wahhabism, a special type of Saudi Arabian purism, has gained terrain. The Afghan Taliban combined the anti-sport line with a violent policy of prohibition against music and dance as well as against popular traditions of festivity. This anti-bodily ethical purism arose from civil society, but it was striving towards a public policy of repression, with a sharp gender bias. New, surprising identities were, thus, growing from civil society. Civil society is not at all harmless - nor is civil ethics.

Presbyterian Puritan, Catholic and Muslim fundamentalist - very different religious filiations have, thus, agreed upon the ‘sinfulness’ of dancing. Inside the same religious filiations, however, and side by side with this repression, dance has also been accepted, and Protestant, Catholic and Muslim countries have even produced outstanding dance cultures and integrated them into their respective ethical codes.

This creates doubt whether the ethics of dancing or anti-dancing, of sports and anti-sports can be derived from religion at all. The sociological and materialistic dimension of body culture has to be taken seriously.

### **The material ‘first condition’**

From this case and its theoretical challenges, we can return to some reflections, which philosophy already more than 150 years ago has launched. Philosophers are always tempted to choose the blind alleys of idealistic speculation; if we want to avoid this, we have to reenter into philosophy from the very beginning - this is what Karl Marx proposed in 1845. We have to search for the fundamentals of the human ideas in the “*really existing world*”, was his answer. But what is this fundament, and where is the “*very beginning*” of philosophical explanation located? What are the material preconditions for human life (“*die materiellen Lebensbedingungen*”), and what is the basis of a social existence?

“The first condition of all human history is of course the existence of living human individuals. The first matter of fact, which has to be stated, is the bodily organisation of these individuals and their thereby established relation to the rest of the nature.”

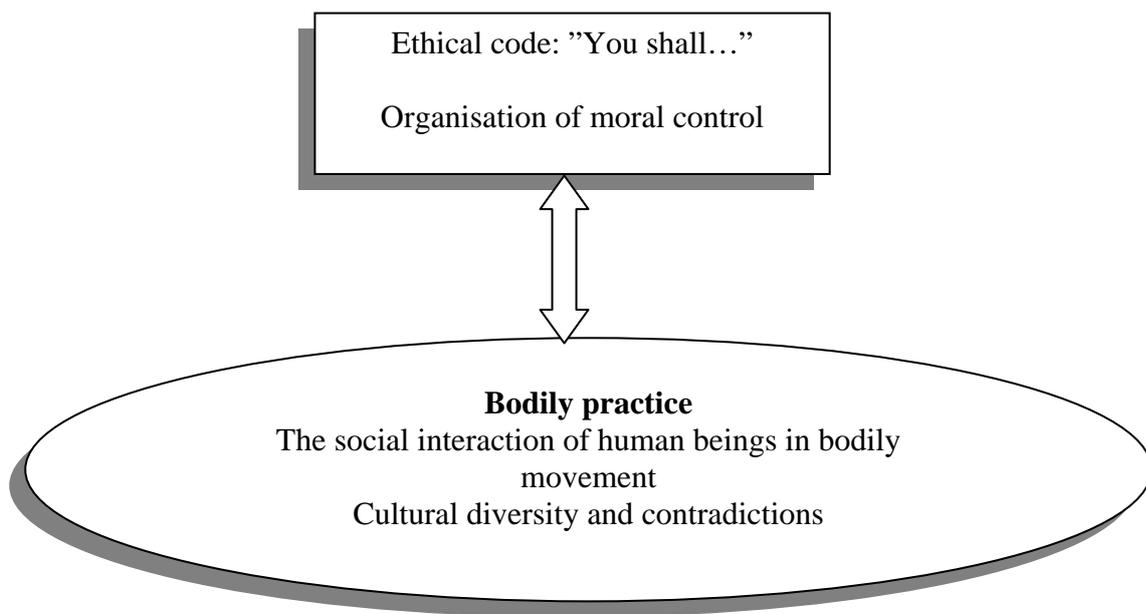
In this draft, thus, the body was central. The bodily existence of the human beings in their social relation to each other and to the rest of the nature - this means that bodily practice is the first matter of fact in a materialistic philosophy. It remains an alternative approach both for philosophy in general and for ethics in particular. Because this intellectual program was never fulfilled so far.

The term of “bodily organisation” has, however, a high complexity, which has to be taken seriously. It cannot be reduced to a matter of ‘productivity’, as earlier generations of Marxists did when treating the basis

as a matter of ‘production’ related to the basic needs of eating and drinking, dressing and housing. Society can - maybe - ‘produce’ itself out of shortcoming of this type. However, bodily organisation of the human beings is more than what is related to production and economy: It is among others the world of sexual relations, erotic quest and seduction, of identity, recognition and anxiety, of depression and laughter - of movement. And society has its practice not only in work, but also in sport, play and game and dance. Movement includes the whole historicity, sociality and inner contradictions of human bodily existence.

This attention to ‘the first condition’ of human existence opens the view towards a broad program of sociology - and ethics. It would be the program of a new body-philosophical materialism.

**Figure 3: Basis and superstructure**



#### **4. Ethics and the culture of laughter - Don' t take it seriously!**

Yet, it is not enough to think ethics dialectically (as a world of contradictions) and materialistically (with bodily practice as basis), there remains one important point to touch. Sport and games are also and in high degree practices of fun. Sport has grown forth from a popular culture of carnival, of festivity and funny dance. By laughter and play, the games transgressed normality and simulated the grotesque ‘other’ . As ‘post-modern’ event-culture is showing, this is not only a matter of past time. If ethics is

to be understood in relation to body, game and movement, this cannot be only a serious matter.

The paradox of sociology of sport and game is that it can only be taken seriously if it approaches human activity also as non-serious practices. As the initial case of popular games showed, there is no understanding of ethics without sociology of laughter. While chase and tag as a serious sport would be an 'impossible game', it is possible - and only possible - as a non-serious event of joking and laughter. And it is just by laughter that this game shows its particular ethical content.

The popular carnival of sports and games challenges our understanding of ethics. Which consequences this may have for a theory of ethics, has to be discussed more in detail in the future. Neither carnival and laughter nor play and game are just harmless. From research in play and game we know that there exist so-called 'dark games'. Façade climbing in drunken state, metro surfing and other dangerous games and competitions combine fun and risk, laughter and death...

In the traditional universe of philosophical reflection, there exists a special niche, where the discourse of laughter and carnival is placed. It is inside the aesthetical field that one finds the humoristic as a special genre. The ethical and social (and anti-social) dimensions of play and game show, however, that it is not enough to talk about niche genre in aesthetical terms.

What we are talking about is much more comprehensive. The threefold Kantian universe with its axes of 'pure reason' (what is true), 'practical reason' (what we shall do) and aesthetical 'judgment' (what is beautiful) has to be critically reconsidered from the very beginning. The true is serious, the moral is serious, and the beautiful is serious. But life is not only serious. It is in high degree paradoxical, and human beings play on this by laughing. Vast parts of human communication are ironical.

It is not at least because of this non-serious dimension, that play and games are important for human life. As a purely serious discourse without reference to the unserious sociality of sports, the sociology of ethics would be ridiculous, wouldn't it?

With the words of Piet Hein:

"Taking fun as simply fun  
and earnestness in earnest,  
shows how thoroughly  
thou none of both discernest."

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