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Sandra Meeuwsen

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Ungrounding Homo Ludens: on Agamben and Modern Sports

Sandra Meeuwsen

Erasmus School of Philosophy, Erasmus University Rotterdam, NL

ABSTRACT

In this paper, I argue that the central ontological presupposition in the philosophy of sport is the 'sport-as-play' paradigm. In reconstructing its archaeological origins, a normative narrative is uncovered in which 'play' represents a creative and 'lusory' social practice, governed by game rules. In the philosophy of sports discourse, *Homo Ludens* is considered as the ideal, virtuous and innocent character, free from repressive, work-related duties or constraints. In the early works of Giorgio Agamben (1942), the conceptual pair play—ritual offers a contemporary frame of reference, rigorously different from our *Homo Ludens* ideal. In Agamben's later works, the provocative *Homo Sacer* concept can hardly be more opposite to the utopian *Homo Ludens* paradigm. As Agamben states, political power in late modernity is based on a so-called 'state-of-exception', in which 'bare life' (as expressed in *Homo Sacer*) at first is excluded from society, but then again reincluded as an exception, in order to realize law and order. In this paper, I introduce philosophical archaeology as a promising new method in the philosophy of sport, debunking our prevailing *Homo Ludens* discourse. I argue that modern sports in our times—inadvertently—more and more seem to function as a 'state-of-exception', strengthening biopolitical power.

KEYWORDS

Play; game; ritual; sacrality; ontology; biopolitics

Introduction

'Where Are We Now?' This intriguing title of David Bowie's 2013 comeback song preluded his final years. At the end of his life, Bowie was willing to reconsider everything he ever stood for. Where are we now, as a philosophy of sport community? Enduring this pandemic, trying to preserve the conceptualization of sport we have installed through the years? Or might this crisis be a threshold for changing modern sports profoundly, and should we support this transition from an inspiring philosophical perspective? This challenging task seems foreseen in 2019 by Gunnar Breivik in *From 'philosophy of sport' to 'philosophies of sports'? History, identity and diversification of sport philosophy* (Breivik 2019), as well as Mike McNamee in *Sport, Ethics and Philosophy: A 10 Year Retrospective*, (McNamee 2017). In his first 2021 editorial, *Sport and Covid-19* (Edgar 2021), Andrew Edgar suggests that the pandemic will lead to 'profound disruptions', strengthening 'our engagement with sport'. The importance of exercise and sport in our lives was never so evident as in 2020. How to move on after Covid-19? In this essay, I follow the three cited

appeals, adopting this crisis as an opportunity for change, and present a novel approach in the philosophy of sport, at the same time ungrounding and rebuilding our body of knowledge.

Both Breivik as McNamee identify, in retrospect, two major fields in which sport philosophy has developed since the early 1970s. First of all, there is the conceptual field, dominated by an Anglo-Saxon analytical approach. Over the years, its research object has extended from a rather narrow approach of modern sports as competitive sport, into inclusive realms like the philosophy of play, of physical education, the philosophy of the body and of human movement in general. The limitations of merely analytic thinking about sport are addressed in several critical accounts, for instance in Scott Kretchmar's article *Dualism, Dichotomies and dead ends: Limitations of analytical thinking about sports* (Scott Kretchmar 2007). As he states, analytical binary logic prevents us from finding satisfying answers and creates only dead ends and aporias. Trying to enrich and deepen these clinical analytic methods of conceptualizing sport, new inspiration was found in MacIntyre's account of virtue ethics, defining sport as a specific social practice, opposing these practices to their potentially corrupting institutions, and the continental phenomenological tradition, enriching the bodily aspect of sport as an existential quest, as found in the works of Heidegger and Merleau Ponty. These explorations led to the flourishing of sport ethics as a more applied species of sport philosophy, nowadays elaborated in an interdisciplinary domain called 'Sports Integrity'. In short, the current tradition (or: *canon*) in sport philosophy seems twofold; a conceptual field (both analytically and phenomenologically based) and an ethical field, mainly rooted in MacIntyrian virtue ethics. A more continental, post-structural approach, combined with a *political* philosophy of sport, exploring policy and governance matters, still seems underdeveloped.

What did this *canon* bring about in the very heart of modern sports? Indeed, our philosophical investigations strongly validated the importance and positive impact of sport, evident in its progressive instrumentalization in different societal areas. On the other hand, there is this increase of excessive distortions in sport, such as violence, corruption, sexual harassment, the use of doping, undermining and match fixing. How ought this ambiguity be understood and, if even possible, overcome? Having been employed in the field of sport for a long time, I wondered if this tension might be systemic, going back to modern sports' archaeological roots. In this paper, I present an archaeological method in the spirit of the French philosopher Michel Foucault, supplemented with a radical ethical twist, as presented by the contemporary Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben. What's the idea?

