



21^e CESH
Congress



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Cultural transfers and cultural mediators in sports

The diffusion of sports in Europe: origins and perspectives

Congress organized by

the research centre "Sport and Social Sciences" (E3S-EA1342)

of the University of Strasbourg



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cognita historia futurum figurare

Much historical research has been devoted to the development and transformation of physical activities and sports in the places where they are practiced. Researchers have identified the various origins of sports, according to whether they have developed locally or have been imported from other regions. Other research has shown how the practice of sport has forged strong links between different areas. Yet studies of influences and borrowings in the field of sport remain rare.

While physical activities may seem relatively homogeneous or stable when viewed diachronically or over a short period, they result, also, from progressive hybridization, cultural blendings, and the addition of elements from elsewhere. Sports, indeed, have permeable boundaries. They are affected by multifaceted cultural forms and diverse “foreign” influences. These contributions build up and enrich physical activities; combining with the invariant techniques of the body, they fashion the identity of sports.

The aim of this conference will be to reveal and analyse the mechanisms by which sports and societies mutually inform each other. Papers should work within one of the three approaches outlined below; **they may focus** on the practice of sport in ancient, modern, or contemporary periods.

► Approach 1: Processes of diffusion in the field of sport

This approach concerns the mechanisms that stimulate the implantation of physical activities in places other than the territories where they originated. Michel Espagne and Michael Werner call this mechanism “cultural transfer”. Torsten Hägerstrand pointed out that diffusion mechanisms go through three stages: contagion, expansion, and relocation. As for Richard Holt, he explains that it is advisable to combine situational data and structural properties to better understand the diffusion of physical activities. He mentions three periods in the diffusion of English sports in France: emulation, opposition, separation.

Papers working in this approach should try to answer the following questions:

- What processes allow a sport which is foreign to a certain geographical area to become established there?
- What issues are at stake in the diffusion of sports?
- How do exchanges based on sport affect the construction of identities?
- What forces drive the diffusion of sports and what factors hinder their diffusion?

The papers may also explain how different ideas, knowledge, and techniques have influenced the diffusion of sports.

- In particular, they might examine the forms of knowledge or the moral, physical, intellectual and scientific values that, according to the period, have influenced sports and enabled them to spread.
- Likewise, they might discuss the circulation of ideas and forms of knowledge. How have these passed from one place to another, sometimes over large distances, or from one field to another, sometimes without any relation to sport? Can the cultural references attached to a sporting practice disappear when they are imported into another? If so, under what conditions?

► Approach 2: Interactions between mediators and/or institutions

In this approach, the emphasis is placed on the men or women who are behind the exchanges in sport and physical education. Christophe Charle calls them “double men”, others call them “intermediaries”, “mediators”, or “dissemination agents”. According to Diane Cooper-Richet, these “mediators in culture” are “individuals who, in view of their familial, cultural, or geographic background, their schooling, or their career path, are open to the world and its diversity”. Speakers may also deal with institutions, associations (traditional associative structures, public and/or private), networks, or material elements (books, periodicals, objects, techniques, sports events) that can also be considered as cultural mediators.

Papers should aim to identify the actors and mediators of these cultural exchanges in the field of sport and show their characteristic features.

- Among other things, they should examine the life trajectories of individuals or the evolution of structures.
- They may address the construction of social, political, or professional identities.
- Their aim will thus be to show how the various actors have managed to pass their practices on or to impose them on others. What role have public authorities and institutions (the Olympic movement, sports federations, church groups, the school system) played in the processes of cultural transfer?

Speakers may also discuss the level of involvement of people or associations taking part in cultural transfers.

- Is the introduction of new practices always intentional? Does it take place by discursive means?
- What rationales or strategies, intentional or unintentional, have been developed?

Finally, papers may focus on how outside contributions have been received in the field of sport.

► Approach 3: the spaces and locations of the diffusion of sport

This third approach invites speakers to focus on the locations where cultural transfers take place. Various aspects of this problem might be considered:

- What are the characteristics of the spaces and territories where the diffusion and reception of sporting practices take place?
- How do individual and/or collective actors (clubs, leagues, federations, but also school systems, etc.) in a given area adapt their discourses, their practices (equipment, services offered) in the field of sports, physical education or recreation, in order to promote exchanges or accommodate foreign practices?

Speakers are invited to focus specifically on the scale of the territories in question (local, national or transnational, etc.) and on their degree of influence.

- Do the diffusion processes differ according to the type of space involved?
- Are interactions or cultural blendings possible between two territories of different scale, or situated at different levels?

Special attention may also be accorded to particular areas such as border regions, or areas that have changed nationality, gained autonomy, or have been ruled by authoritarian regimes.

Similarly, a comparative approach to different territories would seem to allow an original and fruitful perspective

While geographical spaces will of course be central to our preoccupations, they are not the only type of space which may be studied. The notion of space may also be approached in terms of its cultural, intellectual or technical dimensions.

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