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From Hellenism to Hitlerism: The Use of Sport as an Ethnic and Cultural Identifier

From antiquity onwards, sports and competitive athletic events have been used as an area to implement othering strategies. As Professor Donald Kyle plainly put, “From Homer onwards, Greek authors used sport to differentiate peoples culturally or morally.”¹ Othering is the attempt to differentiate a societal group by some determining factor. Evidence of athletics being used as an othering medium, is prevalent throughout ancient Greece, ancient Rome, Fascist Italy, Nazi Germany, and early 20th century Britain. Writings from antiquity, would later affect other sporting arenas throughout history. Sports and athletic competition have also been used as ethnic and cultural identifiers. The significant impact sports can have on a society and its populace, highlights the importance of studying it.

Athletic events, and the Olympics in particular, were an area in which the Greeks could further establish their “Greekness”. They also took it as an excuse to exclude those they deemed not Greek. One of the most important texts in Greek antiquity, Herodotus’ *Histories*, spends ample amount of time describing the perceived cultural antithesis between Greeks and barbarians. Though not entirely dedicated to it, the *Histories*, does reference sport as a marker of Hellenic ethnic identity in contrast to their Eastern counterpart’s mores.² As can be expected, all Greeks were admitted to the games equally, and conversely all non-Greeks were excluded just as equally as Greeks were included. One of the most famous examples of this exclusivism dictated by Herodotus, is when Alexander I of Macedon (Before he was named King), wished to compete

¹ Donald Kyle, “Panhellenism and Particularism: Herodotus on Sport, Greekness, and War,” in *Sport in the Cultures of the Ancient World: New Perspectives*, ed. Zinon Papakonstantinou (New York: Routledge, 2010), 38.

² Zinon Papakonstantinou, *Sport in the Cultures of the Ancient World: New Perspectives* (New York: Routledge, 2010), xviii.

in the Olympics of either 480 or 476 B.C.E. King Alexander came down from amongst the crowd at Olympia and tried to run in the *stadion* race. His Greek competitors who were scheduled to run alongside him tried to bar him from the games, on the grounds that he was not a Greek, and thus should not be allowed to compete. Alexander's competitors proceeded to exclaim to the judging body, known as the *Hellandikai*, that barbarians are not allowed to participate in the games, and that they are exclusively for Greeks. Alexander in response to this claim, went on to demonstrate that through his ancestry, he was in fact an Argive. Through this demonstration, the *Hellandikai* allowed him to compete, thus making him a Greek.³

This idea of exclusivism shown in Herodotus' *Histories*, does not only focus on the banning of non-Greek athletes from competing, but also highlights the lack of input non-Greeks had on the establishment of the games. The story of the Elean embassy to Egypt in 590, accents this idea that not only were non-Greeks excluded from the actual competition, but that their intellectual input on the games was equally disregarded. The Eleans were the people that made up the *Hellandikai*, and they sent an embassy to the court of the Egyptian King Psammiss.⁴ The Eleans boasted to the Egyptians about the excellence of their Olympic Games, and that they had set up the fairest and most just games in all of mankind. They claimed that not even the Egyptians who they deemed to be the 'wisest' of men, could not improve upon their games. The Egyptians, upon learning that Elean athletes competed in the games, suggested the *Hellandikai*

³ Herodotus, "Histories, 5.22.1-2," in *Greek Athletics and the Olympics*, ed. Alan Beale, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 52.

⁴ Herodotus, "Histories, 2.160," in *Greek Athletics and the Olympics*, ed. Alan Beale, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 46.

could possess some biases. But, the story ends abruptly because the, “rejection of these non-Greeks” advice was a given.⁵

The Olympics also played an integral role in the affirming of Greek identity. The Games presented an important opportunity for kings and rulers on the fringes of the Greek world to solidify their spot amongst the Greek ranks. This is shown in the above mentioned example of Alexander of Macedon trying to compete in the Olympics. After Alexander was named King of Macedon, he used the story of his acceptance into the Olympics, and thus acceptance of him as a Greek, as propaganda to reinforce his reign.⁶ But, no one more so tried to act upon the opportunity that sport gives, than Hieron I of Syracuse. “Olympics were such a Greek thing, such a badge of Greek identity, only Greeks were allowed to compete, and Hieron cared an awful lot about being Greek.” As the quote shows, Hieron placed the utmost importance on being Greek and competing in the Olympics. Since Hieron’s kingdom in Sicily was made up of a lot of non-Greeks like the Phoenicians, and Libyans, he spent an ample amount of money on trainers and charioteers to compete for him in the Olympics. Hieron further tried to amplify his Greek identity by dedicating a bronze helmet, celebrating his victory over the Etruscans, at Olympia. Sport and athletic competition not only provided a place to exclude non-Greeks, but it also provided an arena for those on the outlying fringes of Greek society to solidify their position as a Hellenic.