Philosophical Archaeology

Unlike genealogy, focusing on the development of *power* in a certain social practice, archaeology starts from the dominant *knowledge* of a certain phenomenon. In the case of sport, the prevailing ontological assumptions are installed by our philosophy of sport community. Mostly in an explicit conceptualizing discourse, then again implicit or inadvertently, yet in any case crucial to the legitimacy and continuity of the very practice. Where a new societal field emerges, a watershed delineates the activities belonging to it from those that do not (or no longer) belong to it. What belongs to this domain—say:

sport—from then on will be qualified as ‘appropriate’, preferably ‘superior’ to what falls outside of this new domain. The excluded is degenerated into ‘less valuable’ or even ‘object’. Philosophical archaeology tries to reveal these implicit ideologizing and moralizing dichotomies, coming from a certain discourse through time. The position from which this operation takes place is that of ‘the Other’, the excluded and unknown in the field of knowledge being investigated. Every tradition conceals a downside, where the difference, the surplus and the negative of its positively constructed knowledge lives on. Analytic philosophy, rooted in binary logic, contributes to producing normative dichotomies by valuing the intelligible (positive) at the expense of the unknown (negative). But why should we even want to go there, to this downside and unknown, and why is this process of ‘ungrounding’ presumed necessary in the philosophy of sport?

As indicated, Foucault would be the first post-war philosopher to introduce an archaeological method in philosophy. In *Les Mots et les Choses* (Words and Things), like a surgeon, he exposes the mechanisms establishing knowledge within the human sciences, such as medicine, history, linguistics and economics (Foucault 1966). His archaeological analysis is an all-embracing form of historiography, without judgment, as he will explain three years later in his methodological account, *L’Archéologie du Savoir* (The Archaeology of Knowledge): ‘For archaeological analysis, contradictions are neither apparent to be overcome nor secret principles that should be identified. They are objects to be described for their own sake, without any attempt made to find out from which point of view they can dissipate, or at what level they become radicalized, and effects become causes’ (Foucault 1969, 206).¹ A clinical, almost amoral view is required for this type of investigation, however based on genuine commitment, as Foucault would later state in a revealing interview: ‘... the books I write constitute an experience, which I wish were always as rich as possible. An experience is something from which one emerges changed’ (Trombadori 1985, 7). If we apply these thoughts to the philosophy of sport, tracing and revising the ontological presuppositions of modern sports, even with its ‘aporias’ as a confronting experience, will also change the very practice. Why?

Immanence and Change

‘To really change things, one should accept that nothing can really be changed within the existing system’ (Žižek 2018). With this clever turnaround of Einstein’s famous plea for change, Slavoj Žižek reveals his true mission. What about the community of the philosophy of sport; what is our mission? To put it bluntly: if we aim to change modern sports’ current *apparatus*² for the better, we should ‘go outside’ and explore new possibilities. A search for modern sports’ archaeological roots (or: *archè*³), implies ‘going outside’, to activate and re-include what has been excluded from this field since its inception. Undergoing this process may be the first step towards creating a future ‘form-of-sport’. Debunking the prevailing way of conceptualizing sport will expose the way knowledge in and about modern sports is produced, and with it, the construction of sport’s dominant truth discourse.⁴ Shouldn’t we acknowledge that our philosophy of sport community holds a special responsibility with regard to this conceptual engineering? Let’s be honest: we are not objectively reflecting on this practice, but deeply involved with it, we conceptually rule this field. A perfect opportunity for guiding change, I would say. How come?

On this point, I hold a radical *immanence* position, as introduced by the seventeenth-century Dutch-Jewish philosopher Baruch Spinoza. In his *Ethica*, Spinoza brought a most revolutionary ontological insight that reality is one infinite substance, equal to God or nature: '*Deus sive Natura*'. By deductive reasoning Spinoza argues how this substance consists of an infinite number of attributes, of which we know only two: 'thought' and 'extension'. All things or beings in reality are modes of these two attributes and cannot be isolated from them. Transcendent reasoning is based on the distinction between a transcendent, absolute source of our knowledge—such as God or our consciousness—versus the empirical reality that surrounds us; the world of which we are part. Holding to this distinction enables man to control the world or any other 'object' (nature, body, life) from a *transcendent* position. However, according to Spinoza, there is no transcendent agency beyond the substance; God, nature and our world are one.

This at the time revolutionary immanence position evolved through continental thinkers like Nietzsche, Heidegger, Foucault, Deleuze and Agamben. They all share the conviction that the act of knowledge itself, that is 'knowing' as such, is always immanent to 'being' as a continuous flow of experiences. No transcendent subject is possible outside the immanence of being. This epistemological point, in my opinion, seems crucial for the evolution of the philosophy of sport. I consider the 'field-of-knowing' in and around modern sports (not only scientific knowledge but all narratives about sport), as well as the philosophy of sport as a specific field of interest, *inherent* to the very 'being' of sport; the practice of game-playing, competition, coaching and governance. As stated earlier: *knowing* (philosophy) and *being* (sport) are one.

