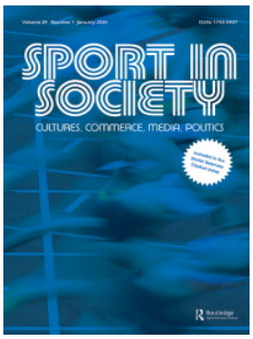

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Framing the idealistic Bohemian and the rational outsider: on Swedish sports media narratives of individualism and defiance

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ABSTRACT

Bohemians and outsiders have long fascinated the media and the general public because they challenge conventional lifestyles and societal norms. This fascination extends to sport, where narratives about such figures appear in both historical and contemporary media. By analysing the media's framing of cross-country skier Lars Theodor Jonsson (1903–1998) and speed skater Nils van der Poel (1996–), this essay identifies two distinct ideal types: the 'idealistic bohemian' of modern society and the 'rational outsider' of postmodern society. Through an examination of these athletes' careers, public personae, and lifestyle choices as represented in the media, the essay sheds light on how sporting hero narratives evolve in relation to broader social and cultural changes.

KEYWORDS

Outsiders; sport media; rationalism; modernity; postmodernity; Nils van der Poel; Lars Theodor Jonsson

Brief introduction

The contrarian and rather wayward character of Nils van der Poel (1996–), the Swedish Olympic speed skating champion of 2022, has fascinated the Swedish sports media in recent years due to his unusual personality and odd, surprising choices compared to other athletes. For instance, he launched an enlightened 'training manifesto' (Jönsson 2022), and shortly thereafter promptly decided to end his career – at an early age and at the height of his athletic abilities – just weeks after becoming an Olympic champion. In interviews, he even described himself as an 'outsider'. Departing from this occasion, this essay will examine the narratives generated by the media as well as by van der Poel himself to understand the construction and marketing of a 'rational outsider' in global sport. In a similar manner, the cross-country (XC) skier Lars Theodor Jonsson (1903–1998) captivated the Swedish media and the public in the mid-twentieth century, standing as an example of the myths of an 'idealistic bohemian'. Through an examination of these athletes' careers, public personae, and lifestyle choices as

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represented in the media, the essay sheds light on how sporting hero narratives evolve in relation to broader social and cultural changes.

To comprehend this change, we will ground the study, instructively, by presenting the framing of Lars Theodor Jonsson as a bohemian. This section will henceforth serve as a conceptual horizon for the analysis of the 'odd' character of Nils van der Poel and the concept(ion)'s possible alterations, which will be comparatively reflected in the essay's analysis and conclusion. Naturally, prior to these narratives and comparative reflections, we find it appropriate and fruitful to present the essay's essential foundation and departures, which will stand and work as a concise and provisional theoretical framework. In addition, the essay's methodological base and materials will be presented before exploring the two illuminating cases.

Scholastic horizon and departures

This section will present several departures and reflections on, for instance, outsiders, heroes, (social) media, and (post)modernity to generate a basic horizon of knowledge and perspectives that will, hopefully, serve as illuminating guideposts in the illumination of the subject and the essay's two empirical cases.

Outsiders and the 'odd ones', in general

Initially, Norbert Elias' and John Scotson's (1994) work, *The Established and the Outsiders*, serves as an enlightening entrance to the essay's aim. Their cultural study consists of a microcosm of local relationships that highlights a wide variety of 'social configurations', such as class, race, ethnicity, and gender. The aim of their work is to highlight social and cultural mechanisms in, among other things, stigmatization, honor and dishonor, reputation, and attitudes towards outsiders. Naturally, these types of figurative studies act as inspiration for micro-sociological, case-oriented analyses in the field of power relations, identification, self-branding, glorification, and medialization. Elias and Scotson argue that although there are different forms of, for example, stigmas and identifications, there are at the same time constant and recurring topics and moral judgments of outsiders, such as untrustworthiness, lack of discipline, living for the moment, and focusing on immediate gratification (ibid.). At the same time, Elias and Scotson note that outsiders' self-image does not correspond to this depiction assigned to them by the established society (ibid.).

In addition, the reading of Howard S. Becker's famous sociological work on outsiders and deviance offers useful insights into the nature of outsiders (Becker 2018). Regardless of his focus on deviance – particularly among marijuana users – driven by stigma and moral panics, this framework does not easily apply to the configuration of outsiders examined in our study. Still, relevant for our purpose, Becker emphasizes that to be considered an outsider a 'rule' must be broken or challenged in some way, either intentionally or deemed as such (ibid.). Notably, the notion of a 'rule' should be understood here in a broad and flexible sense, including, e.g. general norms, common attitudes, codes of honour, customs, as well as public opinion. Evidently, the action or lifestyle must be judged as deviant by a larger – and established – group (ibid.).

It should be stressed that Becker, as well as Elias and Scotson, deal with outsiders mainly as a group (e.g. mods, neighbourhoods, drug users) and regularly in power relations. As a comparison, the outsiders in the current study are regarded and presented as specific individuals. Nevertheless, in our design and analysis, they also work tentatively as representations of different epochs, i.e. modernity and postmodernity.

Lynn Åkesson, as well as Åke Mokvist, has illuminated odd and unusual individuals in Sweden (Åkesson 1991; Mokvist 2006). Åkesson (1991), as an ethnographer, has interviewed several such individuals in the countryside, in other words, 'local characters' (cf. Mullen 1978), to place them in a scientific context. Thus, she states: 'Within one and the same society, there are different perceptions of reality and modes of understanding. In the case of people who in one way or another deviate from the usual patterns of thought or action, this becomes particularly obvious' (Åkesson 1991, 11). These rural outsiders are described as marginalized individuals, hard to comprehend and analyse. They constitute what Åkesson calls a 'cultural complexity' (ibid.). She writes: 'They [the rural outsiders, our remark] do not belong to any deviant subculture; they do not constitute a group at all. They are marginalized but at the same time integrated, they are heroes and fools at the same time' (ibid.).

