This paper deals with the concept “globalization” from a systems theoretical perspective. As its starting point, it takes David Rowe’s recent critical summary of the discussion on the globalization of sport (Rowe 2003) where he observes an “emerging consensus in the sociology of sport that cultural nationalism and (g)localism resist globalizing processes”. With regard to this consensus he suspects „that the social institution of sport is so deeply dependent on the production of difference that it repudiates the possibility of comprehensive globalization while seeming to foreshadow its inevitable establishment” (Rowe 2003: 281f.). This assessment contains some equally interesting and problematic assumptions, namely that (1) sport is deeply dependent on the production of difference; (2) cultural nationalism and (g)localism (according to the consensus) or sport itself (according to Rowe’s speculation) resist globalizing processes; (3) there is a phenomenon called “comprehensive globalization” which can be foreshadowed and resisted.

The paper will provide an analysis of these three assumptions. It uses the perspective of a systems theoretical version of world society theory (for introductory essays see Luhmann 1982; Stichweh 2003, 2004; for seminal works Luhmann 1995; Stichweh 2000). This theory combines discourse analysis with the sociological tradition of differentiation theory. For globalization research it combines a differentiation theoretical thesis (functional differentiation as the primary mode of internal differentiation of world society) with a globalization theoretical thesis (functional differentiation and emergence of world society as closely interrelated processes). It conceptualises social systems as self-referential systems based on meaningful communication and world society as “the encompassing social system which includes all communications, reproduces all communications and constitutes meaningful horizons for further communications” (Luhmann 1982: 131). Within this framework the paper makes the case for sport as a global communication system in its own right. In this respect, it is precisely in line with Rowe’s suggestion that “deeper consideration might be given to the institutional formation of sport itself” (Rowe 2003: 292).

For the purpose of such an analysis the paper introduces the concept “world sport” (Werron 2005). This concept will be explicated in four sections. In the first three sections, central aspects of the peculiarity, universality and globality of modern sport as a communication system will be addressed. In short, it is suggested that modern sport distinguishes itself from pre modern and early modern sport not only through rationalization, quantification and record orientation etc. (Guttmann 1978), but most notably through the hierarchical organization and continuous evaluation of competitions, i.e. through its continuous comparison of performances (see Eichberg 1984; Stichweh 1995). Moreover, in this comparative logic there are no inherent social or territorial limitations for the inclusion of participants and spectators. These basic traits of modern sport imply a specific logic of comparison qualifying for an effective process of globalization: On the one hand, they give way for a worldwide implementation of homogenous rules (of sports and disciplines). On the other hand, the primary effect of this rules is to make differences in the performances of an unlimited number
of participants visible, giving an unlimited number of spectators opportunities for diverse (individual, local, national etc.) partisanship and other motives for participation by observation. This mutually enhancing relation of global horizons of comparison and global production of difference lies at the heart of the concept “world sport”. In the globalization literature this relation is reflected in the ubiquity of “key dichotomies” (Bairner 2001: 8) such as global/local, homogenisation/heterogenization, universalism/particularism, diminishing contrasts/increasing varieties (Maguire 1999) and hybrid concepts like creolization, hybridization, localisation or reflexive localisation (for an overview see Robertson/White 2003). In world society theory it is argued that this comparative logic, based on different criteria of observation, is also an underlying evolutionary principle of other global systems such as the economic, scientific, political, mass media, religious, artistic etc. sphere (exemplary for science Stichweh 2003a). In all these spheres, communication technologies and formal organisations play major roles in extending inclusion and enhancing internal differentiation. Thus, “globalization” can best be described as a simultaneous plurality of processes all dependent on the production of difference.

The fourth and last section will turn back to the initial questions and draw conclusions from the conceptual analysis by comparing the concepts of “globalization” and “world sport”. The basic assumptions will be: (1) Global sport, understood as “modern achievement/competitive sport”, is indeed deeply dependent on the production of difference. (2) Nevertheless, although the observation of differences as resistance may often serve as a mode of producing difference (the case of “reflexive localisation”), the production of difference in sport should not be identified with resisting globalizing processes. Instead, globalizing processes generally are to be seen as dependent on the production of (local, national and other) differences – in the sportive as well as in other spheres. (3) It follows that “comprehensive globalization”, if understood solely in terms of “homogenization”, is a scientific fiction. Accordingly, the final remarks of the paper will ask if, from this point of view, some discourse-analytical reasons may be given for the fact that “globalization” is still widely perceived as a buzz word rather than as a theoretical concept (e. g. Wimmer 2001).

Literature


Stichweh, Rudolf, 2003b: Genese des globalen Wissenschaftssystems, Soziale Systeme 9: 3-26