Now, to overcome binary logic (as presupposed in analytical philosophy), and as such ontological dualism and normative dichotomies, we should leave transcendent reasoning; a position of radical immanence is required to pass beyond the actual crisis modern sports is facing. This 'major premise' in my argument implies that the philosophy of sport community should carefully (re)consider its, clearly unwilling and unforeseen, yet unmistakably relevant contribution to the perverted state in which modern sports lingers. An extraordinary task, for sure.

Although Agamben stays in many ways faithful to Foucault, he distances himself from Foucault's typically post-war epistemological presuppositions. In *The Signature of All Things*, Agamben's most consistent methodological work, he even attacks Foucault on his never-ending quest for the 'historical a priori' of a certain field of knowledge: 'Yet how can an a priori be given and exist historically? And how is it possible to gain access to it?'. Later on: '... the past in question here is a special kind of past that neither precedes the present chronologically as origin nor is simply exterior to it.' (Agamben 2010, 93–94). The work of Agamben can be considered as a next step towards a 'coming philosophy', in which normative dichotomies have been neutralized and new approaches to polarized debates will arise. To my opinion, his critical questions should make us reconsider the normative, a priori position we tend to give to virtuous athletics in ancient Greece in understanding modern sports' moral decline. However, it is impossible to turn back time and reincarnate ancient Greek sacral bodily rituals. We live now.

But if the current *canon* in the philosophy of sport is regarded as the solid ground, the 'positive' and the Same, what then is the 'negative', the Other, the unthought? From an immanence point of view, these dimensions should be brought together again. However, philosophical archaeology is not regression to a specific moment in the past, when the

domain of sports and movement came into being. Bypassing Foucault, Agamben states that philosophical archaeology is 'elusive'; it does not try to restore a previous state (like psychoanalysis pretends), but to decompose and displace it, reactivating the moments in which an epistemic split was constituted, by means of repression of modalities that should not live on. In a veiled form however, this *archè* is still active in the present: 'The moment of arising, the *archè* of archaeology is what will take place, what will become accessible and present, only when archaeological inquiry has completed its operation. It therefore has the form of a past in the future, that is, a *future anterior*' (Agamben 2010, pp. 105–106).

How to find this presumed *archè* of modern sports' body of knowledge? Following Agamben, our present position should be fully embraced as a given potential. In the archaeological search for the point at which the 'knowing' about sport came into being, producing an epistemic split between what would remain known (the 'tradition') and what would be forgotten, our actual position plays a crucial role. Indeed, archaeology even serves the present, in which what has been excluded still lives on, be it 'underground': '... it is a question of gaining access to a past that has not been lived through, and therefore that technically cannot be defined as "past", but that somehow has remained present' (Agamben 2010, 102). Uncovering this *archè* may be revealing and painful, it is also a process that serves the evolution of modern sports. This radical reversal is derived from Agamben's unmasking of the typically Western style of ontology: 'The strategy is always the same: something is divided, excluded, and pushed to the bottom, and precisely through this exclusion, it is included as *archè* and foundation' (Agamben 2016, 264).

Applied to (the philosophy of) sport, it seems that the powers that were decided 'to be forgotten' and as such were suppressed from the arising field of modern sports, until now serve as the very foundation of sport, whether we like it or not. This perspective might declare the persistent, sometimes outright coercive call for recognition of victims and perpetrators, who, because of their inadmissible behaviour, were excluded and have become alienated from the body of modern sports. And as sport philosophers, we draw the lines in legitimizing the distinction between the activities that may and those that may not belong to modern sports. In doing so, we (re)create this exclusive domain over and over, settling the downside as its very foundation.⁵

By way of illustrating how philosophical archaeology might work, let me present some first findings of my attempt to debunk our central ontological paradigm: the ongoing validation of sport-as-play, idealizing Huizinga's *Homo Ludens* (Huizinga (1938 2008)). I consider this paradigm to be the ontological core of (the philosophy of) sport, even in the Suitsian concept of sport as a formalized 'game'. Despite all the criticism and variants, this ontology refers to Johan Huizinga's concept of play in *Homo Ludens*.

Homo Ludens

Even nowadays Huizinga's conceptualization of play is considered as the most important source for the way play should ideally be expressed in modern sports.⁶ *Homo Ludens* dates from 1938, on the eve of the Second World War. Huizinga defines play as follows: 'Considered in form, one can therefore, in summary, call play a free act, which is conscious as "not mean" and outside of ordinary life, which can nevertheless take up the player

completely, to which no direct interest is attached, or usefulness is acquired, which takes place within a deliberately determined time and space, which proceeds according to certain rules in an orderly manner, and which creates community relationships, which like to surround themselves with secrecy or accentuate themselves by disguise as different from the ordinary world' (Huizinga (1938 2008), 41).⁷ Huizinga considers play to be the a priori of culture; play, he argues, is even older than culture. After all, to his opinion, culture already presupposes a form of human society; hence the a priori. Unlike mechanical exercises, play resists any attempt at analysis or logical interpretation. Play, Huizinga argues, has its own irreducible quality, a primary category of life.