Mokvist, a photographer, presents several eccentric individuals, which were typically born either before 1940 or after the 1970s (Mokvist 2006). His encounters can be summarized as follows: Almost all the individuals are men. They are poor consumers and contribute very little to our quest for economic growth or environmental degradation. They have a great deal of knowledge about nature. They can manage on their own and do not rely on social subsidies. They prefer to live in small spaces. Despite having no TV, telephone, or newspapers, they are well informed about current affairs. Mokvist states that many people laugh derisively at them and their opinions, and the media often portrays them as 'funny' or 'odd' characters for various reasons (ibid., 7). However, Mokvist also writes that 'unusual people are of interest to everyone' (ibid., 6). Therefore, there seems to be a great deal of curiosity and fascination, as well as ambiguous admiration, regardless of 'oddness'.

Sport heroes, sport stars and (social) media

Our analytical task is to visualize how the self-image of 'sport personae' is inserted into a hero narrative (cf. Smart 2005, Whannel 2002) in relation to the conceptions of an outsider and a bohemian. Thus, athletic achievement alone is rarely sufficient to attain hero status. According to sports historian John Hellström (2014), no glorification works without a personality that attracts and fascinates the masses. An important element in the construction of a hero is therefore identification (Yttergren 2006, 126–127). Media researcher Gary Whannel (2002) has contended that rather than perceiving celebrity as intrinsically shallow and meaningless, as many commentators tend to do, it is important to note that an athlete who achieves 'celebrity status provides important and revealing evidence about the cultural formation they exist within'. Consequently, he asserts, 'it is […] important to pay close attention to the ways in which they are celebrated, examining the themes, values and discourses that are in play' (ibid., 46). Whannel argues that '[s]tardom is a form of social production in which the professional ideologies and production practices of the media aim to win and hold our attention by linking sporting achievement and personality in ways

which have resonances in popular common sense' (ibid., 49). Furthermore, Whannel stresses that star images are never set once and for all but are constantly being rewritten in the 'continuously present', as the lives of the athletes are interpreted in accordance with the dominant discourse at the given moment in time (ibid., 56).

Evidently, sport in itself stands as an arena in which heroes and stars have flourished and been endorsed due to magnificent performances or unpredictable triumphs. Yet, sport media plays a significant and crucial role in the (re)productions of glorification and celebrated narratives surrounding these stars and heroes (Hellström 2014). In that respect, according to Hellström, the few analyses that have been made state that athletes become heroes when the media portray them as heroes within a particular 'hero narrative' (ibid.; cf. Whannel 2002).

While the media portray sports heroes as symbols of cultural ideals and values, 'the heroes are also a product of a commercial entertainment industry whose purpose is to stimulate the audience's consumption of goods and services' (Hellström 2014, 23; cf. Nicholsson 2007). Thus, the commercialization of sport has made sports stars important advertising pillars (Horne 2006). In addition, Hellström, with a reference to Barry Smart, argues that the accelerated pace of the twenty first century's media society has meant that few of today's athletes receive the status of heroes and that 'the few who do are overshadowed by celebrities who temporarily receive a lot of attention in the media' (Hellström 2014, 25; cf. Smart 2005). The question, asks Hellström, 'is whether today's sport heroes are really heroes in the traditional sense of the word or if they are rather media celebrities' (Hellström 2014, 26).

Yet, media images of sports heroes are the result of ongoing processes. Still, 'even if each story is unique, they are basically based on ready-made story templates that the media continuously reuse, and it is a matter of making the real person and their achievements fit into the available story templates' (ibid., 255–6.). The basic premise, however, is that these narratives reflect prevailing and dominant ideals and values in society.

Future sports heroes will be influenced by the progresses in media technologies. Thus, the development of social media has drastically changed the conditions in this regard. Today's sports heroes can communicate directly with their audiences without going through traditional media channels. This means that they can construct and control the image of themselves in a whole new way. Obviously, the rapid and accelerating advances in the ICT spheres have been vital forces in a gradual alteration of society, from modernity towards a postmodern society with all kinds of change and modification.

Social change, modernity and postmodernity

Naturally, individual choices, possibilities and lifestyles must be related to social, cultural, and structural conditions. Thus, the athletes in the two cases have operated and been career-wise engaged in different epochs, usually grasped as 'modernity' and 'postmodernity'. Modern society is, briefly, described as a more homogenous society, with more stable – more or less 'monistic' – belief and value systems, with an increasing strive towards collective solutions as well as long-term planning, trust in governance and social engineering, and a 'search for truth' as an optimistic legacy of the Enlightenment (e.g. Halliday 1999; cf. Habermas 1971).

It is generally argued that postmodernity implies a gradual suspension, deconstruction, or defragmentation of the welfare state and its buttressing normative structures (cf. Martin 2007; Olson 2006). Individualism is branded and is given considerable space. Regarding interests and participation, individuals are increasingly mobile and transitory (e.g. Canzler, Kaufmann, and Kesselring 2016), and thus, less loyal. Interests and motivations are formed in temporary projects. Hence, individuals are increasingly oriented towards short-term goals with instant rewards. If 'modernity' was shaped and organized more homogeneously, postmodern individuals favor heterogeneity, and thus, pluralism. If individuals in 'modernity' had a hope for 'truth' and firm values, value-nihilism is more on the agenda today (cf. Levin 2001; Slocombe 2006). In a world of 'mayflies' and 'fifteen minutes of fame', it seems imperative to present a self-image, which the rise of social media (Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook) enables and supports.