Proper behavior and the following of customs at the Olympics and other athletic events further cemented one’s Greekness. Thucydides recounts in his, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, the modern practice of participating in the Olympics completely naked. Thucydides claims

⁵ Donald Kyle, “Panhellenism and Particularism: Herodotus on Sport, Greekness, and War,” in *Sport in the Cultures of the Ancient World: New Perspectives*, ed. Zinon Papakonstantinou, (New York: Routledge, 2010), 38.

⁶ Donald Kyle, “Panhellenism and Particularism: Herodotus on Sport, Greekness, and War,” in *Sport in the Cultures of the Ancient World: New Perspectives*, ed. Zinon Papakonstantinou, (New York: Routledge, 2010), 39.

that today's barbarians of Asia Minor compete in boxing and wrestling events wearing loincloths. This custom of not competing nude, according to Thucydides, is outdated and shows that the ancient Hellenic manner of life is on par with the modern barbarian's way of life.⁷ Athletic nudity went as far as being a social marker of free, male citizen status and Greek ethnicity.⁸ The way you acted at the Olympics also affected your status as a Greek. The Egyptian boxer, Apollonios, was late to the games and thus excluded from the fight. Apollonios's opponent, Herakleides, was then crowned victor without even undertaking a fight. As he was being crowned and had taken refuge amongst the *Hellanodikai*, Apollonios equipped himself with his gloves and proceeded to charge at, and attack, Herakleides. It was then said that this mindless behavior Apollonios showed at the Olympics, would later prove to be 'seriously detrimental to him'.⁹

Improper etiquette at the Olympics did not only affect one's overarching national Greek identity, but it could also transform the inter-Hellenic identity of an athlete and the identity of their polis as well. Lichas, son of two time Olympic victor Archesilaos, entered his chariot in the name of the people of Thebes. Lichas competed for the people of Thebes because the Spartans had been debarred from competing in the games because Sparta had broken an Olympic truce. But, unlike other violators of Olympic rules, Sparta refused to pay the mandatory fine.¹⁰ This improper etiquette caused previously Spartan athletes to have to identify with other Greek poleis in order to compete in the games. Other such instances include, Agasikles from Halicarnassus, who won a bronze tripod in the Games of Triopian Apollo. Agasikles then proceeded to take it

⁷ Thucydides, "History of the Peloponnesian War, 1.6," in *Race and Ethnicity in the Classical World: An Anthology of Primary Sources in Translation*, ed. Max L. Goldman, (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 2013), 18.

⁸ Donald Kyle, "Panhellenism and Particularism: Herodotus on Sport, Greekness, and War," in *Sport in the Cultures of the Ancient World: New Perspectives*, ed. Zinon Papakonstantinou, (New York: Routledge, 2010), 40.

⁹ Pausanias, "Description of Greece, 5.21.12-14", in *Greek Athletics and the Olympics*, ed. Alan Beale, (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2011), 55.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 53.

home with him instead of following the custom of dedicating it, and leaving it at the temple. This breach in etiquette caused him and all of Halicarnassus to be labeled as impious and to be banned from further competition in the Games.¹¹

Another badge of Greek identity involving athletic competition was the expected notion that all athletes competed strictly for the valor of their polis and not for prizes or other monetary gains. Making use of this absence of professionalism in Greek sport, Herodotus' *Histories*, brings forth this amateurism as a cultural identifier for the Greeks in comparison to the barbaric easterners, most specifically the Persians. Herodotus highlighted the idea of Greek nobility versus Persian cowardice:

When the Arcadians told them that the Greeks were holding the Olympic festival and viewing sports and horseraces, the Persian asked what was the prize offered, for which they contended. They told him of the crown of olive that was given to the victor. Then Tigranes son of Artabanus uttered a most noble saying (but the king deemed him a coward for it); when he heard that the prize was not money but a crown, he could not hold his peace, but cried, "Good heavens, Mardonius, what kind of men are these that you have pitted us against? It is not for money they contend but for glory of achievement!"¹²

The Olympics and sport in general provided another opportunity to reinforce the often talked about notion of eastern cowardice and softness, versus western/Greek bravery and nobility.

The Olympic Games, and the actual events held within the Games, were not the only way sport affected Greek identity. Historians and poets throughout Greek antiquity would pen stories that included warnings to their readers using sport as a medium. The warnings they issued included the staple Greek identifiers of acting piously, being a democratic civilization, and not

¹¹ Donald Kyle, "Panhellenism and Particularism: Herodotus on Sport, Greekness, and War," in *Sport in the Cultures of the Ancient World: New Perspectives*, ed. Zinon Papakonstantinou, (New York: Routledge, 2010), 37.

