

From dawn to dust: the development of classical sports in Greece- an example

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*'The most important thing in the Olympic Games
 is not the victory but the participation.
 The most important thing in life
 is not to succeed but to fight well'.*

Pierre de Coubertin (Ecker, Wild 1966)

Abstract

The present study aims at recording assumptions through observation and bibliographical research, regarding the development of classical sports in Greece. Using the example of the National Gymnastic Association of Greece (N.G.A), it is claimed that the course from the foundation of the association until the contemporary crisis is directly related to the socio-economic developments of upper middle class.

Introduction

The present study aims at recording assumptions through observation and bibliographical research, regarding the development of classical sports in Greece. Using the example of the National Gymnastic Association of Greece (N.G.A), it is claimed that the course from the foundation of the association until the contemporary crisis is directly related to the socio-economic developments of bourgeoisie. It is argued that the athletic phenomenon cannot be separately considered from the material relations of the society. The course of the specific athletic association, although it expressed the spirit and served the purposes of the bourgeoisie, was neither always totally connected with the power of the state, nor was it smoothly integrated into social developments. Much more its 'products' - the athletes - were not always the result of a normal process of socialization and the absolute agents of a bourgeois morality, no matter how much the majority expressed that spirit. This may be due to the fact that although sports are not independent from the material base of society, for the athletes themselves they are a liberating force, a force of creation of a sense (or illusion?) (Panoussis 1991) of equality and prevalence of the best, on the basis of psychological reservations and desires and not the socio-economic integration.

This social structure, however, is a product of specific social developments and cannot be recorded within the framework of a divided system of evaluation, as a result of certain inviolable rules. The dynamics of the athletic phenomenon, which are recorded at the level of social relations and estimations as well as the level of dialectical relations with the social developments, should be the most basic working hypothesis, regarding approaches to the development of classical sports.

During the last two decades, the sociology of sport is rapidly developing in Greece in contrast to the lack of sociological studies on sports until the end of 70's. It has revolved around macro-sociological approaches as well as descriptive narrations or analyses of the 'impact of sports on the socialization as well as the harmonic physical and mental development of young people' (Myrizakis 1997). Particularly it is related to deviations from this procedure (hooliganism, violence), aiming to establish a research policy of sports (Milios 1980).

On the one hand, sports and consequently athletes are ontologically presented as autonomous human beings, agents of internal and external 'different essence' (Stamiris n/d) and on the other hand they seem to be products of social efforts related to the character of

the modern capitalist society, in total harmony with the modern state that is the political expression of this character. This correlation can be proved by the constitutional entrenchment which is a strong argument within the Modern Greek context. Indeed, in article 16 - par.9 of the Constitution of 1975 it is clearly stated that 'sports are under the protection and the supreme supervision of state', which sponsors and controls all kinds of unions and athletic associations.

At the same time, in the context of ideology, the athlete (mainly from the category of track and field sports) is being presented as the pure product and thus the main agent of a national - state athletic policy, which he/she represents in international events by which he is financially supported. Besides, most of the athletes of this category who won European or other international distinctions have become in fact public servants (usually of the security forces and the army).

However, by presenting only this aspect of sports, we restrict the field of sociological analysis to a narrow frame, without leaving any room for a systematic analysis of the forms of development of classical sports in Greece. It would be a mistake to claim that this development stemmed from a well-organized central planning by the state. The main actors of this development were the athletic associations themselves. Therefore sport studies should focus on the organization and operation of such associations. The present study aims at recording research hypotheses in order to contribute towards a wider range research with the purpose of filling the gap that exists in the Greek literature.

The National Gymnastic Association (NGA) was chosen as a study-case due to the three following reasons: firstly because of the fact that it is the association that 'offered' the first, from a chronological point of view, Olympic winner in 1896. Moreover it still continues to 'produce' athletes with international distinctions (such as Katerina Thanou, silver medal in the Olympic Games of Sidney 2000). Secondly, because it is one of the associations that promote classical sports and not other kinds of sports such as football or basketball. Thirdly, because NGA has an interesting history concerning relations with the Greek State and this can be highlighted by the fact that the present Greek President was the President of NGA's Board of Executives for several years until his election

Theoretical approaches- The example of NGA, the first years.

The research approach of a social fact, such as the development of classical sports by an athletic association, should examine the conscious effort and practice of the latter in accordance with the historical socio-economic conditions of which it is a product. The structure of the present paper is mainly based on the work of Antonio Gramsci about bourgeois ideology as material force in the production and reproduction of social settings. That is, as a type of hegemony that stems from intellectual, moral and political power, which is not monolithic but mutant. This hegemony is empowered and reproduced by state (Gramsci 1971:224; Hargreaves 1986; Jones 1986).

