

**POLITIZATION OF THE BODY, SPORTSMAN'S/WOMAN'S BODY: A CASE  
STUDY ON TURKISH NATIONAL ATHLETE SUREYYA AYHAN**

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Sport has spread many areas of cultural and political life, surrounding daily processes. Mass media intensively provoking the interest in sports changes starring sportsmen and women into social actors and strengtens emulation for their lives (ways of living). Their dazzling lives framed with fame and wealth are watched by ordinary people as unattainable objects . Sport appears to be an entertainment activity to fill leisure times and watched by people of subculture through television, today, whereas it is a meaning encircled by beauty and well-being (fitness) ideologies of upper social strata (layers). Opportunities of an individual to self realise, measure his/her abilities, display skills and compete is surrounded by political and industrial forms of power. Now, sport, has gradually loosened its bonds reminiscent of the concept of play and been joint with practices of power or even having itself institutional dynamics operated as a focus of power . Massive audience has turned out to be a passive consumer of professionally designed sportive rituals. Sport has, as Adorno points out, lost its solidarity and emancipating spirit. “ It is not a coincidence for bourgoise sport to wish to strictly isolate itself from game. Its animal seriousness “to be achieved through play” lists the action of play as beneficial aims, rather than being loyal to dream of freedom by keeping distance to any purpose, and therefore completely erases traces of freedom to be delighted with a sport game”<sup>1</sup>.

Sports could not be expected to remain outside the field invaded by nationalism trying to permeate any other sorts of popular domains. Sports as well as many other fields has been forcibly colonized by popular nationalist discourse. Such a discourse dominating every field

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<sup>1</sup> Adorno, Theodor W., (1962) *Über Fetischcharakter in der Musik und die Regression des Hörens. Gesammelte Schriften*, Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp, 1997 bd. (inside 14 th), Excerpted from: Mehmet Mihri Özdoğan; “Oyun, Ütopya ve Spor”, (Game, Utopia and Sports) **Toplum ve Bilim**, Vol: 103, p. 50, 2005.

from any national achievements put into agenda to football matches between national league teams, evoke those who have a voice on sports towards itself. Every remark and speech involving every kind of sportive activities from leagues to international meetings is made through this nationalist discourse in similar tunes. Therefore, it seems almost impossible for anyone who speak to remain outside and/or not to participate in such a discursive plane. Sport discourse appears to be part of discourse of power and its relationship to politics occasionally turns upsidedown, becoming itself a discursive plane able to establish a power.

Relationship between sport and power presents itself in two different ways in our study. The first one is, as Foucault indicates, the modern bio-power field far too interested in creation of adjustably obedient and productive bodies. The other one association between sport and power in our example is a domain of power which is derived from the bio-politics and symbolizes national structure with particular bodies, establishing representative relation with them.

Michel Foucault, the first volume of his History of Sexuality, points out, a radical transformation of the West in the mechanism of power since Classical ages. “ The ancient regime force symbolized by sovereign power is replaced by meticulous management of bodies and by operation of life for accounts. During Classical Ages different disciplines- schools, colleges, barracks developed and simultaneously in the field of political implementations and economic observations emerged problems of fecundity, longevity, public health, housing and immigration; that is many various techniques were observed to have boomed in order to subjectify bodies and control population. Then began the era of “bio-power”<sup>2</sup>. In history what is biological is for the first time reflected in what is political; living

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<sup>2</sup> Michel Foucault; **Cinselliğın Tarihi**, (History of Sexuality Vol: 1) Translated by.Hülya Tufan, Afa Publications, İstanbul, 1993, pp.143-144.

phenomenon is no longer unattainable ground at times appearing coincidentally with death, and slides towards the field of control of knowledge and intervention of power”<sup>3</sup>.

What Foucault describes as bio-power, modern power technology can be conceived as subjection technology supposed to serve missions and responsibilities defined in order to establish a collective conscience and a common nation in an individual in a very point different from attempts at making him/her a subject of economic development through own well being alone. Citizen is set both as a transforming subject and the object of this educational process, for disciplining body is a collective call made to whole population.

One aims at disciplining the whole nation and bodies through sports. Relationship established between bodies and national structure through sports is of indispensable importance in view of the nation- state. Representativeness/symbolicalness is established between sportsmanship of bodies to compete in the international arena and the species body of the whole nation. Those who run, sweat and win or lose no longer carry their own bodies but shoulder the crystalized form of the national structure as well.

Interest in sports and sportman’s body voiced by those authorized to speak in the name of the nation and the state has now become intense and complicated. The theme of national representativeness is also emphasized by even those sportsmen in an almost anonymous way, during interviews with them before and after international meetings. When they step on the pitch they will compete for the sake of the nation and show the whole world what Turkish people could ever do.