Playfulness is presented as an ideal state of mind, most attractive to inspire and qualify modern sports. This still happens in contemporary sport's practice, research and policy. To put it differently: modern sports' current ontology in the end still revolves around Huizinga's concept of play; it is either embraced or criticized and supplemented. However, Huizinga also disqualified modern sports at the time, because they already lacked the most essential quality of play, namely: surrender, ecstasy, freedom, abundance, 'being a child again': 'Gradually, in modern society, sport removes itself from the pure playing sphere, and becomes an element "sui generis", no more play and yet no seriousness. In archaic civilizations athletic contests were part of sacred feasts. They were indispensable as sacred and salvific acts. This link with a religious cult is lost in modern sports . . . It remains, however important for participants and spectators, a sterile function, in which the old playfulness has largely died off . . . Play has become serious, the playing mood has more or less disappeared' (Huizinga (1938 2008), pp. 229–230). In other words: in the late 1930s, Huizinga already states very clearly that the ongoing organization of modern sports, with its introverted structure, education, rules and institutions, resulted in sport being a quasi-play, stiffened to seriousness, thus losing its most important strength.

To my stunned surprise, Huizinga's critical view on sport was *not* taken over during the reception of *Homo Ludens* into the body of knowledge to define modern sports, taking place from the 1950s until the 1970s.⁸ Before the Second World War, Huizinga was considered a cultural authority and public intellectual. In 1936, he published *In de schaduwen van morgen* (Tomorrow's shadows), which was preceded by various initial approaches, in which Huizinga explicitly refers to the existence of a 'cultural crisis' in modernity. He expressed his growing concern about the (lack of) resilience of European culture and society to the growing nationalism and extremism, spreading quickly throughout Europe. The existential questions that created *Homo Ludens*, were: how could the growing 'amoral masses' be restrained, and how could European culture, which in Huizinga's eyes was primarily a 'higher' culture, still be preserved?

In response to these questions, Huizinga strongly contrasts *Homo Ludens*' concept of play with 'seriousness'. In his eyes, play should primarily be non-serious. It may be taken seriously, but that does not detract from the positive qualities of play. Applying these remarks to sport: 'In sport, we were dealing with an activity that was consciously recognized as play, but which had been elevated to such a degree of technical organization, material equipment and scientific thought that in its collective and public exercise the actual playing mood was in danger of being lost. In contrast to this tendency of play to turn into seriousness, there are phenomena that seem to imply the opposite'. A little later, his conclusion is absolutely clear: 'In the case of sport, therefore, a play degenerating into seriousness, but still regarded as play; in the case of the other, a serious activity, which

degenerates into play, but remains serious' (Huizinga (1938 2008), 231). This rather artificial polarity between play and seriousness within Huizinga's thinking, unwillingly taken over in our conceptualization of sport, is much older than *Homo Ludens*. As early as 1933 Huizinga gave a lecture entitled *Over de grenzen van spel en ernst in de cultuur* (On the borders between play and seriousness in culture). This speech shows that Huizinga must have been possessed by the contrast between play and seriousness, even for more than thirty years. This also means that the roots of Huizinga's concept of play reach back to the end of the nineteenth century, his younger years, in which he read Nietzsche, studied both Dutch literature and Sanskrit, and practiced Buddhism.

Now, how did *Homo Ludens* become the inspiring source it still is for modern sports? It took a while. After the First World War, during the roaring twenties, the humanities were most concerned about the loss of standards and values, partly under the influence of fatal international developments; this public debate became the decisive breeding ground for Huizinga's cultural turn during the interbellum, and thus for the conception of *Homo Ludens*. This piece of work can be seen as the final result of a personal quest; an existential search for what could still have absolute value in the middle of the chaotic years leading to the Second World War: 'We live in a possessed world. And we know it. It would not come as a surprise to anyone if madness suddenly broke out into a frenzy, leaving this poor European humanity behind in stupor and bewilderment, the engines still running and the flags still flying, but the spirit gone' (Huizinga 1935).

Reconstructing the way *Homo Ludens* was used to conceptualize and legitimize modern sports, I was struck by the brutal and systematic way in which Huizinga's clear criticism on modern sports was ignored and excluded from the tradition evolving. And there is more. After the Second World War, Huizinga's esteem crashed completely. At the time, Dutch historians and intellectuals like Jan Romein, Jacques de Kadt and Pieter Geyl reproached Huizinga with a naive, moralizing and overly romantic world view, which portrayed the resilience against extremism in a far too negative light. In their eyes, Huizinga was unable to view massification and a penchant for totalitarianism as an integral part of our modern culture, and thus to view the pre-war period as a 'challenge to struggle' and a necessary phase in the supposed 'Hegelian' dialectic evolution of the Western world. Huizinga was accused of a superficial way of researching; his former colleagues were particularly critical about the acclaimed scientific qualities of *Homo Ludens*. As late as in 1961, Geyl even subtly refers to the Dutch phenomenologist Frits Buytendijk, who in 1938 already dismissed *Homo Ludens* as 'unscientific'. However, this clear criticism could not prevent scholars in sport (philosophy) to adopt *Homo Ludens* from the 1950s as their point of departure in conceptualizing modern sports.