Indeed, worldviews have become increasingly shaped by a globalization process. At the same time, however, there is a growing emphasis on 'the local'. Overall, contemporary society is developed as an amalgam of tradition and transition, of 'modern' as well as 'postmodern' characteristics. Albeit short and summative, discussions regarding crucial elements of 'modernity' and 'postmodernity' and their implications have understandably played a significant role in our contextual charter and the comparative analysis.

Methodological statements

Norbert Elias, who stands as an inspiration for this study, was a master of relating and using minor and mundane events, actions, and discourses in history or in everyday life to capture general social processes on a macro-level. For example, changes in table manners as well as toileting were, for Elias, illustrations and tools in the civilization process (Elias 2000). In a comparable manner, we use media coverage of two unusual sport athletes from different epochs in order to identify possible changes in the conceptualization of outsiders and bohemians.

As acknowledged, the inquiry is fundamentally and empirically based on two narratives that have been (re)produced in relation to Lars Theodor Jonsson and Nils van der Poel by both the media and the athletes themselves. The two cases originate from XC skiing and skating – Olympic winter sports in which Sweden has achieved major successes. These sports are traditionally seen as central to the Swedish sports landscape and, as such, receive significant attention in sports media and hold a strong place in the minds of the Swedish public. All in all, in our essay, these athletes' lifespans, sporting experiences, and associated narratives represent and manifest different epochs. Still, Jonsson, as well as van der Poel, should be regarded as sovereign and complex individuals who, in our essay are (analytically) abbreviated and handled as 'Weberian ideal types', as mentioned, to reflect on potential transitions of the concept(ion) of bohemians and outsiders.

Materials have been television productions about Jonsson, as well as newspaper articles in the Swedish daily press that deal with the myths and stories that have come to characterize Jonsson's life and career as a skier and person. These articles have been found in the National Library of Sweden's digitized collection of newspapers. Similar materials, i.e. articles in newspapers, are used in making van der Poel's case. In addition, his published training diary – the 'manifesto' – has been accessible on the web.

Lars Theodor Jonsson and the search for idealistic bohemians (modernity)

In sports history, we find 'sports heroes' who have distinguished themselves to a greater extent for their way of life than for their achievements as athletes. This group includes the XC skier Lars Theodor Jonsson (1903–1998), whose merits made him a prominent athlete in the 1930s, just below the highest level. Despite these merits, he has mainly been remembered for having left a comfortable life in an urban setting after ending his sporting career and moving to a tiny cabin in the forest in northern Sweden, where he lived in very simple circumstances for about three and a half decades before returning to 'civilization' (i.e. the town of Strömsund, located in the province of Jämtland) in the early 1990s. The long isolation had not prevented him from acting as a public figure, however, and journalists regularly visited the former elite skier to continue documenting his remarkable life story.

Even though Jonsson was frequently portrayed in sports media, both during and after his skiing career, it was not until he was 80 years old that he had a real media breakthrough. The background to this was that, within the space of a few years, he acted in three documentaries on Swedish television. In two of these, he was at the centre of the story, namely *Bortom Hagan* [Beyond the Pasture] (Sladkowski 1988) and *Lappen* [The Lapp] (Sladkowski 1992).

Jonsson first became known to the sport-interested TV audience as early as 1966, in connection with a short film that showed a gathering of 14 older and contemporary Swedish skiing heroes (Sveriges Television 1966). This short film presents the profile of a peculiar TV-personality who, through gestures and speeches, appears to be a unique figure in Swedish sports and media history. The atmosphere in the room is uncertain and ambiguous when the modest champs give an account of their triumphs and titles. Like an icebreaker, Jonsson then makes his entrance into the program. He has hitherto been bent over with his arms crossed and his face turned away, but once he is asked a question and begins to speak, he immediately becomes the central figure of the congregation, even though his merits as a skier are modest in comparison to those of the others. Yet, he makes a big deal out of this, comparative limitation:

> My championships are nothing to come up with in this gigantic group. They are as small as mosquitoes, my triumphs, against these beasts I sit with today. […] These giants from Vasaloppet [since 1922, a famous XC skiing competition, labelled after a historic Swedish king, Gustav Vasa, and his heroic escape, on skis, in 1520 from pursuing Danish soldiers, our comment]; Mora-Nisse, and Sixten Jernberg. The whole Swedish people start to tremble when they hear about their names. […] I am only a shadow. (Sveriges Television 1966)

For five of the program's total 13 minutes, Jonsson is in focus, which indicates that he had already in the 1960s occupied a special, almost mythical, position among Swedish skiing legends. He appears as a wayward figure in a long line of otherwise reserved Swedish skiing heroes.

Jonsson is presented in a fairly similar way in the documentary *De sista skidåkarna* [The Last Skiers] (Sima and Eriksson 1988), which was broadcast on Swedish Television 22 years later (in 1988). While the other aging skiing heroes are interviewed at home, Jonsson is presented through a stylized sequence of his backboard as he energetically walks through the forest with a large knapsack on his back. He appears elusive; he will not rest on his laurels while the other ski legends sit down, satisfied with their achievements and with their life.

The film has a nostalgic tone. It was better in the past, when the heroes of skiing were simple men from the broad depths of the people, who worked in the forest and lived in simple conditions. All the participants are reminiscent of a skiing culture that has been lost due to the specialization and commercialization of sport. Jonsson, in particular, represents this nostalgic hero ideal, as he has maintained a lifestyle similar to that of a woodsman from the interwar period. In this respect, he is portrayed as a symbol of a barren and harsh form of Swedishness that seems to be fading with the rise of the welfare state.