In 2003 Süreyya Ayhan a national athlete achieved a great performance for the first time in the sports history of Turkey. Born in Çankırı in 1978, she started athletics at Athletics Training Centre, Çankırı in 1992. Meanwhile running for Fenerbahçe and MTA sports club, and following a process of financial difficulties, she was greatly put on the sports agenda with

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<sup>3</sup> M. Foucault; **Cinselliğin Tarihi**, (History of Sexuality Vol: 1) p. 146.

her extraordinary international achievements for Turkey. However athletics is hardly considered a sports branch people find interesting in Turkey. National athletes are not so renowned for their performance as futbol stars. In Turkey no one has gained a remarkable success until those of Süreyya Ayhan's. Everyone in Turkey was quite sure that Süreyya Ayhan would win gold medal in The World Athletics Championship in 2003, just following her gold medal performance at 1500 m in 18 th European Athletics Championship in 2002. In the interviews with her she reported that she could not only run for herself but also for the gold medal for the sake of Turkish nation.

*“Saying that there are people who fast and pray for her achievements, she added: “ Among those fasting for me, Recep Yildırım, Director of the Youth and Sports Provincial of Karaman, fasts too. I am sure they will do so for me in the finals, because I believe they just feel like doing so. I thank those praying for me. Everyone should save their prayers for the final at 31st of August. It seems as if these remaining four days past like four years. I wish that final could be on soon”<sup>4</sup>.*

However, something unexpected happened during the race in 31st of August when the prime minister and the head of oppositon party were among the audience, and she failed to win the gold medal and was the runner up, which caused disillusionment as well as a surprise in Turkish public opinion. “Entering the last 300 m to finish Ayhan, threw herself forward (took the lead) with a strong exertion, leaving the runner up 20 m behind in the last 100 m. Because she took the lead too much earlier and failed to keep her pace of speed and could not catch up with her runner up Russian athlete, Tatyana Tomashova, she finished as the runner up by 3.50.04. Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and the head of the oppositon party Rebuclic People's Party Deniz Baykal also spectated her in Paris”<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>4</sup> **Hürriyet** , 30.08.2003 (popular national newspaper)

<sup>5</sup> [www.ntvmsnbc.com](http://www.ntvmsnbc.com) News Portal, 31.08.2003.

After that unexpected failure she said that she had her mens therefore failed to catch the pace she always runs on the day of the race. There followed an interesting discussion in television and press. It was a matter of criticism that she could not retard her mens day using drugs.

*“Gold medal she was supposed to win underwent a series of misfortunes. Süreyya who has been exposed to irregular menstruation since her adolecency was administered some medicines, which then created edema in her, upsetting her trainings and performance. Moreover she stepped on the track fearing that “ I will happen to be disgraced all over the world”<sup>6</sup>.*

The anger and disillusionment caused by her failure to win the gold medal triggered a process of discussion on which her body and athletics career was focused. No more did her body belong to herself. Her body became an organ of the shared body, the whole nation on which everyone has a right to possession. The *Bare Life*<sup>7</sup> of the athlete, as in the meaning Giorgio Agamben defines, turned out to be an object of desire for national achievement or of politics of national success.

Süreyya Ayhan’s extraordinary performance for Turkey caused national expectations to flourish in athletics which happened to be a sports branch on which sports authorities spoke in a very close attention and tune through discussions and interviews on football in mass media. Some of those who produce discourse and expand debates only on football suddenly came to capture the field of athletics outside their expertise.

Most of the actors with their voices on football widened their expertise to athletics without any difficulty at all. Those actors, establishing elements of general word order on sport (sports commentators, columnists) produced statements and patterns of expressions within this general order of words, which is accounted for by a strong intermingling of sports

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<sup>6</sup> *Hürriyet* , 02.09.2003 (Popular National Newspaper)

<sup>7</sup> Giorgio Agamben; *Kutsal İnsan- Egemen İktidar ve Çıplak Hayat*, (Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life) Tranlated by: İsmail Türkmen, Ayrıntı pub. İstanbul, 2001.

with nationalism, national achievement and with masculinity in Turkey. This discourse is based on these three major concepts closely interrelated with and capable of substituting for one another. This order sometimes provides the actors establishing and participating in the discourse with an opportunity to speak in a field outside their expertise as if they were so-called authorities. This period was also the beginning Süreyya Ayhan became vulnerable to interventions in her living and privacy.

Hincal Uluç, a columnist and television commentator on football was one of the most fervent participants in the process of debate. The following outspoken statements he made reflects angle of view by part of media opinion leaders.