Even after 1968, the provocative publication *De opstand van de Homo Ludens* (The revolt of Homo Ludens), in which Cobra artist Constant Nieuwenhuijs reactivated Huizinga's ideas about play as the basis for culture (Nieuwenhuis 1969), could not change the incorporated *canon* in sport science anymore. Constant's revitalizing interpretation of *Homo Ludens*, a clear response to the highly accelerating process of mechanization and industrialization, was again ignored by the existing field of sport knowledge. Constant, a true right-wing socialist, inspired the post '68 generation and strongly politicized *Homo Ludens*. In the arising field of the philosophy of sport however, this critical account was not included; no reconsideration occurred about *Homo Ludens*' one-dimensional reception.

I would even reframe Bernard Suits' attempt to define modern sports in *The Grasshopper: Games, Life and Utopia* (Suits 1978) as an ambiguous conceptual revision of the *Homo Ludens* paradigm. Suits' clever compromising definition of sport as rule based 'game-playing', yet with lusory attitude, seems to reflect the ongoing attachment to *playfulness* as the presupposed ontological core of modern sports. However, in stressing rules, means and goals as elements to prevent any 'undesirable' outcome to happen in game-playing, Suits' way to define sport is paradigmatic for the process of 'play degenerating into seriousness . . .', thus turning it more and more into 'a sterile function . . .', as Huizinga would say. Even in the field of sport sociology, attempts have been made to recharge *Homo Ludens* as a neo-Platonic ideal. For instance, Thomas Henricks pointed at the opportunity to use Huizinga's classic, notwithstanding his explicit criticism towards modern sports, in directing us to some fundamental social issues in sport (Henricks 1988). Again, *Homo Ludens* is taken as an ideal ontological state.

My point here is that *Homo Ludens* as the prevailing ontological paradigm in (conceptualizing) modern sports, over the years has turned into a transcendent *normative* position, dividing between 'superior'—validating all exercising activities that are considered still truly playful—and 'inferior'; all practices that are not supposed to be playful enough. Yet, drawing this demarcation line only strengthens *Homo Ludens*' idealistic interpretation, thus accelerating the process of sterilizing modern sports. To comprehend this rather bold statement, a different concept of play might shed some light.

Agamben on Play

In addition to Huizinga's concept of play in *Homo Ludens*, various alternative concepts of play can be found. Play (and game-playing) as an archetype for pleasure, innocence and freedom is of all times. This certainly does not mean that modern sports meet this ideal. As indicated, as early as in 1938 Huizinga already did express his disqualification of modern sports as a 'sterile, aggravated' practice, from which its playful essence had already disappeared.

I hereby introduce Giorgio Agamben's concept of play as a contemporary frame of reference, quite opposite to our *Homo Ludens* tradition. In one of his early works, *Infancy and History*, in the chapter 'In Playland', Agamben explores the conceptual pair play—ritual (Agamben 1978, 70–93). As he states, there is a reciprocal relationship between play and ritual (the sacred). By means of rituals, we give structure to our sense of time, while play puts the relationship between past and present 'on hold', at least for the duration of this very play. In other words: rituals transform diachrony into synchrony, while playing can transform synchrony into diachrony. A recent illustration of the diachronic ability of play in modern sport I see expressed in women's football. For decades vilified and banned, but nowadays the thrilling hope in modern football. As later Agamben would say, the more playful approach in women's football may help to 'profane' (disable) the traumatic self-conception of male football. Another example: the use of objects from a sacred practice as 'toys' (for example, a tin can as football) also frees us from the repressing boundaries of the sacred domain. These last remarks need more explanation.

In his later, more politically oriented work, Agamben considers not only traditional religion but all kinds of modern socio-economic practices as 'sacred', because the use of objects, words, forces and activities is part of a constructed utilitarian context, serving the

existing juridical order and strengthening political power. In this political twist, Agamben goes beyond the more anthropological approach Foucault represents. Following this line of thought, it seems that the ongoing validating of *Homo Ludens* as a legitimization of the preferred lusory, innocent character of 'morally good' sport, has 'sacrificed' modern sports even more. An observation in which Huizinga's critical view on sport resonates.⁹ Indeed, Huizinga foresaw it all well: the level of organization, hierarchy and regulation has risen explosively in more than a century of 'sportification'. With secular rituals, like the modern Olympic Games and other spectacular sporting events, but also the announcement, adoption and swearing allegiance to a Code of Sports' Governance, the continuity of the sporting 'apparatus' is guaranteed. In modern sports, the degree of sterilization and rigidity caused by the overvaluation of such rituals, seems to explode, trying to counter a growing excessive dimension. Another illustration: in qualifying modern sports as a new post-religious cult, we seem to fade its original sacral playing-roots even more. This analysis goes a decisive step further than the works of Foucauldian, Weberian and Marxian scholars like Grant Farred (2014), CL Cole (1993; 2004), John Hargreaves (1986; 1987), Richard Pringle and Pirrko Markula (2006),¹⁰ who did apply postmodern critical theory to the sporting body and sport as a social practice. However, without thoroughly exploring the *political* implications for the evolution of modern sports. Unlike Foucault and these interpreters, Agamben rethinks all manifestations of human life as both created and governed by politics, subordinating both law, education, leisure as care to politically sanctioned ends. Where to find hope? Agamben also states that restoring *play* will help to 'profane' sacrificed practices—such as modern sports—in order to unleash the use of the original vitalist, even sacred exchanges within the plane of being. How so?