It is noteworthy that the documentary omits Jonsson's ethnic background. Jonsson is Sámi, belonging to an Indigenous population that dominated Swedish cross-country skiing in the late nineteenth century, though their prominence waned during the interwar period (Lidström 2021). Jonsson's Sámi ancestry is explored in greater depth in the documentaries *Bortom Hagan* and *Lappen*. In the latter, ethnicity is one of several issues with which the director paints a picture of an elderly and rejected loner. Both documentaries focus specifically on stories of Jonsson enduring contempt during his career, partly because he was Sámi and partly due to jealousy in his local community provoked by his trips abroad during the competition years. In addition to racism, the absence of women in Jonsson's life is also explored in depth. This celibacy is visually staged through sequences in which Jonsson dances a waltz with a feather in his hat, dressed in a suit with his arms around an invisible woman.

To emphasize: in the documentaries portraying Lars Theodor Jonsson, two distinct identities are constructed. Jonsson stands as the remnant of the old Swedish sport ideal, a folk hero, tainted with snot, sweat and profanity. On the other hand, he is a Sámi eccentric and societal outcast, a 'noble savage' who has turned his back on civilization. It is clear, in this respect, that Jonsson did not really fit into the prevalent notions of interwar skiers.

After Jonsson's departure from competitive sport, a decade and a half of media silence followed. From the beginning of the 1960s onwards, however, there was a resurgence of interest. In several media articles, the focus was on Jonsson's retreat and course of life in the forest cabin. As far as the break-up is concerned, the reasons behind it are described rather vaguely. Racism and general contempt from the people back home are usually mentioned. Jonsson talks about how the aversion of those around him had made him nervous, and that he was forced to have surgery for a stomach ulcer, after which he retired on disability pension and fled to the woods.

The media coverage from Jonsson's home depicts a solitary existence that seems timeless. He read newspapers and then wallpapered the walls and floors with them. He is unfettered, detached from all hierarchical orders and loyalties. The timelessness of the reportage is also reinforced by the fact that Jonsson consistently refuses to disclose his age.

The struggle between the secular or 'being estranged from the world' intervenes as a fundamental conflict in the narrative that surrounds Jonsson's forest life. At the epicentre stands the material things that cause him to vacillate between these positions, i.e. his prizes and cups from the ski competitions. It is remarkable how important trophies, medals, silver spoons, and plates are in most of the newspaper articles about Jonsson. Equally remarkable is the change in importance that this collection has acquired over the years. The collection is described in the following way:

> On a few planks under the roof ridge of a barn in the nearest village, we find Lars Theodor's collection of prizes. It's been many years since he nailed the unique dents, statuettes, and silver

> cutlery into boxes, which were stacked into the barn. There they are hidden under layers of dust and will be destroyed. (Karlsson 1961)

The decay of the prize collection mirrors the status of its owner. Five years later, however, the perspective has shifted. The collection of prizes had symbolized the old evil life and 'was for philosophical reasons buried in the forest and hidden in order to forget' (Jolo 1966), but six months after that, the prize collection has once again shifted in importance. A reportage in *Göteborgs-Tidningen* portrays a man who now looks back on his skiing career with much brighter memories. He recalls: 'Oh, I remember. Imagine when I danced in the streets of St. Moritz!' [referring to the 1928 Winter Olympics]. He also remembers 'what it was like to be Swedish champion in three distances. What it was like to be universally acclaimed throughout Europe'. Jonsson has evoked these bright recollections with the help of the prizes, which have been found 'from the old barn in which it had lain forgotten for many years'. Now he intends to leave life in the forest with the help of these trophies, stating: 'I thought that some company that builds sport cabins would exchange my prices for a cabin' (Äng 1967). The news that Jonsson intended to exchange his prize collection for a sport cabin was spread in the daily newspapers. After only a week, the municipality had offered him 'a state-of-the-art retirement villa' and said that he would not have to hand over his prize collection in return (Nordin 1967). However, Jonsson does not seem to have been interested in the modern retirement home. Instead, he accepted a simpler cottage that a forest business company made available to him, where he could live in solitude.

The prizes – cups and medals – seem to have been the root of misery and unhappiness because they bound Jonsson to the material world and thus prevented him from fully immersing himself in a happy life, free from competition. In the documentary *Bortom Hagan*, he claims:

> They're useless, those tin cans. They are a symbol of stupidity, of sport, of human mendacity. And I've wondered many times: How could I be so stupid to get into sport? How could I be so stupid and start skiing for medals and money and glory? It wasn't for the money I competed, but for the glory of getting to the top. (Sladkowski 1988)

Lars Theodor Jonsson died in 1998 in a retirement home, 95 years old. Much later, it would turn out that the collection of prizes remained in the hut after he had moved. Many people believed that the collection was embezzled, given away or submerged, at least until 2009 when the location of the collection was made public; it is now on display at a local homestead museum (Gustafsson 2009).

To sum up, Lars Theodor Jonsson's rank as a bohemian is to be found between myth and reality. As an interviewee, he seems to have had a very playful approach to the conventions of storytelling. Our presentation exposes the creation of a bohemian mythology, with Jonsson himself and his countless biographers as authors. Some details from his life are stated and immortalized in a newspaper article, then spread and raised to rumours and legends. Soon, the myth has grown wings and has a life of its own. After a while, new and younger reporters come and inquire the myth's truthfulness, whereupon Jonsson immediately dismisses its veracity. The story can be modified and presented into the public sphere [*Öffentlichkeit*], from his cabin out to the world and back.