“ On one hand, science now serve and find solutions on such matters, on the other hand is it unforgivable to miss the opportunity to win the gold medal in international championship by hiding behind such an excuse? Now, during Athens Olympic Games shall we pray that “We wish Süreyya’s mens could not coincide with the final day”... In the history of Olympics did there happened to be a championship which was lost with the excuse that “ I had my mens”. Olympic Games are held every four years. This four- year period is far away from now. The gold medal opportunity is gone just because of personal negligence and mistakes. That’s all gone. Such an opportunity might not be found again four years later. These facts considered, are those who criticize such excuses in this age, or those who have greater excuses than their mistakes to blame ?”.

However, as regards to the explanations by Süreyya Ayhan, there also appeared in the press numerous comments concerning understanding an explanation of sportman’s and sporwoman’s physiology in particular, as well as naturality of the process. From feminists writers who affirmed her disclosure of womanness to specialists who stated remarkable aspects on the matter, many had a voice to support her.

It was really marginal explanation in an Islamic community like Turkey that the national athlete revealed her mens period. With the explanation that she “dared reveal” her femaleness, she encountered a series criticism by sports critics and columnists who meant to set up her as an asexualized champion. It was of course clear what sort of national pressure on her could be caused by the competition she finished as runner-up not a champion. The fact that Süreyya Ayhan happened to emphasize a taboo could be comprehended as an attempt to ward off a very intensive national pressure, with a very justifiable excuse. But beyond this, her revelation was made from a domain where she escaped and got stuck in. Such words might have a potential likely to dissolve, if not their mere intention, the present word order (the loud speaker) excluding sexuality. More importantly, they might be understood an attempt to prevent the body from becoming a national possession and make it belong to herself. On the other hand, where the dominating discourse compels it, this issue itself fluctuated even in her statements.

Hard times awaited her following The World Athletics Championship. Before 2004 Athens Olympic Games, after her decision to retreat from the games due to her injury, she was declared to be banned from athletics for two years by the Disciplinary Board of General Youth and Sports Directorship, for the reason that she had violated anti-doping rules of International Amateur Athletics Federation<sup>8</sup>. This punishment was such that she could be exposed to very grave consequences, especially in a time when she attained the summit of her sports career. In a sense her sports life and her body became a tragic result of the policy of national achievements. The approach that some bodies responsible for representing the national body (structure) could encounter compulsions and interventions likely to harm themselves can be seen as a symbol of an absolute power on the body. In fact, although Yücel Kop, her trainer and also husband, claimed that she had not doped, his general

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<sup>8</sup> **Radikal**, 02.02.2004 (Popular National Newspaper)

approach to doping is quite striking. On a television interview, he defined the relationship between national sensations and doping as follows: “(These friends of ours have served greatly for Turkish sports., we had better not ban or punish them right away. They should be enlightened on the matter. If they had really doped, I do not believe though, they did so to heighten Turkish flag) said I. But my words were misinterpreted... “I advocate what I have said. I am always absolutely against doping but these friends doped for our flag and nation. Why should have done so? Of course they did dope for the flag and the nation. I insist on this” he said”<sup>9</sup>, while commenting on weight-lifters who were banned for doping<sup>10</sup>.

Power technology elaborately covering bodies has gradually tended to penetrate the possessions regarding his/her body of the individual. Body has been turned into an object on which powerful desires provoked by Capitalism could be satisfied, since debates on doping have been extended to a point where ethical principles of sports could dissolve. While one dopes on his or her will and consent, doping represents an extreme form of the loss of control on the body. In this sense, it is the last point where sport is irreversibly broken off from the very naive nature of the game. Just as in a torture, the body has become a structure on which to make any sorts of manipulations.

“Running makes me happy. Just like something one can do anything which make us happy at any moment. Just like eating what you enjoy”.

Süreyya Ayhan’s frank explanation above reflects perhaps the highest level of a sportsman’s and sportswoman’s expectations of the sport.

Süreyya sincerely reflects the meaning of sport in a very natural way. Such naive expressions to reveal that the sport is a natural way of action is an expression of her justifiable reaction to an achievement and performance-oriented social surrounding. Could it be possible

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<sup>9</sup> **Hürriyet**, 22.10.2005.

<sup>10</sup> International Weight Lifting Federation declared to have suspended all international activities of Turkey’s Weight- Lifting Federation, justifying that doping controls had been violated on 06.09.2005. 22. .09.2005 <http://www.kanald.com.tr/spor/digerdallar/2005.09.22/halterde874.shtml>.



for sport to transform into an independent and liberating domain through which sportsman/woman could surpass themselves?