To understand this perspective, let me add another relevant distinction in *Infancy and History*, the one between 'cold' and 'warm' societies (Agamben 1978, 77), inspired by the thoughts of Zygmunt Bauman, for instance (Bauman 2007). Let me add 'domains' (such as sport) as the representative carriers of Western society. In a cold domain, the ritual atmosphere has grown explosively at the expense of play. Whereas within warm domains this is exactly the other way around: game-playing has become absolute and a modernistic spectacle, while the ritual 'cooling' down has disappeared and with it: synchrony. In sport, it seems as if the growing series of modern rituals actually cover-up the sacrificing melting process that takes place within her. As Agamben states, ritual and play should not be opposites; they are a reciprocal dual structure we need to survive: 'Ritual and play appear, rather, as two tendencies operating in every society, although the one never has the effect of eliminating the other, and although one might prevail over the other to a varying degree, they always maintain a differential margin between diachrony and synchrony' (Agamben 1978, 74).

Homo Sacer

From the mid 1990s until now, Agamben has debunked the ambivalent ontological interpretation of the sacred within modernity, following continental twentieth-century philosophers like Heidegger, Bataille, Benjamin and Foucault. He unwraps the ambiguous meaning of the term 'sacred', an interpretation from which Agamben's *Homo Sacer* series departs. On the one hand, he points out, this concept refers to a 'holy' and 'exalted'

person, but on the other hand it also refers to the 'non-sacred' criminal, in the sense of 'infected' and 'exiled' (Agamben 1995, 75–81).

Where does this ambiguity of the term 'sacer' come from, and how did this ambivalence affect (our thinking about) modern sports? The *Homo Sacer* concept is derived from ancient Roman law, marking the borderline between divine and human law. It referred to someone who had committed a crime, and as such was considered evil and unclean, but at the same time declared 'sacer' (holy). The latter qualification meant that the person in question could be killed, but not ritually sacrificed. The *Homo Sacer* was outlawed and could be killed without this being considered murder and therefore punishable. Being excluded from sacrifice in combination with the option of being put to death with impunity, created a curious contradiction which, over time, has accompanied the term 'sacred'. In ancient times, the taboo on *Homo Sacer* made it legitimate to banish him or her from the 'polis', that is from public life. And yet, at the same time, Roman law presupposes *Homo Sacer* as its juridic-political *archè*, be it in exclusion.

Next, Agamben uncovers the double exception in ancient times; the *Homo Sacer* is excluded from the polis and killing him or her should not in any kind be a sacrifice: 'This violence—the unsanctionable killing that, in his case, anyone may commit—is classifiable neither as sacrifice nor as homicide, neither as the execution of a condemnation to death nor as sacrilege' (Agamben 1995, 82). It links this area of double exclusion with the area on which sovereign power rests.

Moving on, Agamben stresses to uncover the ambiguity of the sacred as a misunderstanding surviving into the twentieth century, also infecting Freud's taboo concept. Freud copies the opposition within the Latin word 'sacer'; the semantic tension between 'holy' and 'cursed'. On top of this, the secularization process added a negative connotation to the sacred as unclean, abject and dark. As such, even in our times, the ambiguity of the word 'sacer' penetrates deeply into modern society (Agamben 1995, 75–81). An irreversible process in which the conjunction of sacrality and religion rapidly lost its meaning. Agamben points out that the pejorative interpretation of the sacred in the twentieth century, should be understood as an anachronism that does not do justice to the function of the *Homo Sacer* figure in ancient Roman law. Even Roger Caillois bases his *L'Homme et le Sacré* (Man and the sacred), written very shortly after *Homo Ludens*, on this specific explanation (Caillois 1939). Caillois is one of the first in Huizinga's time to make the connection between play and sacrality. Caillois emphasizes that, although Huizinga assimilated cult and play, he forgot to include the most important thing, namely the *sacred* origin present in ancient cults. And thus, I argue here, by installing *Homo Ludens* as a superior ontological paradigm in conceptualizing modern sports, their sacred roots have faded away.