Even though sport is 'the only global language besides science' (Elias, Dunning 1986:23), its social evaluation that varies from its examination as a liberating force to its recording as a mechanism of oppression and creation, must be pervaded from what Elias calls 'diversion, which is made possible by keeping distances' (Elias, Dunning 1986:24). That is, distancing from evaluative statements by revealing social significance of sports. Such an approach involves the examination of the association's structure and its transformation through the years. Furthermore, it includes the consideration of its articulation with the wider context in which it belongs to in relation to socializing processes of making of athletic 'products'. Ever since the establishment of the Modern Greek state, sports were under the protection of the state. According to the Royal Order of 6/2/1834 and 31/12/1836 physical exercise is introduced in primary and high schools 'twice a week'. However, the official introduction of sports in school took place after the 'Zapia Olympiads in Athens, in 1859, 1870, 1875 and 1889 (Yiannakis 1993). In 1859 Minas Minoidis translates the ancient text of Filostratos (first half of the 3rd century A.C.) to French and writes (in the epilogue of the translation) about the revival of the Olympic Games while in 1866, the 'Greek Athletic Association of Cyprus' is founded and becomes the first athletic association.

All these developments in the social field, which led to the 'discovery' and consolidation of sports, started from a specific social group, the 'mystes' (experts who had gained deep knowledge of something and tried to disseminate this knowledge). 'Mystes' were trainers, athletes and people with administrative duties (they often combined all these skills), who had a high socio-economic background and operated as 'crusaders of morality' (Chrysafis 1928).

The foundation of Pan-Hellenic Gymnastic Association (PGA) in 1891, which was the biggest athletic association at the time, was the outcome of the efforts of the most prominent 'mysti' of the time I. Fokianos. This association was in fact consisted of a group of rich people focusing in the context of 'consumption for exhibitionism, while in leisure' (Veblen 1982). With King George II being the head of the association, young boys from private high schools and other 'prominent' men spent a great amount of money for the 'revival' of the Olympic games, during the first three years of the establishment of PGA. In 1893, however, a group of founders of the Pan-Hellenic Gymnastic Association disagreed with Fokianos and as a result proceeded to the foundation of the NGA. The main cause of the disagreement was the building or not of a gymnasium, and those who left PGA claimed this was more important issue than the organization of games.

The idea about the revival of the Olympic Games and the continuation of the ancient Greek spirit, is dominant for the development of classical sports in Greece during the last years of the 19th century. What's more it still finds supporters even today. However, this can be considered an ideological myth cultivated in order to strengthen the attractiveness and prestige of sports. A closer look suggests that there are many differences in style, ethics and purpose between the Olympic and the other Games of Greek antiquity and the modern ones (Slowikowski 1991).

What played a crucial role in the development of classical sports was the establishment of associations that functioned as elitist unions, agents and representatives of a class, that Veblen named leisure class. These associations proceeded to the conversion of recreational games into sports, by using a model stemming from the emerging bourgeoisie. The structure and the operation of the associations expressed accurately this spirit.

Specifically, the founders and the members of the association were members of the Athenian bourgeoisie. Prints of the association that mention the names of the members do confirm this claim (NGA 1991) St. Fragiadis (president), A. Zinis, Ks. Sochos (lawyer), supervisor of the association's bodies Kasdonis (publisher), D. Kabouroglou (writer), P. Stefanovic (benefactor), St. Vouros (Dr. of Jurisprudence), Tr. Triantafyllopoulos (adjutant-steward of exercises) and others.

Moreover, the primary need was to build a gymnasium, so as to control the 'production' of new athletes, for whom 'the sport team constitutes a starting point and an extension to bourgeois and professional education' (Sakellariou 1986:177). This point is of crucial significance because it indicates a direct control over the general, cultural, political and moral education of young athletes. It points to a supplementary socialization, along with school and family. The NGA was the first association to organize sporting events for children and teenagers in 1898. In order for its members to achieve this goal, they introduced regulations according to which all members of the association were called to organize excursions together, so as to strengthen the social ties (NGA 1991). According to official data in periods of crisis between the N.G.A. and SEGAS (the Federation of Greek Athletic Associations), its athletes did not leave the association but rather preferred not to take part in sporting events (ibid: 19)¹.

