

Mujica-Johnson, F.N. (202x). Critical Analysis of the Term Sport by José María Cagigal. Revista Internacional de Medicina y Ciencias de la Actividad Física y el Deporte vol. x (x) pp. xx Pendiente de publicación / In press.

ORIGINAL

CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF THE TERM SPORT BY JOSÉ MARÍA CAGIGAL

ANÁLISIS CRÍTICO DEL TÉRMINO DEPORTE DE JOSÉ MARÍA CAGIGAL

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Código UNESCO / UNESCO code: 720102 Epistemología / Epistemology
Clasificación Consejo de Europa / Council of Europe classification: 13.
Filosofía del deporte / Philosophy of sport

Recibido 20 de agosto de 2021 **Received** August 20, 2021

Aceptado 13 de abril de 2022 **Accepted** April 13, 2022

ABSTRACT

The intellectual heritage of modernity has not contributed to the development of philosophical thinking about sport. However, there have been personalities who have interpreted sport from a deeper perspective than what common sense would suggest. One of them was José María Cagigal, pedagogue and philosopher representing the international Olympic movement and Physical Education in Spain. This essay analysed the ideas of this thinker in relation to his concept of sport. In this way, it was possible to identify an interpretation aimed at extending cultural and epistemological boundaries. This promoted meanings with ambiguity and relativity between the contemporary distinction of physical activity, physical exercise, play and sport. Nevertheless, it is appreciated that Cagigal's thinking has the potential to avoid reductionisms around universal definitions of sporting activity that can be established.

KEY WORDS: Philosophy, sport, epistemology, game, culture.

RESUMEN

La herencia intelectual de la modernidad no ha contribuido a que el pensamiento filosófico del deporte haya podido ser muy desarrollado. Sin embargo, han existido personalidades que han interpretado el deporte desde una mirada más profunda que la que propiciaba el sentido común. Una de ellas fue la de José María Cagigal, pedagogo y filósofo representante del movimiento olímpico internacional y de la Educación Física en España. Este ensayo analizó las ideas de aquel pensador en torno a su concepto de deporte. De este modo, se logró identificar una interpretación orientada a ampliar las fronteras culturales y epistemológicas. Esto promovió significados con ambigüedad y relatividad entre la distinción contemporánea de actividad física, ejercicio físico, juego y deporte. No obstante, se aprecia que el pensamiento de Cagigal tiene potencial para evitar reduccionismos en torno a las definiciones universales que se puedan establecer de la actividad deportiva.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Filosofía, deporte, epistemología, juego, cultura.

INTRODUCTION

The philosophy of sport in contemporary thought is a relatively underdeveloped activity. The causes of this may lie in the theoretical bases inherited from the modern era. Two major philosophical currents had great cultural power in that historical period: rationalism (Descartes, 1970; Spinoza, 2007) and empiricism (Hume, 2014; Locke, 2018).

Rationalism is characterized by considering that the source of truth is found in reason; therefore, metaphysics was extensively developed during this period (Habermas, 2008). One of its metaphysical constructs was Cartesian dualism, which promoted an objectivism that separates body from soul. That fragmentation of the human resulted in the disregard of the human corporeality in the face of the spiritual, mainly the reason, the mind, the conscience, or the understanding (Mujica, 2020a, 2020b, 2021a). In this sense, the objectivist idea of a *body-machine* that could be manipulated and used independently of its subjectivity was promoted (Contreras, 1998; Llinàs, 2016). The hegemony of these philosophical constructs may have generated everything related to the human body, including physical activity, Physical Education, and sport, to be considered second-class issues. Thus, as Bueno (2014) explains, sport has been rather irrelevant in Western philosophy. According to Coca-Fernández (1996), to improve this social condition, sport needs to be interpreted as a serious cultural aspect that must be studied rigorously from multiple academic perspectives in order to be understood.