Another key point in Agamben's thoughts seems even more relevant to our field of knowledge; he applies this conceptual framework to the emergence of *bio-political power* in our time. This concept was originally launched by Foucault, indicating the growth of political power in modernity through controlling the body, not only in health care and the prison system but even in the very intimate realm of sexuality. In his first volume of the History of Sexuality, *La Volonté de Savoir* (The Will to Knowledge), Foucault introduces the concept of biopolitics as a politically sanctioned regime to regulate the biological processes concerning the human body: '... one would have to speak of bio-power to designate what brought life and its mechanisms into the realm of explicit calculations

and made knowledge-power an agent of transformation of human life. It is not that life has been totally integrated into techniques that govern and administer it; it constantly escapes them.' (Foucault 1976, 188).¹¹ All kinds of technologies and practices reflect the rise of this new paradigm during the second half of the eighteenth century; government turns into governing the growth and security of the entire population, controlling life and death. Agamben combines these insights with the dichotomy Hannah Arendt presents between *zoè* and *bios* (Arendt (1958 2018), 12–17). Let me unpack this argument before applying it to sport (philosophy)'s prevailing ontology.

According to Agamben, modern Western politics is founded on the inclusion of so-called 'bare' life ('*zoè*', as carried by *Homo Sacer*) within qualified, politically relevant life ('*bios*'). In ancient Greece, natural life (*zoè*) was still excluded from the polis or public domain. As Agamben states, this is quite the opposite in our times; the rule of law as a manifestation of political power (contemporary '*bios*') only operates because of the exclusion of naked, uncontrolled life. But the reverse is also true: 'Life, which is thus obliged, can in the last instance be implicated in the sphere of law only through the presupposition of its inclusive exclusion, only in an 'exceptio' '(Agamben 1995, 27). As such, the *exception* defines the political sphere of sovereign power as an *inclusive exclusion*. These rather inconvenient insights made me wonder if the knowledge about modern sports, even the philosophy of sport, is also deeply involved in these counterfeeding dynamics. Although we are diligently asserting its uniqueness as a rule-based social practice, protecting it as a precious separate realm, modern sports first were excluded from the political sphere (and to some still should be). And yet, this precious social practice is allowed and sanctioned by modern society, including modern sports again, be it as an exception. What are the implications of this *inclusive exclusion*, governing modern sports?

Following Agamben, Western political structure, intertwined with capitalism since modernity, is based on a double exception: first the possibility of excluding *Homo Sacer*, followed by the exception of this rule, re-including *zoè* (naked life) as a suspension of the juridical order, as an exception into *bios* (society). Political power grows in creating this so-called permanent 'state of exception'; people, powers and activities are re-included through their very exclusion. Sovereign power combines this 'inclusive exception' with the power over death as its ultimate sanction. Even Hobbes' Leviathan shows this twist by moving the naked, vulnerable body from outside to inside, from bare life to political life. Hence, modern political power gathers and governs all the bodies of individual citizens. Considering this, might it really be true that we, as a (philosophy of) sport community, are keeping up the exception to live off the rule, being the Western political system as it is? Such an intolerable thought.

One last step, Agamben even radicalizes Foucault's thoughts by pointing out that, through this double exception, inclusion still takes place within the regular order: '... what is excluded in the exception maintains itself in relation to the rule's suspension. The rule applies to the exception in no longer applying, in withdrawing from it' (Agamben 1995, 18). It is decisive for the crisis of modernity that biological life, as expressed in vitality, by the bare, unconditioned body, shifts from the outside to the very centre of political power. We experience ourselves less and less as an object and more and more as a subject of this (bio-)political power. In other words: the need to strengthen and discipline our body is fully internalized as a free choice, experiencing our body as 'a gift of life', but in fact we are captured in the maintenance of the rule of law.¹² As such, the dividing line between

exclusion and inclusion, between outside and inside, *zoè* and *bios*, morally superior and inferior, has become increasingly blurred in our time.

These insights redefine modern sports as an instrument in the 'politization' (controlling, influencing, adapting) of bare life, enabling the very emergence of bio-politics; from protecting public health to controlling all living bodies within the political sphere. Agamben describes this process as the 'sacrificing' of profane domains within our present, secularized society. Not only politics but also other societal areas, such as education, science, human rights and, as my thesis says here, modern sports, are typically sacred domains. Accepting the normative position of such domains seems to be based on the *inclusive exclusion* of bare life: 'What has been banned is delivered over to its own separateness and, at the same time, consigned to the mercy of the one who abandons it—at once excluded and included, removed and at the same time captured.' (Agamben 1995, 110). How tragic; a realm that desperately seeks to be politically meaningful, instead is kept at a distance and consigned to the mercy of sovereign power.

Concluding Remarks

Should not these insights awaken us in reconsidering the ontological framework we created as a philosophy of sport community? In order to comprehend the challenges modern sports are facing, it seems necessary to recognize sport as an excluded practice, desperately pretending to include all participants, but as such a unique exponent of bio-political power. With its own shielded regulations, its *Lex Sportiva*, its specific educational regime and its supposed ethical core, sport has turned into a distinctive 'state of exception', legitimized by the highest sovereign power; our Western constitutional state.¹³ Its rules are only valid to the extent that it places athletes and all other actors within this particular domain, this state of exception, outside regular law.