Nevertheless, the spirit of the bourgeoisie could not only be served through excursions and control over the athletic 'production'. What was before a closed, elitist association should open up to the wide public, either by offering the opportunity for physical training (for rich non-members), or by organizing sporting day-events, which would attract audiences and would create 'markets' in the entire Greek region. NGA was one of the first to foresee the possibility of physical training for non-members. Those were the 'partners' who should, of course, keep to the letter of the regulations, regarding the operation of the association. In addition, NGA was the first to organize athletic competitions away from Athens, the so-called 'Tinias' on the

15th August 1895 in Tinos Island. Such events had Pan-Hellenic appeal and associations even from Ionia Smyrni (which is now part of Turkey) participated. Finally, NGA was the first association which allowed women to take part in the Board of Directors since 1900.

The function of a bourgeois formation such as NGA was not always totally compatible with the development of the state what's more with the authoritarian Royal power. Thus, in 1896, a little while before the Olympic Games, K. Manos, who was one of the four secretaries of the Committee of Olympic Games, having strong support from the circles of King's court, initially attempted to exclude all the associations from the Olympic Games. When he realized that it was not feasible to do so he founded a closed elitist association from which he tried to exclude all the independent athletes. In 1904 Prince Nikolaos, honorary president of the association, retired because the association was engaged in 'improprieties' (NGA 1991:69).

The result of this athletic production was the participation of N.G.A. in the Olympic Games of 1896, 1900, 1904, 1908 and in the mid-Olympics in 1904 at the association's expense. In addition, the association organized athletic competitions in cooperation with associations of the enslaved areas (Panionios-Smyrni, Thessaloniki).

The distinctive characteristic of N.G.A. was the 'production' of bourgeois individuals-athletes (Petralias, Filippas, Leopoulos, Lyberopoulos, members of Parliament, Kasimatis high-school teacher, Th. Michalopoulos inspector of primary schools, Skaltsogiannis jurist, Theodoropoulos teacher, Papasideris jurist, etc-NGA, 1991:33). The development of classical sports did not aim at creating professional athletes but at their socialization according to the bourgeois models. As I. Chrisafis, stadium manager - trainer at that time of the N.G.A., so vividly writes, *'I wish Greece does not have Olympic winners in any of the Olympic Games as long as all the millions of Greeks, free and enslaved, flow into gymnasiums to exercise and not only to watch the champions and to get enthusiastic about foreign triumphs, while they themselves do not exercise at all. In our country until its National restoration is completed and afterwards as well, great masses of ordinary people, healthy, disciplined, strong and with good morale, are needed for the realization of Nation's ambitions and the opening of new paths of civilization, not a few sport celebrities, who offer every four years an ephemeral glory, which cannot equal the colossal results of the general physical training of all citizens without exception* (Chrisafis 1928:48).

The 20th century: One of the same

The birth of classical sports in Greece at the end of the 19th century, through the establishment of private athletic associations, was a social activity developed in the super-structure of the society, in direct relation, however, with its economic basis (emergence of the bourgeois development). The creation of these bourgeois formations of the private athletic associations, such as the N.G.A., proves that sports have no autonomous history but express the dominant material relations. Therefore, it is fair to say that the development of these material relations causes analogous developments in the field of sports. This became obvious from the first years of the development of classical sports in Greece, when the changes in the use of time and space as a medium kept pace with the need to list the records (national or world records) in sports, in seconds or centimeters, in comparison with the initial model (which soon disappeared), that is, the seeking of victory in competitions as the only concern of the athletes.

Nevertheless, the industrialization and the political domination of the bourgeoisie resulted in what Huizinga called 'fatal turn of sports towards an exaggerated seriousness' (Huizinga 1949:223). Sports do not aim any more at expressing a dynamic stream of principles and values of the bourgeoisie, which seeks domination; they are not recreational activities and processes of socialization any more but they contribute to the preservation of status quo and try to establish the domination of the governing bourgeoisie. That doesn't mean that forms of classical sports, even within associations, which have as a sole purpose 'the cultivation and development of all human dimensions, such as the physical, the mental, the emotional and the moral' ceased to exist (Zervos 1988:118). Nevertheless, they are now commercial classical sports 'an important factor of the economy, so that the athlete, the businessmen, the state and many other people, who are part of the athletic network, gain profits' (Lytras

1983:118). Consequently, sports appear in various forms (mass, competitive, championship, professional) and their demands, regarding knowledge, abilities and skills, are different (Avgerinos 1987:44).

In Greece, embourgeoisement was combined with a model of state control and support. Sports were nationalized and in spite of the fact that the associations retained their autonomy, the financial support coming from the state was the main if not the only prop for their survival.