In contrast to rationalism, empiricism is characterized by pointing out that the source of truth is found in experience or in the events that can be perceived by the senses (Ferrater, 1994). This doctrine favored the development of the particular

sciences and, specifically, of the natural sciences, such as physics, biology, and chemistry. Likewise, it promoted a positivist perspective on science that had an anti-metaphysical and, therefore, anti-philosophical character (Von Hildebrand, 2000). As can be deduced, this intellectual context did not favor the development of philosophy and, consequently, of philosophical thinking about sport, as it did, in part, with the physical activity and sport sciences and, above all, with the sciences viewed from a naturalistic, positivist, and quantitative perspective.

Faced with the philosophical adversities inherited from modernity to approach sport in the twentieth century, some personalities dared to highlight metaphysical, epistemological, and axiological aspects of sporting activity. One of them was José María Cagigal, representative of the international Olympic movement and Physical Education in Spain. His works have earned him the title of sport philosopher (Mujica, 2019; Olivera, 2006). Some disagree with that title, such as Bueno (2014), for whom Cagigal (1959, 1975, 1979, 1981, 1984, 1996) was nothing more than a spiritualist who talked about sports but did not philosophize about it. However, Bueno's (2014) view is reductionist, as according to his materialistic perspective, it is not appropriate to call metaphysical ideas, such as those of Cagigal, philosophy. From a more open perspective on the meaning of philosophy, Cagigal did philosophize about physical activity and sport (Mujica, 2019; Olivera, 1997, 2003, 2006). In this regard, Ramírez and Piedra (2011) state, alluding to Cagigal, that "the topics he addressed in his vast intellectual work range from sport (the most common of them all), physical education, leisure, or Olympism, to philosophy and legislation" (p. 68). This is also demonstrated by Coca-Fernández (1993), who, to philosophize about the *sport man*, considered the philosophical contributions of Cagigal.

Regarding Cagigal's philosophical thinking, it is important to understand that his ideas are linked to the philosophical current of idealism (Perrino y Vicente, 2012), i.e., contrary to a radical materialistic view, which is explained by his adherence to Christian philosophy (Mujica, 2019; Olivera, 2006; Rivero-Herraiz y Sánchez-García, 2018). Nevertheless, aware of the problems of Cartesian idealism (Cagigal, 1975, 1979, 1981), he tried to approach an idealism that would recognize the unity of the human being, such as the Aristotelian-Thomistic or scholastic conception (Beuchot, 1993; Dri, 2020), which, despite recognizing the spiritual sphere, proposes a unity that dignifies corporeality (Orrego, 2020). His attempt to overcome the separation of body from soul regarding sport can be appreciated in the following quotation:

It is not a matter of reducing people to a mere body or physical activity; this would be to take them back to cosmologism or crude materialism. The aim is to discover bodily dignity in its highest human specificity. Sport is fundamentally the activity of the whole person (Cagigal, 1981, p 83).

This intellectual work seeks to further understand the viewpoint of this Spanish humanist thinker on sport, with the intention of progressing in the philosophical

knowledge of the subject. Based on the above, this essay aims to analyze the concept of sport present in the ideas of José María Cagigal.

SPORT ACCORDING TO JOSÉ MARÍA CAGIGAL

Cagigal (1981) considers sport as a human activity that involves the whole person. To conceptualize it, he pointed out that sport is "liberal, spontaneous, disinterested recreation, in and through physical exercise understood as self-improvement or improvement of others, and more or less subject to rules" (Cagigal, 1959, p. 16). This definition reflects a great scope that seems to blur the boundaries between what is and is not sport. This broad interpretation of sport can be seen more clearly in the following quote:

Playing on a regulation court as part of a team of five and shoot a ball through a hoop following a set of rules is a real sport called basketball. However, forgoing the elevator and walking up to an eighth floor; walking three kilometers from home to the office; playing two against two (just like five against five) with a ball at the park; or competing to see who can jump the farthest on the neighborhood sidewalk, without the need for a tartan track and pit, is just as real a sport. Spontaneous competitive games or children's games of skill in neighborhoods and towns are real sports (Cagigal, 1996, p. 797).