Considering modern sports as an exponent of bio-political discipline, implies that all actors in sport (un)willingly allow themselves to be dressed as 'obedient bodies': 'Being outside, and yet belonging: this is the topological structure of the state of exception, and only because the sovereign, who decides on the exception, is, in truth, logically defined in his being by the exception, can he too be defined by the oxymoron "ecstasy-belonging" ...' (Agamben 2005, 35). Indeed, a really controversial suggestion, turning *Homo Ludens* as an ideal into the most tragic *Homo Sacer* figure. And where do we, as a philosophy of sport community, come in? If we keep on validating the 'lusory' and innocent *Homo Ludens* as a morally superior ontological paradigm, we are only facilitating modern sports' very sacrifice. Of course, to all of us, this will be a most inconvenient truth.

Let me conclude by repeating my first question: 'Where are we now?'. It seems as if around modern sports—being the exception to the ruling political system—a particular diffuse border area has arisen, a 'grey zone' between the rule-based sporting practice and the regular legal system.¹⁴ If so, why did it come so far? How could all actors in this beautiful bodily practice be tempted to get excluded from society, in an implicit yet decisive way? As a teaser for a future article about these matters, let me suggest this happens because of the oxymoron 'ecstasy-belonging'; we are highly attracted and attained to the magnificent, seductive spectacle of modern sports. This demand being never really fulfilled, keeps modern sports going. At all costs. However, the isolated situation (exclusion) in which sporting bodies seem to flourish, are a threat to sport's

vitalizing powers. Only by restoring its sacral roots in modern times we may create a hopeful perspective, realizing a new de-sacrificed and profane 'form-of-sport'. This statement implies that we should fundamentally rethink our contribution as a philosophy of sport community, in order to build an ontology that will disable modern sports' in- and excluding dynamics.

Notes

1. References come from the original French publication, in which the passage is as follows: 'Pour l'analyse archéologique, les contradictions ne sont ni apparances à surmonter, ni principes secrets qu'il faudrait dégager. Ce sont des objets à décrire pour eux-mêmes, sans qu'on cherche de quel point de vue ils peuvent se dissiper, ou à quel niveau ils se radicalisent et d'effets deviennent causes.'
2. 'Apparatus', a concept launched by the later Agamben, refers to the intertwined systems, structures and knowledge in a specific social practice.
3. 'Archè', an ancient Greek concept straightly borrowed from Aristotle, literally means 'origin', but is used by Agamben in a much more complex way, as will be clear later on.
4. As such, philosophical archaeology strongly differs from the more common sociological description of the social conditions that led to modern sports, for instance the works of Allen Guttmann, Norbert Elias, Eric Dunning and Richard Giulianotti.
5. Deleuze even goes a full step further: 'It is of vital importance for a society to repress desire, and even to find something more efficient than repression, so that repression, hierarchy, exploitation, and servitude are themselves desired' (Deleuze and Guattari 1977, 116). Isn't it tragic to comprehend the demand for 'bread and games' as a clever cover-up for repression?
6. See for instance Emily Ryall's and Lukás Mares' recent article 'Playing sport playfully': on the playful attitude in sport (Mares and Ryall 2021).
7. Again, all references are made from the original text, for this purpose translated in English. In this case the original is in Dutch; most French philosophical sources I read in French.
8. For my doctoral research I analysed all kinds of sources, with an emphasis on Dutch handbooks and policy documents. Broadening this approach to *international* sources would be welcome.
9. In which I follow Agamben's ethical task, implied by carrying out philosophical archaeology. To decompose guilt as an instrument of power, we need to overcome 'ressentiment' (as in Nietzsche's work) and face shame: 'Beyond good and evil lies not the innocence of becoming but, rather, a shame that is not only without guilt but even without time' (Agamben, 1999, 103). We are all 'witnessing' modern sports' current situation, be it as participants, executives, spectators or scholars. Feeling ashamed about its distortions, would pave the way to a future form of sport ethics.
10. I lack space here to do full justice to this tradition in sport sociology. Their most cited references are included in the bibliography. My argument here is derived from the current works of Agamben, unpacking the *ontological* presuppositions of Foucault's thoughts on power and knowing.
11. In the English translation by Robert Hurley the passages defining bio-power can be found in Part V; 'Right of Death and Power over Life' (pp. 133–156).
12. Once again, Deleuze is intriguing in this regard. Applying his concept of the 'body without organs' would brutally redefine modern sports as part of economic production: 'The body without organs is non-productive; nonetheless it is produced, at a certain place and a certain time ...' (Deleuze And Guattari 1977, 8).
13. In a first attempt to apply Agamben's thoughts to the philosophy of sport, Lev Kreft showed the analogy between Agamben's concept of the state of exception and the far-reaching enforcement practice of anti-doping rules, but he doesn't extend these concepts, linking them to the process of biopolitical discipline, legitimizing and controlling sport with (our

conceptualizing of) modern sport as a social practice (Kreft 2009). The Semenya case would be a revealing second one.

14. The current debate about excluding transgender women from (a particular level of) competitive women's sport is an illustration of this growing diffuse area, in which sport's intrinsic values (fairness, equality, safety) appear to conflict with regular international law and human rights.

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