¹² Herodotus, "Histories, 8.26.1-3," in *Greek Athletics and the Olympics*, ed. Alan Beale, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 120.

becoming to ‘big’, or arrogant for one’s self. The poet Pindar uses space in his victory ode, *Olympian I*, to issue a warning on not getting above one’s self and not to offend the Gods by acting too big. Herodotus himself at times used sport “creatively and structurally to record wonders, tell morally didactic stories, or make ethnographic points.”¹³ In books five and six of his, *Histories*, he criticizes how Kylon of Athens used his double sprint victory in the Olympics to attempt a tyranny, and how Pheidon of Argos acted hubristically in expelling the Elean officials and trying to organize the Olympics himself.¹⁴ Greek writers effectively used sport as an intermediary to establish some of the main values of being a Greek.

Although sport was mostly used as means to exclude the perceived ‘other’, and as a marker for cultural or ethnic identifiers, sport could also be used in a process of acculturation. And the immensely popular Roman gladiatorial games, provided gladiators just such an opportunity. Gladiators were outsiders looking in at Roman society, and by showing to the spectators of the games that they were, *virtus*, it would allow these gladiators to be set free and gain citizenship amongst the Romans. But, these gladiatorial games were part of a larger context. The games were part of a, *munus*, which included beast hunts and executions of criminals. This put the games into a context of societal integration. Before the gladiators fight for acquisition into Roman citizenship, those that were deemed unfit for Roman society were executed before the onset of the games.¹⁵ Roman sporting spectacles like these gladiatorial games also proved to be an unintended method of Romanization in the eastern part of the Empire. Scholars have long understood that eastern provinces of the Roman Empire were a lot less affected by the Romans than the western provinces were, particularly Britain and Germania. While Greek poleis did not

¹³ Donald Kyle, “Panhellenism and Particularism: Herodotus on Sport, Greekness, and War,” in *Sport in the Cultures of the Ancient World: New Perspectives*, ed. Zinon Papakonstantinou, (New York: Routledge, 2010), 37.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 38.

¹⁵ Christian Mann, “Gladiators in the Greek East: A Case Study in Romanization,” in *Sport in the Cultures of the Ancient World: New Perspectives*, ed. Zinon Papakonstantinou, (New York: Routledge, 2010), 127.

undergo a drastic change between the end of the Hellenistic and the oncoming of the Roman period, one of the few markers of Roman society that the Greeks did adopt was their taking to the gladiatorial games.¹⁶ The poleis took to the games so much in fact, that in some ways they became more Roman than their Roman counterparts. Though extremely popular in Italy and in Rome, there was no mention of any western gladiator fighting in the eastern provinces. And this comes as a surprise because various inscriptions mention Greek gladiators travelling to Rome and other areas in the western Roman Empire to fight. Other inscriptions detail exchanges between the Emperor Hadrian, and the elite of Aphrodisias, in which Hadrian calls for them to use money from the High Priest's office to build aqueducts. The people of Aphrodisias responded by being much less willing to fund the High Priest's office if they were using the money on aqueducts and not the local gladiatorial games.¹⁷ Sport proves to be a way in which an individual or an entire people can become assimilated into a different culture.

Ancient ethnographies, such as Tacitus's, *Germania*, have throughout history been shown to influence the way sport appropriates itself within a society. Tacitus's writings are known to have had a profound effect on one of the most influential groups in history, The Nazis. Their racially charged ideologies stretched into the fields of athletics and sport. But, this pro Aryan, pro German sentiment always linked with the Third Reich, has some of its roots in 19th and early 20th century athletic organizations. Friedrich Ludwig Jahn, a German nationalist, opened the first gymnastics field outside the walls of Berlin in 1811. Jahn wished to return the, *Volkstum*, to the state of physical fitness admired by the Romans when their ancestor's infantry would run alongside their cavalry. German nationalist groups such as the Pan-German League and

¹⁶ Christian Mann, "Gladiators in the Greek East: A Case Study in Romanization," in *Sport in the Cultures of the Ancient World: New Perspectives*, ed. Zinon Papakonstantinou, (New York, Routledge, 2010), 124-25.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 130,133.

Germanic Order, would go on to found gymnastics societies and shooting clubs. The Pan German League and Germanic order was inspired by the rhetoric of Friedrich Jahn, which was to keep the German race pure by the caretaking of the youth. Sport provided these nationalists an area for the caretaking of Germany's youth.¹⁸ This perception of athletic superiority in the early parts of the German nationalistic movement carried on throughout its entirety, on up until the start of the Third Reich and the establishment of the Nazi regime.