It is possible to appreciate that, for Cagigal, a spontaneous physical activity devoid of any institutionalization can also be considered a sport. This is because Cagigal (1959) approaches the concept of sport from an etymological and philological perspective, which refers to the Latin terms *de-porta* and *de-portare*. Both terms would be associated with recreation, fun, and rest (Olivera y Torrebadella, 2015). In this sense, when Cagigal (1996) discusses the concept, he opts for the Latin meaning and, at the same time, recognizes the modern meaning that is embodied by British culture through the concept of *sport*. This is also reflected in his classification of *praxis-sports* and *spectacle-sports*. Praxis-sports would be characterized by spontaneity, freedom, recreation, education, disinterested socialization, and informality, while spectacle-sports would reflect the commercialization, politicization, professionalization, and institutionalization of that human activity. This is similar to what Coca-Fernandez (1996) called *sport-for-all* and *sport-for-the-few*.

The humanistic contribution that José María Cagigal made to sport is unquestionable (Mujica-Johnson y Orellana-Arduiz, 2022), anticipating the recognitions that UNESCO (2013) would later make by declaring April 6 as the International Day of Sport for Development and Peace. Within the framework of a representation of sport as a fundamental component of life, Cagigal (1996)

proposed an analogy between sport and music to show the transversality that the sport phenomenon would have in human society. He expressed this as follows:

Sport can be compared to music. There are various forms of it according to appetite, as well as doses for everyone, both for those with a fine ear and for those who have a predilection for elemental sonorities (Cagigal, 1996, p. 795).

In this analogy, Cagigal points out that sport can be understood as a positive attitude that can be integrated throughout life, so it can depend exclusively on the person themselves:

The *sport man*, like the *music man*, is more a disposition, i.e., a readiness to integrate their behavior sportively (or musically), than erudition, technification, or physical training (Cagigal, 1996, p. 798).

Cagigal was skeptical about the idea of proposing a universal definition of sport, giving as an example the existing complexities regarding the definition of *play*. Thus, according to his understanding, "any attempt to find universally valid definitions usually leads to failure, and this is what happens with any effort to define primary realities of life" (Cagigal, 1996, p. 789). In this sense, Cagigal (1996) would agree to a certain extent with Coca-Fernández (2002), who has pointed out that "defining sport univocally is a task that is almost impossible given its polysemic nature" (p. 22). Olivera and Torredadella (2015) pointed out something similar, stating that "sport is indefinable due to its symbolic complexity, cultural dimension, and social reality" (p. 62). However, Cagigal (1996) implicitly approached a meaning of sport that tends to a general view and, therefore, with yearnings for universality. This sport philosopher recognized that sport is less primary than play, especially from the perspective of the theory of the *homo ludens* (Huizinga, 2012). However, the boundaries between a competitive motor skills game and a sport are difficult to appreciate in his ideas, as can be seen in the following quote:

The sport-related, which is not conceptually understood or expressed by a two-year-old, but is correctly understood, categorized, and used by a four-year-old, refers to a simple activity where physical exercise converges with a competitive spirit (challenging, pushing, measuring, defiant) amid a playful vital attitude. It is one of the elementary forms of children's play, long before they use, or even understand, the word *sport* itself. It is one of the games children already play from the age of twenty months, one of their first and easiest ways to play (Cagigal, 1996, p. 790).

These ideas presented around José María Cagigal's meaning of sport will allow a critical semantic analysis to be developed in the following section.

CRITICISM OF THE TERM SPORT BY CAGIGAL

Some of Cagigal's ideas regarding the essence of sport do not contribute to the desire to establish greater clarity in linguistic and philosophical terms of what that human activity is or, at least, what it is today. In a way, Cagigal established a nihilism or relativism around the meaning of sport, generating both ambiguity and similarity between various concepts, such as physical activity, physical exercise, play, movement, motor skills, and sport. In this sense, in an attempt to establish a profound, dignified, and transcendental view of sport, he developed an interpretation that can lead to the opposite, that is to say, to a simplistic and irrelevant view of sporting activity. The best example of this is his proposal that climbing a staircase with no other intention than to reach a destination could be considered a sporting activity.

