

ISHPES : potential and limits

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ISHPES being an umbrella world organisation, my contribution should cover the “potential and limits” of sport history internationally or at least at a very large level. A vast and ambitious program that can reasonably not be considered here! Rather, I would like to stress the ideas ISHPES was built on, to reconsider more critically why its objectives were never entirely reached despite some obvious successes.

A long history: when politics meet science

The networking of sports historians was the result of both political conditions and scientific expectations. Before ISHPES, there were two international organisations in sport history, whose project was to network the community of sports historians world wide and to support the recognition of the field at various levels. However, their division reflected the state of the world of the 1970s and 1980s. On the one hand, the International Committee for the History of Physical Education and Sport (ICOSH) was created in Prague in 1967, under the umbrella of ICSSPE. The group was rapidly taken over by a majority of scholars from Eastern Europe, with only two presidents in 22 years: Frantisek Kratky and Günther Wonneberger. Despite representatives from all the continents, the organisation had only between 60 and 90 members in the 1980s.

A few years after the creation of ISOH, however, some people refused the way it was ruled. For both political and individual reasons, they created a concurrent institution, HISPA, in Zürich, in July 1973. From the very beginning, the idea was to build a link between sports historians and all major institutions in sport science, including ICHPER, FIMS, FIEP, ICSSPE and even UNESCO. It has to be noticed, however, that the institutions in mainstream history were not an explicit target, although most of the sports historians had the desire to strengthen also these links.

HISPA was successful enough to attract hundreds of sport historians in its congresses and seminars and its membership rose from 117 in 1973 to more than 400 in 1986. As an example, the last HISPA congress in 1989 was followed by participants from 27 countries and from the 5 continents. Scientifically also, HISPA had a considerable influence. For instance,

Pierre Bourdieu delivered an opening lecture at the HISPA conference in 1978, where he explored the field of sport for the first time in his academic life, showing the potential of its theoretical model to understand both the sociology and the history of sport.

However, the division of the field had a cost. As a consequence of the ICOSH-HISPA situation, the international visibility of sport history was not as strong as it could have been, in comparison with both other sport sciences and History. Also, national and regional organisations such as NASSH or the BSSH were not really tempted to take part in the process and preferred act locally.

The end of the cold war created new conditions in 1989, and ICOSH and HISPA could merge during the 13th HISPA Congress held in Olympia. Here again, the main ideas behind the new organisation were to build a World organisation, able to represent the community of sports historians and the field of sports history at an international level and to support the development of sports history world wide. ISHPES kept some of the characteristics of HISPA and ICOSH, for instance the three official languages (English, French and German), but most of the scientific orientations were taken from HISPA.

Institutional successes, scientific limits and academic failure

Since 1989, some actions have been successful, both institutionally and scientifically. One can mention the linking of scholars with the Internet (SPORTHIST), the organisation of more than 20 congresses and seminars on the five continents, the edition of more than 15 books, proceedings and special issues of journals.

Though ISHPES, sports history was also integrated within both the International Council of Sport Science and Physical education (ICSSPE) in 1990 and the International Committee of Historical Science (ICHS) in 2000. Behind the institutional process, this last step was important, because mainstream historians had hardly recognised the work done in sport history over the last 40 years.

However, ISHPES has not reached some of its objectives, which lead to a much less optimistic view on the future. Let me evoke briefly five problems which, in a sense, concern also sports historian in general.

First, the generation that founded HISPA in the 1970s was in its 30s and 40s. When ISHPES came into existence in 1989, this group of scholars were around their 50s. Despite their effort to promote sport history among the youngest, the size of the job market, the concurrence of new sub-disciplines such as sport management, the sometime lack of

understanding of our colleagues from hard sport sciences, internal sterile fights tarnishing the image of sport history and the rejection of sport as a legitimate topic in most of the departments of history all together generated a decrease in the wish and in the possibility of doing sport history professionally for the students. Thus, gab has been created in ISHPES membership between the oldest and the youngest, which reveals more generally the position of sport historians in the academic world, as showed by the difficulties to have candidates for the ISHPES young scholars. My personal analysis is that the reduction of the job market is a major concern for the future of sport history and that this might lead to changes in the way we are doing sport history.

Secondly, ISHPES succeeded in representing sport history for the other sport sciences, but this representation remains very formal for mainstream historians. Despite the process that occurred after 2000 with the integration of ISHPES into the CISH, the reality is that most sport historians are still not recognised as such in mainstream history. Of course the situation is different according to the countries and historical traditions, but the tendency is that nowadays, mainstream historians accept that their students worked on sport history without recognising or more simply without knowing the tremendous sum of works done on the issue. Yet international journals in History accept papers on sport history, but if you consider in detail the type of papers that are accepted, you would see that there is a reduction of the field to certain approaches and topics with for instance a predominant position of political sport history.

Thirdly, the creation of ISHPES was based on this generous idea of connecting all sports historians. A simple look at the membership issue shows that not only the number of members is inferior to what the situation of ICOSH AND HISPA was, but also that the membership follows the rhythm of the congress. If I am pessimistic, I would say that scholars are looking more to a reduction of their congress fee than to the belonging to a community. Clearly, some of the most active national and regional organisations in sport history attract more people in their congress and have more members than ISHPES. They are several explanations to his statement. The image and recognition of ISHPES, maybe, the cost of travelling to an overseas congress, more surely. For some, the fear of an "international" academic level could make they feel unsecured, even though it would not be objectively the case. Reality is that the people who attend an ISHPES congress are constituted partly by

“local” from the hosted country and partly by a group of international scholars that you can see again regularly at NASSH, BSSH, ASSH, etc.

Fourthly and in relation with that, ISHPES leaders wanted to balance the participation and membership of the scholars from the different regions of the world. The reality is very different and shows an over representation of Europeans. Successive presidents of ISHPES were all Europeans: Roland Renson, Gertrud Pfister and myself. It has already been the case for HISPA, with successive presidents being Swiss citizen Luis Burgener, German Manfred Lämmer and Belgium Roland Renson. However, more important is the fact that the membership shows the same profile, with a half of Europeans members over the last 20 years. The situation is problematic as such, but became uncomfortable when the European Committee of Sports History was created in 1995.

Finally, ISHPES could have played a larger role in contributing to recognise that they are several ways of writing sport history, and various historical cultures, which should be equally accepted. According to Pomian (1999), “Whether it is understood as knowledge, interpretation, writing, institution, or as all those who practice it and who are recognized as such taken as a whole, history is available only in the plural”.¹ Let’s consider only the European case, for instance. Taking into account the tradition and forms of mainstream history, the social theories which are currently recognised as the most relevant, the importance of regional or national institutions and networking in sport history, the focus of the studies, the periods that are privileged and the sources which are mainly used and/or which are available, six different ways of writing sport history or even cultures of sport history appear at least : a British culture of sport history, a German culture of sport history, a French-speaking culture of sport history, a Greek one, a Scandinavian one and a East-European one, on top of many brilliant individuals from other countries and regions. The international journals of sport history such as the *JHS*, the *IJHS*, and maybe *Sport in History*, etc. have had a responsibility in defining dominant lines, which, however, contributed to marginalize still more other ways of writing sport history. ISHPES could have been a tool for reaching academic excellence though diversity: this has only been partially the case.

¹ Krystof Pomian, *Sur l’histoire*, Paris, Gallimard, 1999, p. 399.