

STUDII ȘI CERCETĂRI

ALIENATION, MANIPULATION AND THE SELF OF THE ATHLETE *

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Abstract. Since there is some truth in the exaggerated representation of the top sportsman as a personality type only concerned with performance, too often self-alienated and manipulated by others, it is necessary to find possibilities for explanation, for critical thought in order to contribute to the emancipation of the athlete, to avoid senseless and unnecessary experiences of alienation and to minimize those possibilities of manipulation which are morally reprehensible.

Key words: alienation, manipulation, self-constitution, top athlete.

The new social criticism of sport did regard the competitive sportsman as an immature (*unmündig*¹) subject, or rather an object of manipulation which remains in a state of alienation and is kept there by ruling bodies. Relevant quotations for this are well known. It was claimed by sport students in Hamburg that “sport has taken over and supports the principle of effectiveness of the Capitalist Society and its ideology” and, beyond that, that “particularly uncritical individuals ... are attracted to intensive training and kept at it”: “there is no more any free decision. On the contrary, the competitive sportsman is the result of continuing corruption and manipulation”.

Is the only radical consequence of this very gloomy picture drastic manipulation by others and by oneself, performed in the interest of increased achievement only and under the quasi moral pressure of a public anxious to see medals and of the demanding clubs and supporting institutions? Is the top sportsman in fact sentenced to “alienating labour” in the sense of Marx? What do “alienation” and “manipulation” mean?

Discussion of Alienation

It is impossible here even to sketch out the history of the concept of “alienation”, “self-alienation” and even “self”; they have notoriously been open to different interpretations (cf. e.g. “alienation” in: Calvez 1964, Schacht 1970, Israel 1972). Historically, the

* First published as: *Philosophical Opening Speech at the Olympic Scientific Congress in Munich 1972*. Also in: Grupe, O. (ed.), *Sport in the Modern World. Chances and Problems*, Berlin/Heidelberg/New York, 1973, pp. 9-19.

¹ In German, the term *unmündig* usually means the legal state of a minor who is legally not able to manage his own affairs.

problem appears already at an early time. In addition to statements by St. Paul who complains that he does not do what he would like to do but does what he hates (Romans 7, 15) and theological speculations about the desertion from God by the “flesh”, one finds the subject of alienation already in Plato. Plato’s “soma = sema” (“the body is the grave of the soul”) already documented this problem of alienation in areas close to sport.

In Hegel “alienation” means change of the concept of self into objective forms (*Selbstentäußerung des Begriffs in objektivierte Formen*) and after that elevation of the concrete self into the general; this is the process which constitutes culture. Hegel’s theory of alienation, however, had only in the 1930s been rediscovered in the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts* of Marx. The problem of alienation has, in addition, been of particular significance for the last century because it opened up the possibility of linking Existentialist and Marxist starting points. Marcuse, Fromm, Horney, Heidegger, Tillich, Lefebvre and Sartre had used this expression in different ways. The expression “alienation” sparkles with many meanings, no uniform meaning exists. The expression does not describe a phenomenon which by its content is uniform but is used for a multiplicity of social phenomena and objects of philosophical interpretation. Examples of its use have at best one thing in common: that a desirable unity does not or does no longer exist so that something which should be uniform splits up into parts. The concept is not only used in an explanatory way but also polemically, critically, normatively. Concepts which have many meanings are well suited for ideological use.

Walter Kaufmann and Richard Schacht stated that a meaningful precise use of the concept “alienation” has to understand the concept as a definition of relationships. Somebody is alienated *from* somebody or *from* something. The content of the theories and concepts of alienation differ according to the categories of the related objects. Individuals, groups, classes and generations can be alienated. They can be alienated from other individuals, friends, groups of other people in general, from the surrounding society, from their culture and its basic values, from political systems, from their work and its products, from the social and ecological environment, from nature in its various meanings, from themselves (their self either in an empirical or personality constituting sense), from their being or ideal, from their past, from their bodies, etc.