It is apparent that Cagigal's desire to interpret sport as a relatively primordial phenomenon of culture led him to an epistemology that is untenable from a precise conceptual point of view. He proposed that there was a semantic broadening of the meaning of sport in society, which even came to represent material elements with the meaning of sport. According to Cagigal (1996), this broadening leads sports to be understood as a series of habitual actions of citizenship, being a reflection of the primitiveness of sports in what is human life itself. This way of reasoning can be quite naive and dangerous, considering the confusion that such meaning can cause around the concept of sport. The same happens nowadays with different terminologies associated with sport, e.g., when people confuse *gymnastics* with *Physical Education*. This confusion has its historical basis in the genesis of this pedagogical discipline. However, it could not be a sufficient reason to relativize the epistemological boundaries separating the two activities. In addition, it should be understood that Physical Education evolved to the point of having a meaning of its own.

As Cagigal (1959) and Coca-Fernández (2002) have pointed out, sport has had different meanings according to diverse cultural and historical contexts. This has also happened in other areas of culture, such as, for example, philosophy itself. What Aristotle (2017) called physics or second philosophy in his time is not the same physics that developed as modern science; however, this is also not a valid argument to deny the development of a universal and representative concept of what sport is. Likewise, the diversity of terminology across cultures would not be free of semantic errors or confusions. Certainly, Cagigal (1996) does not directly deny the possibility of identifying a universal definition of sport, but, given the complexity that this meant in his thinking, he opted for a path of integration of meanings without establishing clear boundaries. Furthermore, Cagigal does not seem to be interested in establishing a historical distinction of sport where, for example, what sport was in the past and what sport is today is pointed out. Rather, the intention to unify both historical views is apparent, which could be the main reason for the confusion produced by his ideas.

This essay does not intend to establish a definition of sport, but rather to point out that there are other definitions of sport that would be incompatible with Cagigal's (1959, 1996). In them, an effort to differentiate sport from physical activity, human movement, play, and/or physical exercise would be observed. One of them is that of Hernández (1998), for whom sport is "a competitive, regulated, playful, and institutionalized motor situation" (Hernández, 1998, p. 15). What is possible to point out in this work is that any definition of sport that pretends to represent what this activity is in contemporary times should be oriented towards a conceptual precision that recognizes the other cultural manifestations that have their own cultural meaning, as there is an increasing awareness of the terminological differences between physical activity, physical exercise, play, and sport (Asún, 2017; Mujica, 2021b; Stirrup y Hooper, 2021).

It is by no means intended or recommended to underestimate the contribution of Cagigal (1996), as his view invites us to question the epistemological boundaries that have been established at present and could contribute to questioning the reductionism surrounding the sport activity. Therefore, sport specialists should not fail to ask themselves the following question: is there really a difference between physical activity, physical exercise, play, and sport? Whatever the answer, there should be a good argument as to *why*. In this sense, based on Cagigal's approach, the following question could be asked concerning Hernández's definition (1996): Is institutionalism a fundamental condition for sport? Or, in other words, can sport exist outside social institutions? In this way, the aim is to avoid reproductive thinking about physical activity, Physical Education, and sport, stimulating critical thinking about the sport-related (Coca-Fernández, 1993, 1996, 2002; Kirk, 2010; Olivera y Torrebadella, 2018; Soltani et al., 2021; Stirrup y Hooper, 2021).

CONCLUSIONS

Regarding the objective of this essay, it is concluded that the term sport by José María Cagigal is characterized by ambiguity and epistemological relativity, as his ideas lack a distinction between the concepts of physical activity, physical exercise, play, and sport. It is understood that this philosopher intended to broaden the semantics, dignity, and transcendence of sport in culture; however, this can produce the opposite effect, i.e., the simplification of sporting activity.

Cagigal's ideas cannot be understood from a superficial point of view since they represent a profound reflection of society and its relationship with sport. In this way, Cagigal's sport thinking can be very useful in future stances on the essence of sport, noting that, in the eagerness to seek greater conceptual precision, it is possible to fall into reductionisms that also simplify the sport phenomenon. In this sense, there are definitions of sport that are more oriented to represent the sport phenomenon without a specific context and others that are more focused on representing a specific historical-cultural context of what is understood by it. Cagigal's definition seems to belong to the first ones, where its content longs to

transcend particular contexts. Even so, the definition itself could be analyzed from its own context.

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Número de citas totales / Total references: 41 (100%)

Número de citas propias de la revista / Journal's own references: 3 (7,3%)

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