Nils van der Poel and the issue of rational outsiders (postmodernity)

In his acceptance speech after receiving the 2022 Jerring Prize (a prestigious award in which the Swedish public votes for the most impressive sporting performances of the year), Nils van der Poel, who won gold in the 5,000 m and 10,000 m speed skating events at the Beijing Olympics that same year, presented himself as an 'outsider'. But to what extent can an athlete truly be considered an outsider if they choose to describe themselves that way? How much of an outsider was van der Poel, really? Consider, for example, the fact that he was awarded the people's vote, not because of his outsider-position but for his athletic achievements. From that perspective, he was very much an insider; he competed within the sporting system and culture but managed to frame himself as an outsider, nonetheless. So, in this respect, it seems reasonable to claim that he was very aware of his position and that he took advantage of it as a way of strengthening his brand in the market. In fact, one might even suggest that he used the logic of the commercial sports industry and culture to make a stand against the thing he benefitted from. In that respect, he positioned himself as both an insider and outsider: he was an insider regarding the knowledge he had about how the market works, but from that deliberately distanced himself from the insider position. This was evident when he was awarded the Jerring Prize at the Swedish Sport Gala, a reward he, inconsistently, regarded with skepticism, stating:

> Sport is not about pleasing others, making others think you are good. It's kind of strange to receive an award for that in a business that so clearly praises achievements for what we do. (SVT Sport 2022a)

But how did we get here? In the following we will illustrate this narrative and the construction of van der Poel's position and character.

We start with the manifesto. Theatrically, even before its publication, the manifesto had assumed an almost mythical character. As soon as the Beijing Olympics were over for van der Poel, even before his anticipated triumphs, he promised that his training diary would be made public. In this respect, everything went according to the plan. He won the gold medal in the 5,000 meters and subsequently secured another victory in the 10,000 meters, setting a new world record.

Thus, there was a curious waiting for the diary, and as promised, it was published the day after the second gold medal. The interest in 'How to skate a 10 k' turned out to be enormous. In just twelve hours, the document had been downloaded 130,000 times, not only by athletes but also by cultural journalists, who had already identified something distinctive in van der Poel's persona. This interest elevated after a short documentary, 'Nils van der Poel – fool or genius?' on Swedish Television (SVT Play 2023). Something of a modern myth had quickly been formed and van der Poel established himself as a phenomenon. In the documentary, van der Poel reflected on his life and career in a way that is unusual for elite athletes. Instead of standardized comments, we met an athlete who had, in addition, extended his interests beyond material achievements and victories. In this respect, media and fans met an athlete with his senses turned as much towards the inner world as towards the outer. This made an impression. Simultaneously, he became a product of the attention-seeking culture.

The manifesto lived up to the expectations. The approach was set already in the introduction by a quote from the psychoanalytical theorist Carl Jung, stating: 'It seems that all true things must change and only that which changes remains true'. (Ironically, van der Poel misspelled 'Jung' in the document). Nonetheless, van der Poel had found this quote applicable to his training philosophy, in which nothing is static, least of all the human being. On the contrary, it seems everything is set in motion. Hence, it is only through movement that the truth about oneself can be attained as well as preserved. It came, understandably, as no surprise that several cultural writers became interested in the diary.

In the culture section of the daily newspaper *Sydsvenskan*, for example, Peter Fällmar Andersson observed that van der Poel made references to Nietzsche and additionally quoted him from the TV documentary as saying: 'Nietzsche told us that if you have a why, almost everyone can do it. People can do a lot of things, sick things, if you have a pretty strong why' (Andersson 2022). Historian Björn Lundberg made similar connections to Nietzsche in *Expressen* but also noted influences from Thomas Kuhn and his thoughts that scientific methods do not develop linearly but through paradigm shifts (Lundberg 2022). Lundberg observed, in that respect, that Kuhn's arguments were repeated in van der Poel's training diary and immersed in his training methods. In such a prism, training methods are not progressed through a straight line of development but through the breach of habitual training patterns. In an interview at Swedish Television, historian Sverker Sörlin moreover saw 'Stoic ideals' emerge in van der Poel's manifesto (SVT Nyheter 2022), where the question of the meaning of life became far more important than all the gold medals in the world. The attraction of the document was, from this perspective, not directly to do with the training itself but rather in relation to existential issues that lie behind – and within – the person who is set to perform the sporting acts.

But there were also other voices from within the sport, i.e. from those who have read the document as a training manual. In addition to the philosophical expositions, several pages are covered with training plans, numbers, and tables concerning the amount of training. To that end, it can be said that the document falls into two separate parts, one for culture and one for practical sport. Still, van der Poel himself may not see them as two separate parts but as interwoven.

All this notwithstanding, reducing his career to several Olympic gold medals, world records and this training diary would not capture van der Poel in a fair way. For it is equally obvious that his interests are more expansive than that. It is a concern that goes beyond the boundaries of sport itself. This was most evident when, a couple of weeks after the Olympics, he arranged to meet Angela Gui, the daughter of the Swedish-Chinese poet and publisher Gui Minhai, who has been imprisoned in China for several years for exercising his basic human rights. During the meeting, van der Poel offered one of his gold medals in support of Gui Minhai. Not only did this act have political explosiveness, it also constituted an action to generate a sport philosophy that does not stop at the boundaries of sport.