Marx himself distinguishes five kinds of relationships of alienation affecting the working, i.e. producing man: 1) He is alienated from the *product*, from the work in so far as it appears to him as an alien object which has some hostile power over him, which he needs to satisfy his needs and into which he extrudes himself, his energy, strength and life. 2) The worker gets into an alienating relationship towards the work, towards the very *activity of producing*, as far as this appears to him as a “not belonging”, forced suffering, over which he has neither control nor freedom of decision and which gobbles up his energies and his personal life. 3) The conscious life activity of man, his supra-physical being (*Gattungswesen*) as well as his body simply become means of mere individual existence and are, therefore, alienated from him; his *spiritual being*, his human dignity is degraded to animal status. 4) In consequence there is an alienation of man from *other men*. He becomes dependent on the alien owner of the means of work and production, an owner who himself does not produce, but dominates product and production. Since any relationship of man to himself only realises itself in

his relationship to others, and since – according to Marx – this relationship documents itself in work, we are further faced with 5) *alienation from one's own self*.

An attempt to criticize Marx's theory of alienation cannot be made here. Remarkable and wrong is the fact that Marx *always* links alienation to an alien will, to an exploiter. Does sport activity in this sense constitute "alienated work," and is the athlete himself "alienated"?

An exact analysis shows:

1. The athlete does not experience his sporting performance as an alien object having power over him, but continues to identify himself with it, even if, as a record, it occasionally seems to become objectified and separated from him, and is seen as a mere number in the dimension of surpassing. However, alienation and objectification cannot be equated, as Lefebvre believes (this has been convincingly criticized by Calvez after Hyppolite).

2. Sporting activity is seldom an agonising burden for the sportsman but is nearly always invested with pleasurable feelings, positive affects and values; it is experienced as a personal act which has not been forced out of him.

3. Marx's assertion that the very "essence of humanity" is degraded to the status of animal function used to safeguard bare existence does not apply to sporting activity, for sport performance is being fostered as a cultural symbol which typically cannot be the only alternative of securing mere existence.

4. Marx's thesis of the "alienation of man from man", which results from the domination over the labourer by the owner of the production means, cannot *generally* be proved in sport. There are no means of producing sport results which would be analogous to factory machinery owned by an entrepreneur and on which the sportsman depends or which dominate him. Here we have no true existential dependence. The nonprofessional always has alternatives, even if he himself does not notice or recognize them. In addition it has been found in handling top athletes that excessive bureaucracy and authoritarian treatment are mistakes and reduce the result. It is not possible to administer and direct individuals as if they were lifeless material, when they are attempting to explore the limits of human ability with complete personal devotion.

5. Marx concludes the self-alienation of the workman from his alienation from his own work and life activity. Self-alienation, like alienation from activity and other forms, is also a *socio-psychological* concept. The self-alienated person, in his activity, becomes a burden to himself. This activity does not, as Marx says, correspond to his wishes, interests, human dignity or real being (*Gattungswesen*). The socio-psychological category of self-alienation cannot be applied here because the sportsman does not regard his sporting activity as a burden but, as a rule, considers it a freely chosen, self-accountable activity which has pleasurable colouring and can even be regarded as libidinal, and because he identifies himself to the highest degree with his sporting result and its preparation and execution, in accordance with his wishes and interests.

The following theses summarize the above.

Thesis 1. Following a detailed analysis² regarding Marx's thesis about alienated work and its fivefold aspects, sporting activity can be regarded neither as forced labour

² Cf. *Sportwissenschaft* 3 (1973), pp. 15–23.

nor as dehumanising routine labour, nor as “alienated labour” in the sense of Marx. While, without doubt, many traits exist which can phenomenologically be compared to work, the significant differences (like attitudes, valuation, devotion, absence of compulsion, less serious sanctions and less dependence on the power of others) should not be neglected. The *complete* classification of sporting activity as a kind of labour is as much motivated by ideology as was its interpretation as pure play.