Under the Nazi regime of Adolf Hitler, sport and athletic competition was severely compromised by his racially charged policies. Physical education was a major part of the curriculum within Nazi Germany, and had an even larger role within the Hitler Youth. Heinrich Himmler, leader of the SS, placed exceedingly high physical expectations on his SS soldiers. SS soldiers were to earn a performance badge each year, and were to practice physical dexterity, just as their ancestors had. Himmler himself trained an hour a day with his assistants, so he could compete amongst other athletes to prove he was a true, *Germane*. Through athletic exercises it was said that the, 'master spirit' revealed itself, and all true *Germanen*, had a penchant for sprinting, jumping, swimming, and wrestling. Tacitus's account of the sword dance undertaken by their ancestors, would be a staple discussion point in Germanic sports for years to come.¹⁹ Commenting on the fascist regime in Italy, in 1936, American sports writer John Tunis declared that, "An Italian triumph in football, cycling, tennis, or any other sport, particularly if over old rivals like the French, is seized upon, written up and paraded as proof positive of the superiority of the race and its governing principles."²⁰ It was this idea of German athletic superiority as

¹⁸ Christopher B. Krebs, *A Most Dangerous Book: Tacitus's Germania From the Roman Empire to The Third Reich* (New York: Norton, 2011), 186-87, 204.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 221, 239-40.

²⁰ Emma Anspach, Hilah Almog, "Mussolini's Football," *Soccer Politics: A Discussion Forum About the Power of the Global Game*, 2009, <http://sites.duke.edu/wcwp/research-projects/football-and-politics-in-europe-1930s-1950s/mussolinis-football>

dictated by Tacitus, and the assumption that victory in a sporting event asserted one's racial superiority over another, that cumulated in one of the most infamous soccer matches in world history.

Known colloquially as the Death Match, a group of occupied Ukrainian soccer players started a club known as FC Start. (They were barred from their original name of Dynamo because it was a creation of "evil Soviet forces"). They began playing other national teams such as Hungary, and mashed up teams of soldiers from various units. Eventually the Germans got wind of them being undefeated and organized a match. FC Start beat the first German team they played quite handily. The German high command became unsettled over their successes, as it jeopardized their views of racial superiority. The next match scheduled, was against the official German *Luftwaffe*, squad. A team comprised of nothing but pure Aryan blood. But gain, FC Start won. A final match was scheduled for FC Start and again it was against the *Luftwaffe* club. Before the beginning of the match an SS officer appeared in the locker room and advised FC Start of the consequences of them winning again. After another reminder at halftime was ignored, FC Start left the pitch with a final victory under their belt. This was the end of the line for FC Start, as the Germans could not handle having their official teams being beaten by those deemed inferior to them. The members of FC Start were imprisoned at work camps, and some were even executed.²¹

Tacitus's writings also indirectly spurred the growth of another nationalistic athletic association that is still around today. Late 19th and early 20th century Britain was filled with anti-Irish sentiment. Distinguished British scholars of the time claimed that the ancestors of the

²¹ Emma Anspach, Hilah Almog, "The Death Match," *Soccer Politics: A Discussion Forum About the Power of the Global Game*, 2009, <http://sites.duke.edu/wcwp/research-projects/football-and-politics-in-europe-1930s-1950s/hitler-and-nazi-philosophy/the-death-match>

Britons, enshrined the concept of liberty in the forests of Germany. In response to this Anglo-Saxon racism, a wave of Irish cultural nationalism swept the nation, led by the formation of The Gaelic Athletic Association, by Michael Cusack in 1884. The Association represented Irish exclusivity and stressed the playing of ‘ancient’ Irish sports such as Gaelic football, hurling, and *comogie*. While at the same time they also banned any member from participating in English sports such as rugby, soccer, or field hockey.²² In this case, sport was used as a retaliatory mechanism in response to ethnically imbued policy.

Sport from its earliest beginnings, has been a tool for societies to provide exclusivity, and to enforce othering tactics. At the same time sport was used by the ancients as a medium, in which they could effectively talk about, and efficiently solidify the mores of their society. While being used to exclude the perceived other from society, and to set boundaries for those within it, sport has also shown its usefulness in the acculturation of individuals and larger groups of people into society. The continual use of sport in this fashion, as influenced by authors from antiquity, emphasizes the importance sport has on a society and its culture.

²² Thomas E. Hachey and Lawrence J. McCaffrey, *The Irish Experience Since 1800: A Concise History* (Armonk, New York: M.E. Sharpe, Inc., 2010), 112; Donald Kyle, “Panhellenism and Particularism: Herodotus on Sport, Greekness, and War,” in *Sport in the Cultures of the Ancient World: New Perspectives*, ed. Zinon Papakonstantinou, (New York: Routledge, 2010), 4-15.

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