After his two gold medals in the Olympics, Nils van der Poel announced that he could consider retiring as an elite skater when the season was completed. First, however, he intended to participate in the All-Around World Championships in Hamar, Norway, March 3–6, the Swedish Skating Association announced in a press release (SVT Sport 2022b). At a press conference in connection with this championship, van der Poel then confirmed that he indeed intended to end his career shortly. 'My ultimate ambition is that the World Cup in Heerenveen will be the last thing I do as a skater', he stated in front of a gathered press

corps in early March (Rickstrand and Akbarzadeh 2022). Although this news had been preceded by many long speculations, it hit the domestic media landscape like a bomb. The reactions in the media can best be described as a mixture of admiration and amazement. That a young, popular, and successful athlete at the peak of his career voluntarily chose to turn his back on everything was quite exceptional (Dagson 2022). Revealingly, a journalist at *Expressen* asked van der Poel if he 'wasn't keen to continue just a little bit longer' because of the chance to break a world record that has eluded him (Börjesson 2022). van der Poel responded to the reporter:

> I mean, it would have been huge to do that, but I'm not driven enough by it […] As an athlete, especially a cardio athlete, when you train for so many hours and with high intensity, you ask yourself every day what you are doing. That's a question I've asked a lot. I've concluded that […] I don't want to live my life in relation to if it's worth to break six minutes. That would have been legendary, but it's not big enough. (ibid.)

Subsequently, the newspaper *Aftonbladet* made a penetrating report of van der Poel, with the explosive headline: 'It must be okay to fail' (Bergström 2022). In this reportage, van der Poel addressed his view on his sport practice and the goals and meaning of sports in general. Thus, he became positioned as an atypical sport profile, as well as a genuine and reflexive person, who himself has as many questions as answers:

> He doesn't live anywhere and doesn't know which city he's going to this afternoon. He doesn't have a full-time job, no sports career, but will give some lectures and help develop mountain tourism. But he is present like few others I have met. Looking you in the eye, laughing out loud, listening, joking, asking counter-questions, drifting away from given topics. He dresses nicely. And he refuses to talk about himself more than necessary. (ibid.)

The article finished with a longer passage, in which van der Poel put his own experiences into words by talking about himself in the third person:

> You can realize that Nils was the best in the world. He isolated himself in a cabin in Inzell, Germany, for two months. Is that a reasonable way to live? No, not at all. You must find an approach that makes you wake up every morning and have a desire for exercise […] It's exclusionary. And those of us who have been at the top are pressured to present our careers in a certain way: you have to say that it's hard and fun and that you've had a lot of support from your team. It's going to be an uninteresting interview about yet another perfectionist athlete. But the lyrics are dull, and the life seems boring […] But we don't have the courage to be nuanced. We are not athletes because we want to become exposed in media. It is often influencers or journalists who want to become popular, or people who front TV-shows. Most athletes just think sports are cool and enjoyable, so interviews are just about fitting into a predetermined and normative role. Not to stand out. It's crazy, it's us who talk to you who want to be seen. (ibid)

As expected, the interview was received with great curiosity in the Swedish media landscape. The day after, *Dagens Nyheter*, devoted the editorial column to dissecting it in general and van der Poel, as a unique athlete, in particular:

> Free, high, and uncensored, the skater discusses the existential conditions of sport: what elite efforts require, how far it is reasonable to stretch to reach the top, and what it does to a person regarding a one-sidedly strive to achieve a goal that is difficult to achieve. As usual, he's a refreshing contrast to the media-trained, logo-embellished, and table-rattling athletes we're used to spot in front of the cameras. Not least, his strong opinions about the Swedish sports movement are worth recording. (Westerberg 2022)

Indeed, these words encapsulate the position that van der Poel seems to have achieved after his active career. That is a position as a 'grey eminence' in Swedish sport society, with great influence in all sorts of matters concerning training, performance, and success. This position has since been strengthened by the fact that he has embarked on a successful lecturing career, where he gives motivational speeches to the sports movement, as well as to the business sphere, about what it means to 'succeed'. Moreover, he does not seem to hesitate to use the media as a platform to create and drive opinion regarding everything from youth sports and the organization of sports to the importance of taking a stand for Ukraine in the wake of the Russian invasion. Extraordinarily, regarding sports stars in general, in 2024 van der Poel paved the way for a supplementary lane at the university by starting to study political science at Karlstad University (Feuk 2024).

Comparisons, analysis and conclusions

As stated in the methodological reflection, it is epistemologically challenging to draw general conclusions based on two individual cases from different epochs and ontologies. Despite this burden, this section has such an ambition. Thus, the section will present trends and alterations in the media construction of outsiders and bohemians. The analysis will, accordingly, exhibit comparative views on our two cases, in addition to some reflective judgments related to their presented and exposed characters and (self-)images, hopefully providing several general insights regarding the conceptions of bohemians and outsiders.

For various reasons, due to media coverage, we depart from the assumption that both Lars Theodor Jonsson and Nils van der Poel are exhibited as odd or unconventional athletes. We have, also, initially as well as hypothetically, identified the presentations of Jonsson with 'modernity', whereas van der Poel's images have been identified with 'postmodernity'. But does this idea, categorization and conceptualization maintain our inquiry and, thus, a critical and responsive examination? If so, in what way? And can we find similarities, in addition to the differences, which can be held to be universal characteristics to media's presentation of bohemians and outsiders in sport, regardless of the particular epoch, social and cultural development or social-scientific attributes to society?

Accordingly, Gary Whannel's concept of star images as products of cultural formation offers a useful lens for analysing these two cases (Whannel 2002). According to Whannel, the ways in which athletes are celebrated in the media reveal the values, themes, and discourses of their time. This perspective is evident in how Jonsson and van der Poel are represented, not just as athletes, but as symbols of broader societal shifts. The media narratives surrounding them reflect both their achievements and their alignment, or misalignment, with dominant cultural logics.