Thesis 2. The preparation and achievement of sport performance is an activity invested with affective tones and values; such activity can cause pleasurable experiences; in the widest sense and can represent an area of possible personal self-expression and self-formation. As far as the pressure of public opinion does not affect the athlete too much, sporting activity can, in fact, be regarded as a model of “free self-activity”, as an activity carrying libido in the sense of Marx and Marcuse. Particularly the claim that the athlete is alienated from himself by sport cannot be upheld.

Permit me to add a further thesis which need not be further proved here regarding the question whether the social criticism of certain alienated professional activities can be applied to sport.

Thesis 3. The actual socio-philosophical criticism of achievement: the so-called achievement principle as it is used in the occupational sphere is said, on the one hand, not to be justly applicable, not to be the only criterion of occupational and social position classification and, on the other hand, is said to be enforced with too much perfection. This criticism cannot be applied to competitive sport as a whole, but only to certain tendencies toward the objectification of results and records which are imposed on sportsmen. Altogether, the partly justifiable criticism of the occupational achievement principle cannot, or can only in exceptional cases, be applied to sport. For the sporting result is a personal act attributable to a person; with it and with its value, the acting individual identifies himself. This activity, as a rule, is not forced out of the sportsman against his interests and abilities, as happens with routine occupational activity.

Discussion of Manipulation

Once the theses of alienation in sport have been disproved, the critics are only left with the retreat to a manipulation hypothesis. We have to deal with this briefly. In this context I want to spare you a longer exposition of the concept of “manipulation”³. Only a definition by Plack (1971) may be quoted: “Manipulation is the steering of individuals by means which they are not conscious of, for purposes which are not their own but which should appear to them as their own”. The following difficulties have to be pointed out: It is not known whether such steering applies only to deliberate guidance by a powerful will or also to guidance by introjected values; manipulation can hardly be separated from education; the difference between permissible and non-permissible manipulation depends on educational, value-influenced guiding ideas; without setting up such an ideal from outside, no goals can be attributed to a child as his own goals. It follows that manipulation is a normative (evaluating) concept of aspect character. The decision whether one deals with permissible or non-permissible manipulation can, therefore, not be made completely on the basis of empirical scientific

³ Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 26–28.

analyses but only by normative *philosophical*, even moral philosophical discussion which, however, can and should be rational.

Is the thesis of manipulation true for the competing sportsman? Is the athlete or at least the top athlete being manipulated?

In the new sports criticism at least half a dozen different meanings of the concept “manipulation” are being used, depending on the situation to which it applies. These meanings partly overlap and are often mixed up. In accordance with the interpretation, answers to the above question will differ. Manipulation of the athlete was seen:

1. in the attunement to work norms in training;
2. in uncritical adjustment to the ruling political and social system based on promises of success and dosed rewards;
3. in the authoritarianism of the “father figure” coach;
4. in the pressure exerted by the club on the athlete (training and competition duties);
5. in financial dependence on the supporting institution;
6. in the pressure of public opinion which imposes its expectation of success on the athlete or threatens the unsuccessful sportsman with pillorying by headlines and sporting reviews;
7. in early childhood education in which parents and teachers encourage achievement, resulting in value systems which are uncritically accepted;
8. in the absence of any self-formulated public presentation of the sport result by the athlete who is said to be stamped or “falsely (re)produced” or rendered “speechless” (*sprachlos verproduziert*) (Prokop 1971), because he is generally not sufficiently articulate to reflect critically on his sport activity in original personal form and to present his ideas to the public mass media, and thus to confirm and constitute his own self in social contact.

I should like to return to this last interpretation because it is new and has hardly been discussed. However, first I want to insist without more detailed evidence⁴ on the following thesis regarding the manipulation of the sportsman.