Now ex-athletes, who do not necessarily belong to the upper class, become members of the associations, even though they are not likely to become members of the Board of Directors. At the same time, however, the increasing intervention of the state in sports goes hand in hand with the general athletic mobilization of the nation, in order to meet the international athletic competition (Stamiris: 320).

At the same time classical sports in Greece continue to develop through athletic associations and the intervention of the state takes the form of funding and initiatives for the training of the champions, who have distinguished themselves in the process of 'production' and have been incorporated into an undeveloped central planning. Meanwhile, N.G.A. continues to be one of those who dominate the athletic production, as it appears in the results of the Pan-Hellenic championships. The operation of athletic associations, such as N.G.A., serves the purposes of the state since it fills two gaps: firstly the non-existing infrastructure (at least till 1982) for mass sports and secondly the inability of the state to control the athletic production during the pre-championship stage as well as the absence of private capital.

This way, the bourgeois formations at the end of the 19th century are maintained until the end of the next century and they evolve into associations subsidized by the state. Moreover, they continue to be indifferent towards their operation as private enterprises, by manifesting their indifference to infuse the spirit of professionalism into their athletes. This logic, which is not compatible with the aims of the evolved bourgeoisie into a group of citizens-capitalists, is in fact the result of the peculiar, supported by the state industrialization and urbanization of the Greek society. At the same time, the operation of these associations served purposes incorporated into the ideological infrastructure of society's material relations. The opportunity for physical training to a population with inadequate chances of physical exercises, the cultivation of self-control with suppression of pathological intense feelings, the cultivation of counter-measures against tensions and stress, aims that ease the tensions, preserve the current status quo, and even cultivate the spirit and the character of a cultivated, civilized (not spontaneous) and successful athlete-human being, who is normally integrated into urban society.

A research that was carried out during 1975, mentions that in the total number of women athletes of track and field sports at the time, 95% were attending or had attended high school and none of them was country side resident (Angoulatos 1975:27). An even more significant conclusion, however, is that in Greece, the athletic super-specialization and the maximization of technical efficiency do not play any major role as far as the athletes are concerned. In the same research of H. Angoulatos it is mentioned that the average age of women athletes was the age of 18 years old, and the average frequency of training was 4 times per week and 2 hours per day. In addition all athletic trainers followed this profession as a hobby and they earned their living from other sources. Besides, an athlete is rarely specialized in a sport. On the contrary he/she has been trained for a category of sport activities (e.g. throws). Following these facts it is fair to say that relevant 'professional' mentality was unlikely to be established.

A new, uncertain era

Nevertheless, during the 90's the operation of athletic associations in Greece slowly changes, along with the behavior of Greek champions, after the victory of Patoulidou in the Olympic Games of 1992 in Barcelona (100 m. hurdles-women) but mainly after the Olympics in Atlanta (1996). Two events set the seal on the dawn of a new era, regarding classical sports. The preparations for the Olympic Games of 2004 (track and field sports are not only 'king' of the Olympics but also the sport that holds the highest viewing rates and consequently the sport

that holds the highest advertising rates) and the new economic policy, whose main characteristic is the reduction of state intervention in society and as a result in sports.

Thus the dominant until then, tendency in the field of sports gave its place to that of the so called "professionalism" through the gradual but probably unavoidable distortion of attitudes, values and structures of "amateurism" and their replacement by attitudes, values and structures, which are called professional. The 'game' of the beginning of the century and the amateurism that characterized sports in the mid 20th century, having as prime target the process of socialization, are transformed into a kind of employment, which aims at the production of champions. Whereas sports are initially linked with the reinforcement - in the sphere of leisure - of a morality of hard work, performance and loyalty to the team which are vital for the orderly function of an advanced industrial society, later on the athletic alienation appears with the competition and the transformation of sports into a product for consumption. The athlete becomes prisoner of his own activity, at the same time that the athletic prattle (discussions about the athletic phenomenon or even discussions on discussions about the athletic phenomenon) becomes the glory of extravagance and therefore the ultimate point of consumption. Thus a new industry is created; that of sports whose laborers are the athletes, the coaches, people from administration, the managers, the sportswriters and the spectators. In the context of this process the body becomes an object and a source of exploitation. It is a technological object but it is never subject to pleasure or real freedom.