Apparently, to start, Jonsson was a naturally talented skier and not a 'product' formed by the Swedish Ski Federation's organizational plans, at that time, and the emphasis on rational training. This is, evidently, a beneficial soil for that time's media constructions to display the images of a bohemian who rejects and abandons the typical paths to success, outlined by the federation and society at large, due to the rationalization processes in society (cf. Habermas 1971, Hirdman 2018). Thus, he receives through these narratives a certain amount of symbolic and cultural capital, and a mythological status, in relation to other Swedish Ski Champions. Nevertheless, what stands out as sustenance in the narratives is Jonsson's choice of a modest lifestyle in the forest, far from the assumed prospects of a

'sports star', as well as the Swedish Welfare Community's [*Folkhemmet*] comfort and social order. Thus, the narratives of the idealistic bohemian are constructed with two parallel and mutual components, both referring to naturalism and idealism. He is a naturally talented skier and, in addition, chose to have his desired 'habitat' close to nature. All in all, for common people from the 1960s to the 1990s, Jonsson stands as a reference to, and a nostalgic memorial of, past times in a rationalized society with increasing social engineering, standardization and rather comfortable and organized everyday life (e.g. Hirdman 2018, cf. Habermas 1971). Hence, his lifestyles and sporting success become idealized and contrasted with ordinary life – and thus both glorified and ridiculed and mocked – as a contrast to common social norms.

This duality in Jonsson's representation, where he is simultaneously celebrated and mocked, resonates with Whannel's assertion (2002) that stardom is produced through a dialectic process. Jonsson's image as a bohemian challenged the norms of modernity, but at the same time reinforced a nostalgic ideal of authenticity, appealing to the 'popular common sense' of a society grappling with rapid modernization. The media's construction of Jonsson as a figure both within and outside the system exemplifies how star images are shaped to capture attention and evoke cultural resonance.

Naturally, van der Poel has similar talent but, contrary to Lars Theodor Jonsson, he is also a clear product of rational training affirmed by his manifesto, his displayed training program. Thus, in some sense, he is even *too* rational, which even goes beyond current athletes' general training programs as well as the scope of the Welfare Society's rationalization processes. Thus, if we disregard the scope of individualism in his character and career, van der Poel's attitude is, in some sense, more in accordance with the period in which Jonsson operated and the common people's 'rational' worldview of that time, settled by 'social engineering'. This is a worldview of 'rationalization' that was confronted by Jonsson's choices and preferences for a simpler life in the woods.

To stress, van der Poel has had his sport career in a period with the support of a blend of rationalism and naturalism in sport (cf. Svensson 2016; Svensson and Sörlin 2019), due to a progressive pluralism of beliefs, values and interests in a postmodern society, in addition to an increasing individualism (cf. Canzler, Kaufmann, and Kesselring 2016). Thus, a general individualism in society supports van der Poel's action, which was fulfilled notwithstanding the hegemonic sport logic and general opinions about sport careers and their natural and normal durations. Indeed, it is his determined and consistent individualism that generates attention, which is demonstrated by, e.g. his rejection and his abandonment of sports at an early age, which is done and to be understood regardless – and in light of – his triumphs and commitment to training, manifested in his training program. Thus, his solid and convincing individualism – which goes beyond ordinary individualism – fascinates media and common people in a time of celebrated individualism (ibid.), which makes him a rational outsider. In this respect, media and van der Poel himself seem to exploit a mix of exclusion, marginalization, alienation and estrangement, in this amalgamation of van der Poel's individualism, in addition to his embedded 'sense of entrepreneurship' (cf. ibid.; Halliday 1999).

Here, Whannel's emphasis on the fluidity of star images is instructive (Whannel 2002). van der Poel's outsider status is continually reshaped by media narratives that align his actions with contemporary values of hyper-individualism and entrepreneurial spirit (cf. Hellström 2014; Smart 2005). His calculated rejection of traditional sports trajectories exemplifies Whannel's point (2002) that stardom operates within the 'continuously present',

with athletes' lives being reinterpreted to fit evolving cultural discourses. By presenting his career choices as deliberate and reflective, van der Poel transcends the boundaries of sports, positioning himself as a rational yet eccentric figure who exploits his symbolic capital to craft a unique public persona.

On the other hand, Jonsson arrays the image of being more authentic, and thus, receives the image of a more 'idealistic' bohemian (cf. Åkesson 1991; Mokvist 2006), as such, challenging 'modernity' as well as maintaining the normative foundation of modernity – the Welfare Society – due to the entertainment logics in these media narratives. No doubt, Jonsson had a more calm, static and peaceful society to relate and react to, whereas van der Poel, on the other hand, acts upon a society with increasing mobility and temporality regarding interests, values and opportunities. In this respect, in 'modernity' Jonsson *reacts to* society and its prerequisites, and in 'postmodernity' van der Poel *acts on* society and its possibilities (cf. Canzler, Kaufmann, and Kesselring 2016). Thus, Jonsson is presented as more passive, still replying with eccentric responses, when asked by sports journalists who yet must seek him out in the forest. On the contrary, van der Poel is increasingly active – and has control – in the creation of his image as an outsider, as a peculiar and odd individual in the sphere of sports, due to calculated choices customarily considered irrational due to the sports logic and the normative structure of sports, although these could inversely be evaluated and appreciated as rational in other systems and thus used as 'symbolic capital' to receive advantages and gains beyond sports. In this respect, we must recall that he was actively invited to press conferences to present his manifest and declare the termination of his skating career. Yet, it is this profound rational approach regarding his training, attitude to sport and future career that makes van der Poel odd and eccentric in the narratives, whereby he receives the image of an outsider (cf. SVT 2023). The rationality (i.e. predictability) in van der Poel's concept is different from and goes beyond the emphasis on rational training (cf. Svensson and Sörlin 2019). Hence, the rationality rests in van der Poel's unique and unusual attitude to the sport, and sporting success in general, in addition to rational training.