Thesis 4. The question whether the competitive sportsman is manipulated cannot be simply answered by “yes” or “no”. First of all we should establish which of the various meanings of the word “manipulation” is meant in the particular case in question. One cannot dispute the existence in top sport of certain tendencies to have a directing influence (sometimes by pressure and the threatening of sanctions through clubs, public opinion or individual officials). However, in social criticism the frequency of this tendency has been considerably overvalued. If manipulation means influence in early childhood, then it can for practical purposes not be separated from education, and everybody is manipulated. Using moral and social-philosophical criteria, one should distinguish justifiable from unjustifiable manipulation. From a moral philosophical viewpoint, every adult, as an individual, is responsible for his decisions in the present; he is *relatively* free and can make *conditionally* free decisions if there are any and if he sees any alternatives at all. The voluntariness of sport performance has its limited analytical value as a social-psychological category and as a

⁴ For this cf. again *Sportwissenschaft* 3 (1973), pp. 28–37.

category of experience even if this problem is more acute in very young sportsmen because they have not yet developed enough critical ability and power of observation to enable them to be fully responsible for their decisions (see below). A more thorough analysis shows, therefore, that the term “manipulation” according to most of its interpretations cannot typically be applied to the situation of athletes, although a partial justification of some criticism can be agreed to.

Now let us return to the latest type of criticism of manipulation which claims that the sportsman lacks every possibility of public self-presentation and, therefore, lacks self-constitution. Gebauer (1972), following the theory of Goffman (1959) regarding the self-presentation of the personality in the group by performances, recently tried to distinguish between the actual performance of the sportsman and his *presentation* performance. A performance is not appreciated as such, as a pure action, unless it corresponds to a certain cultural value pattern and a certain response. Nobody takes seriously world records in walking on one’s hands or running backwards. Therefore, the action performance can only be documented, made known and judged publicly through a certain agreed presentation performance.

According to Goffman, the self-image of the acting individual mirrors itself by necessity in the reactions of the social environment. It is not possible to develop a personal identity against one’s social surroundings and independent of them. Even protest groups need their sub-culture. The presentation performances are completed by symbols, by spoken or written words but also by other expressive actions like gestures, signs and demonstrative acting which is sometimes done in public. According to Goffman, the ability to be expressively articulate and other abilities to produce such presentation performances are the conditions for the successful formation of a stable self which can only express itself in the group by multiple contacts and modes of reaction. Gebauer believes that very young, uncritical or not very intelligent top sportsmen are neither adequately articulate nor possess skilled ability of self-presentation. They, therefore, cannot utilize their action performance for the construction of an individual self-image or personal identity through well prepared presentation. Their performance is too much of a pure action performance. The athlete, so to speak, slips into a shell of identity held ready for him by others. Under the mere “principle of surpassing others”, the multiple possibilities of self-expression have been reduced to the single “dimension of merely beating the record”, to the bare result. The possibilities of expression, the will and ability of the individual to express himself are therefore reduced to a minimum.

The question is whether Gebauer, together with Goffman, does not ascribe too much significance to the personal presentation performance, to the secondary transformation of the original multiplicity of action. Is it not for some sportsmen a presentation of their activity and, therefore, of their self, who can hardly be achieved in normal life, if they can slip into roles which are publicly valued very positively, even if others prepare the scene for their appearance? Certainly the sportsman is not trained to appear to be more than he is in order to satisfy the needs of the publicity society, rather the contrary is true. But does not the public at the outset offer the newly developing talented individual a very remarkable credit of goodwill if he achieves or attempts to achieve an impressive goal? Does not the top sportsman also gain a multiplicity of new

experiences in training, in competition, in travels which would be unattainable to him in monotonous everyday life? In addition, the social interaction of a sporting competition and the preparation for it should not be reduced to pure orientation toward results. This can only be assumed from the aspect of purely external consideration. The sportsman and particularly a member of a sport team does not live only in the one dimension of his desire for records. This has already been shown in the discussion on the alienation thesis.