The development of sports industry is responsible for the great changes in the structure and the operation of some associations in Greece during the last years of the millennium. Apart from the economical reasons, there are also non-financial motivations behind some businessmen' sponsorship to classical sports in Greece. On the one hand, it is the prestige of contribution to the society and the social recognition that such an activity carries; on the other hand the financial problems of the associations made possible the intermeddling of businessmen with classical sports (Hargreaves 1986:115). The result of this process is that the P.G.A. came into possession of Minos Kyriakou (owner of Antenna TV one of the biggest private TV channels), Olympiakos is funded by Sokrates Kokkalis (important businessman in the field of telecommunications) and private colleges such as 'XINI' and 'DOUKA' establish their own sports teams - associations.

The reinforcement of the specific athletic associations was initiated by the method of athletes' transfer. The participation and the victory in Pan-Hellenic championships are of great significance because they determine the amount of the state subsidy, while the winning association has the opportunity to participate in Pan-European championship of associations. The creation, however, of a strong team, consisting of prepared athletes, leads to the weakening of the rest of the associations.

The second step for the reinforcement of these associations is the establishment of international meetings of classical sports with high viewing rates; meetings which, nevertheless, contradict to the purposes of the meetings that are organized by the state. At international level, the private meetings are those which prevail over national championships, even if the first private meeting in Greece, organized by the P. G. A. took place as recent as 1998 in the Olympic stadium (Athens).

The control of the 'production' according to similar sports systems which operate on the basis of a private enterprise at international level is the final step of the reinforcement. In the context of such a process athletes should adjust to the forms of work that the athletic activities and the rules of competition impose on them. This context is characterized by fixed rules of work and a strict, general discipline, which represents a complex system of dynamically connected relations and 'finds expression mainly in making the biological environment more complicated and in regulating the adjusting changes of the body, based on the each time determined conditions of training.... in fact we enter into the area of the science of cybernetics...which can be defined by the relation of the general to the specific, that is how the general laws of management manifest themselves in the specific case of the management - perfection of the structure and the functions of the human body' (Dinev 1993:10).

The specific athletic system involves the control of performances and their objectification as well as the power of the technique, which concerns the imparting, implantation and perfection of effective physical techniques through help of scientifically structured nutrition (Dimov 1989). In fact, it is a totalitarian system, in which no risks are taken, a framework that mobilizes everybody, to the extent that it defines with accuracy the role, the function through the division of athletic labor. A system that consists of mechanisms of athletic oppression, as it is possible through the internalization of a morality, an athletic superego for the control of athletic power. This third stage, stemming from the other two, is the future of the development of the largest athletic associations of classical sports in Greece. Until now, similar steps have been taken only at individual level by champions and their coaches, under the economic auspices of sponsors who finance the preparation of athletes.

The N.G.A. does not participate but objects to these procedures. It is worth noticing that in a resolution of the Board of Directors of the association, these actions, that give classical sports a professional character, are condemned. However, the oligopoly of private enterprises - athletic associations tend to become the main trend in the first years of the century and the economic survival of the N.G.A. is in question. As far as victories are concerned, a sharp decline has already been noticed in N.G.A. during the last years, which resulted in the loss of its position among the most significant (regarding victories) of the country's associations in Pan-Hellenic championships. For example its most important athlete - K. Thanou – has been transferred to Olympiakos. This doesn't mean, of course, that the athletic 'production' will stop, since during the first years of an athlete of field and track sports the most important criterion is the talent and not the professionalism at training. The future of this association is nevertheless uncertain, as the expenses will increase and the income from state subsidies will decrease. As a general rule, the oligopoly causes economic suffocation to small enterprises, while profit remains the prime concern. The association's future will be similar to that of one of its athletes, George, who started as a great talent in the semi-endurance races, after three years, however, he was forced to give up (at the age of 18), because the involvement in championship entails great economic cost and the above mentioned athlete, as an offspring of a working-class family, had to enter into the process of production.

Endnotes

¹ A piece from the journal 'Bicycling and Athletic Review of the East' in May 1900 is illustrating this above mentioned policy: 'Last Sunday morning the National Gymnastic Association went on excursion to Penteli Mountain. Morning to evening Penteli echoed with musical harmonies, songs and Greek dances. A group of stockbrokers was also at Penteli who had lunch around noon. Afterwards, the Council of NGA paid them official visit and the President Mr. Fragiadis addressed them. On behalf of the Stock Market, the banker Mr. Aravantinos exalted the importance of gymnastics as National concern, and the importance of the economic activities of the Stock Market in relation to and for the benefit of the Nation. On behalf of the Association, Mr. M. Stellakis, Member of Parliament, answered by thanking them.'

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