To stress, again, Lars Theodor Jonsson is displayed as more spontaneous and instinctive regarding sports and life in general. In this respect, Jonsson might be 'going with the flow', in contrast to van der Poel who seems to 'surf on the flow'. In this respect, he utilizes and exploits the image that he and the media reciprocally produce to operate in other scenes, outside sports, as a speaker, brand (e.g. the EQPE-collection 'Picked by Nils'), or entrepreneur. However, in comparison to Jonsson, van der Poel operates in a market and in a media society that is increasingly mobile, transitory, and thus, less loyal. Consequently, it seems imperative to present a (self-)image, which the progress of social media enables and supports (Smart 2005; cf. Canzler, Kaufmann, and Kesselring 2016; Slocombe 2006). In that respect, van der Poel – and the media – will in these efforts, probably utilize the symbolic and cultural capital he received as an outsider due to his attitudes and temporary relationship to sports and triumphs, which was odd with respect to sports logics. The unexpected abandonment of sports, and thus receiving the position of being odd and eccentric, will likely strategically benefit him in the long run as a rational outsider.

While Jonsson's bohemian image was rooted in an almost passive rejection of modernity's structures, van der Poel actively embodies and critiques the pluralism and individualism of postmodern society (cf. Levin 2001; Slocombe 2006). Consequently, van der Poel's rational decision to abandon sports, which appears irrational within traditional sports logic,

becomes a hallmark of his unique position as a rational outsider. His carefully curated image speaks to Whannel's point that stardom thrives on the dialectic interplay of rationality and unpredictability, attracting attention by simultaneously aligning with and challenging popular common sense (Whannel 2002).

Fascinatingly, van der Poel's image reflects the dialectics of rationality and irrationality, which Whannel identifies as central to the construction of star personae. His extreme rationalism in training, juxtaposed with his seemingly irrational decision to retire at the peak of his career, epitomizes this tension. By abandoning a conventional trajectory, he reclaims control over his narrative, demonstrating what Whannel (ibid.) terms the 'production practices of the media' that amplify such contradictions to resonate with societal fascination for figures who defy expectations.

At the same time, van der Poel is a 'child of his time', project-oriented and flexible in his interests and thoughts (cf. Canzler, Kaufmann, and Kesselring 2016). This adaptability fits Whannel's argument that star images are never fixed but constantly reshaped to fit cultural shifts. In a postmodern context characterized by mobility, transitory values, and self-promotion, van der Poel's ability to transfer his outsider status into other social spheres exemplifies the fluidity and strategic potential of stardom.

Final remarks

No doubt, Lars Theodor Jonsson, and his idealistic and naturalistic appearance, according to our scholastic departure, could easily be grasped as a bohemian in a general and traditional conceptualization, regarding rationality/irrationality, due to the media representations covering his sport career and life. As a comparison, van der Poel seems to have taken the dialectics of rationality/irrationality to become a serious attitude for him. In that respect, he consumes rationalism to the extreme, in his sportsmanship, while at the same time he irrationally abandons this successful trajectory, in order to rationally benefit from this irrational action, as having been fixed and marketed with the epithet, 'an outsider'.

Still, in a comparison, both Nils van der Poel and Lars Theodor Jonsson, in a general course, repudiated, rejected, abandoned, or refused common norms or the logics of careers or social life, by their actions. Thus, all in all, for various and different reasons, both could be regarded as 'uncaptured', which is to be regarded as a dualistic, simultaneous act of neither being excluded nor encapsulated. This duality reflects the (sport) media's tendency to construct star images that oscillate between inclusion and marginality, and thus, creating narratives that are compelling precisely because they defy easy categorization.

Regardless this similarity, there are differences in their approaches towards sport and society, their individual characters, the forms of rationality in sport and training (naturalism vs. extensive rationalism as well as their use of (social) media in order to (re)produce a (self)-image, which are related to their positions in a modern respectively a more postmodern era. Hence, in 'modernity' Jonsson *reacts to* society (i.e. media) and its prerequisites, and in 'postmodernity' van der Poel *act on* society (i.e. social media) and its possibilities.

Hence, according to our Weberian modus, as 'analytical ideal types', the concepts might work as a spotlight to illuminate several differences, due to social change and cultural variations, and thus, present 'social facts' according to a Durkhemian sociology. In that respect, the ambiguity is not a limitation but a key aspect of their mediated stardom. It is through this interplay of defiance and resonance, marginality and centrality, that Jonsson

and van der Poel become enduring symbols of their respective cultural epochs, formed by 'modern' or 'postmodern' values or trends.

Postscript

A few years after the Olympic success, Nils van der Poel made a new change in life. He changed his name from the, in Sweden, quite unique name van der Poel to a name that is far from uncommon, Svensson. What does this mean? It must mean something. A name is not only a name, as we know. A name says something about a person. To take the name Svensson, which is his mother's birth name, is a statement. Not only because the name Svensson, in a Swedish context, is a name that Swedes use to personalize the representation of that which is common, but also because it is a name that will make him 'average'. 'Nils Svensson' can be 'anyone'. Therefore, we should think of the name change as a statement. He does not want to be the skater 'Nils van der Poel' anymore. That person belongs to sports history only.

However, there is a paradox embedded in the name change. Making himself 'common' can, in itself, be seen as a way of making himself even more special, at least for some time. In the future, one might guess that he will become 'Nils Svensson' also in the eyes of the public, whereas 'Nils van der Poel' will represent something that once was but no longer is. It is a transformation one should not take lightly, but what it really means is still something to think more about. Perhaps it does not mean anything more than a simple name change, but it could also mean a change of personal identity. There is a philosophical point here about what a personal identity really is, and if we are the same through time or if persons really are divided into many identities.

What is left of Nils van der Poel is, from this perspective, nothing more than a skater that once was the best but now has become a memory – a 'nostalgic narrative' – for the sports world, and that may be good enough.

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