Aside from this, it seems that Goffman and Gebauer have overestimated the significance of the presentation performance and the social reaction for the constitution of personal identity, of the self, though it must be admitted that the social cradling is important. It would be unrealistic to overlook it. To a considerable extent the self is partly formed and constructed by the attitude adopted by the individual toward himself. It was not by accident that Steinbach (1967, 1968) found that for the stabilisation of the self by competitive sport, the training of the individual – which often takes place alone and isolated from social reactions of the immediate environment – is at least as essential, if not more important, than the competition and the following ceremony in honour of the successful. Even defeats can help stabilize the self-confidence of an athlete if he has lost honourably against great, recognized opponents. This, however, is not to deny the fact that sport and sporting performance are embedded in society.

Since there tends to be some truth in the deliberately exaggerated delineation of the sportsman as a personality type only concerned with performance, it is necessary to find possibilities for explanation, for critical thought in order to contribute to the emancipation of the athlete, to avoid senseless and unnecessary experiences of alienation and to minimize those possibilities of manipulation which are morally irresponsible. It is particularly desirable that such initiative should be taken by the organizations and the public. The image of the uncritical “dumb” athlete who is fanatically concerned with his performance only is, in fact, a somewhat frightening picture. He should be given a chance to develop his personality.

Are there no chances of emancipation which can be linked or joined to sporting activity? Competitive sport could prepare a field for this purpose in accordance with Goffman’s ideas: not only for the realisation of new types of actions but also for the demonstrative articulation of such activities as presentation performances, or for the transformation of “action material” into presentation performances which meet with an exceptional, valued social response. Competitive sport offers opportunities, starting points, stimuli and outlines of suitable areas and action patterns as the basis for the playful initiation and differentiated development of presentation performances. Accomplishment in sport is a personal act which is done and experienced as something performed by the self; therefore, it has a certain formative value for the constitution and development of the personality, for the self, and for the image seen by society and by the individual. The person of the sportsman cannot be sharply separated from the personality of the sportsman. The self constitutes and mirrors itself in evaluated and interpreted actions as well as in social reactions. The sketch of such a model of self-constitution is here not a merely descriptive theory but is joined to a normative appeal in the sense of a guiding image. In this case, the ideotypical concept of an adult, enlightened athlete.

Since sportsmen up to now do not possess the ability for this transformation to an adequate degree, it is necessary to create possibilities for the athletes, to facilitate public performances that are essential for self-constitution, to help athletes reflect on these, work through in a rational, evaluating manner, and to enable them to learn how to become more articulate, how to argue and how to appear in public. Without underestimating the importance of the sport competition and the public appearance before a critical public, such a programme would furthermore be essential and necessary as part of the guiding image to enlighten and educate athletes toward critical thinking, participation in discussions, and independent judgement. Then some of the mentioned possibilities of manipulation would be reduced and deprived of their efficacy, even if living together with other top sportsmen should no longer follow the standard pattern set by the authoritative coaches as dominating figures of the superego vis-à-vis humble obedience.

Such a programme of enlightenment for athletes is not all that utopian. "Democratic training" has been practised and realized in some areas, even in team sport, e.g. with the rowers of Karl Adam in Ratzeburg, for a decade and a half; this applies to the question of training methods, training quantities, the strategic structure of racing reports, etc. All these questions were subjected to rational discussion. The identification of the individual with his performance which he experiences at a higher degree than his own is in such a case higher than when enforced from outside or when mere orders are carried out. A performance in the arrangement and formation of which the sportsman has participated is, as a rule, considerably superior to one that has only been ordered, even if pure performance efficiency should, from the pedagogical and moral points of view, not be regarded as the main goal. Variation and change, particularly through critical discussions, are possible and desirable in training. It is not correct, as social criticism of sport all too simply implies, that rationalization and compulsive order, aspiration for achievement and authoritarianism are always linked. In this way training is not a mere repressive, compelling system, nor a programme to enslave the individual.

If many sportsmen, particularly the younger ones, still lack the ability to look critically at the role and consequences of their sport activity, as well as the linguistic ability and self-confidence necessary to "present" their success in public, an enlightening education fostering critical thinking should be the guiding principle to which coaches, guides and mentors (all of whom have a particularly high pedagogic responsibility in this respect) ought to lead the young athlete, at least by attempting a step-by-step approach. Ideally the criterion should always be the critical, personal, responsible and relatively free decision of the active individual. One should not force an athlete by exaggerated expectation of medals into a slavery of competitive sport. In fact, it cannot be done.

Statements such as this one by a young female gymnast (who knows how typical her attitude is?) should cause the leading powers of competitive sport to wonder whether they have not neglected some things in this respect: "Sometimes I don't want anymore... I then want to throw everything away and go somewhere to a dance. But then one thinks it over again. I have sacrificed so many years for competitive sport that I cannot give up everything at one fell swoop. I have decided in favour of competitive sport and must live as I am supposed to do". This statement and the public comment of a German champion show the partial, but only partial, justification of the social criticism in regard to some tendencies to manipulate top sport. "It does not matter to

me whether I am manipulated or not. The only thing of importance to me is whether I stand on the top of the steps". In this context, we must not forget the possibilities of voluntarily chosen self-enrichment and positively affect-coloured, partially playful self-fulfilment as well as the social exercise and opportunity for experience which sport, and particularly competitive sport, holds for the athlete.

I want to summarize what I have just said.

Thesis 5. Too little care has been given to training the intellectual and critical ability of the athlete to reflect on the role and significance of his successes. At the same time emancipatory chances of self-fulfilment and self-reflection can be noticed also in sport. Sport performances cannot automatically guarantee the emancipation of the athlete; but even from the point of view of a social-philosophical interaction theory of the self-constitution and self-expression (Goffman) they offer *one*, though not the only field of articulation for primary, spontaneous performances in life. This field opens up possibilities for the presentation of the self in the social environment and for active self-stabilization by action. In addition, competitive sport solves also social problems by offering a "myth" of life-enjoying activity which acts as a substitute for adventure and is a symbolic representation of archetypal battles of roles; this applies to active as well as passive individuals (cf. Lenk 1972).

From the above discussion, summarized in the form of theses, we can conclude the following postulates to be put into practice (they are listed here as three further theses).

Thesis 6. The following programme of intellectual teaching of athletes should as soon as possible be initiated in order to avoid possible dangers of manipulation: Coaches and supervisors should be convinced of the value of the guiding idea that sportsmen should reflect critically on their training, should themselves influence it as far as possible and should be able to put their thoughts into words. These are important tasks of protection and supervision for mentors, particularly when dealing with very young top sportsmen. The adult critical and enlightened athlete should be the goal which, however, can be approached step by step only and certainly only incompletely. Improvement programmes should be orientated toward the sportsman as an adult, responsible man and not as an individual who produces records under pressure.

Thesis 7. The public should again and again be informed about this ideal picture of the responsible athlete and about this programme of enlightenment by clubs and sport journals. It should learn – it should be told repeatedly – that it is not morally entitled to complain about insufficient performance and to sharply criticize the athletes. It rather has to perform a sort of protecting function, if it looks on young, unfinished human beings as its representatives (also e.g. medical protection against high performances desired by the athletes and their coaches who may be detrimental to their health). The public must learn that the public denunciation of unsuccessful athletes and their knowledge that such a reaction may be possible will certainly not increase their performances.

Thesis 8. The philosophical (in particular the socio-philosophical) analysis and discussion of performance behaviour, especially in sport, should be extended and strongly promoted, to overcome the widespread lack of orientation concerning social,

philosophical and intellectual problems of sports, particularly in connection with the subjects of alienation and self-alienation.

Only after consideration of these and other similar postulates will it be possible, in a manner compatible with human dignity, to utilize the chances of “emancipatory” personality formation inherent in performance and aspiration for achievement in sport, even though these chances have no automatic effect but must be “touched off” by pedagogical measures. Top athletes are also human beings, not “mechanical producers of medals”, not high performance muscle machines, not useful performance-idiots or “luxuriated performance animals”. Theoretically, almost every sports organizer and every coach understands this. But in the individual case more selective non-bureaucratic and human action should be taken. And one should not forget that even fun, humour and play also have their place in modern sports – even in today’s high level and top performance sports.

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