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Tensions and contradictions in sport’s quest for legitimacy as a political actor: the politics of Swedish public sport policy hearings

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to draw attention to and analyse strategic representations and legitimacy production in sport policy advocacy processes. Considering it as a case of public consultation in part made possible by contemporary governing systems, the empirical base of the study is the public hearings with representatives of six parliamentary parties that were arranged by the Swedish Sports Confederation (SSC) prior to the 2014 election to the Swedish parliament. Using verbatim transcripts of these hearings as data and the notion of policy advocacy as institutionally situated production of legitimising accounts, two research questions are addressed: (1) What legitimising accounts are produced and deployed by the SSC during the hearings? (2) To what wider systems of meaning are those legitimising accounts connected and how? The analysis shows three sets of legitimising accounts and how both long-standing and contemporary ideas of the sport–government relationship in Sweden were used as cultural resources in these framing processes. Two aspects of policy advocacy processes arising from the study are discussed. First, the possible reasons for and consequences of the contradictory nature of legitimising accounts advanced, and second the transformations of the institutional conditions of sport that are implied by the emergence of phenomena, such as the hearings under analysis.

Within sport policy research, significant effort has so far been dedicated to understanding how, why and with what effects on sport, governments have increased their interest in sport policy and in sport organisations as policy implementers. Quite early on in the field’s development, Houlihan (1997, p. 272) argued that two unwelcomed aspects of government interventions are, first, ‘the admittedly instrumental attitude of government to sport’ and, second, ‘the administrative financial and personnel structure of sport has been colonised by government’ with sport organisations that provide the ‘independent’ voice of sport paradoxically relying on public subsidy. Houlihan’s analysis, in the sense that it points to the disciplining intentions and effects of government involvement in sport, exemplify what we consider to be the dominating orientation of research on the (ever closer) relationship between sport and the state at various levels (e.g. Garret 2004, Green and Houlihan 2004, Green 2007, Skille 2008, 2009, Fahlén and Karp 2010, Adams 2011, Fahlén 2011, 2015, O’Gorman 2011, Nichols et al. 2012, Keat and Sam 2013, May et al. 2013, Macris and Sam 2014, Sam and Macris 2014, Stenling 2014a, Aggestål and Fahlén 2015, Fahlén et al. 2015, Stenling 2014a, A
Stenling and Fahlén 2016, Strittmatter and Skille 2016, Skille and Stenling 2017). This body of work has indicated two key characteristics of this development. First, in order to make sport fit to deliver (shifting) public policy objectives, governments have attempted to ‘modernise’ (i.e. professionalise) sport organisations (e.g. Green 2007, Sam 2009, Adams 2011). Second, echoing Houlihan’s (1997) analysis, sport is increasingly subjected to various ‘performance regimes’ (Macris and Sam 2014, Sam and Macris 2014), which – contrary to a rhetoric of decentralisation – shifts accountability patterns towards central agencies. Taken together, these research themes suggest it may be ‘the worst of times’ for sport organisations, at least when it comes to their leeway and autonomy in relation to government authorities.

In civil society studies, the political function of civil society organisations and their fundamental role in public policymaking have been studied for decades under the umbrella term non-profit policy advocacy (cf. Almog-Bar and Schmid 2014 for a recent review). On the current topic, this research suggests that the changing functions of societal roles, characterised by the emergence of so-called ‘compacts’ (e.g. Reuter et al. 2012), reflects both the worst and best of times for civil society actors when it comes to their participation in, and impact on, public policy processes (Casey and Dalton 2006). On the one hand, contracting-out and accountability through key performance indicators may circumscribe the autonomy of civil society and undermine internal democracy processes. On the other hand, an increasing use of civil society organisations for welfare delivery make state actors more reliant on the expertise and legitimacy harboured by these organisations, thus promoting their role as ‘insiders’ in public policy processes (e.g. Casey 2003, Casey and Dalton 2006, Jenkins 2006, Bar-Nir and Gal 2011, Sam 2011, Almog-Bar and Schmid 2014, Meier and Fuchs 2014). Perhaps in recognition of this reliance, political parties in the United Kingdom (UK) and New Zealand, for example, now include sport as part of their election manifestos (cf. Houlihan and Lindsey 2012). This new political space is significant because it can paradoxically enable sport organisations to advance interests that are in opposition to the policy agendas espoused by the government in power.

While non-profit policy advocacy is a central theme in civil society research, the image of sport organisations as ‘insiders’ that perform public policy advocacy is, however, rarely conveyed and studied in sport policy research. Thus, for example, while Green and Houlihan (2004) showed that the Canadian Olympic Committee and the national sports organisations or national governing bodies responsible for swimming and athletics in Canada and the UK respectively were key players in elite sport advocacy coalitions; these organisations are also portrayed as somewhat passive actors in reform processes. Other studies on changes to the sport–government relationship also indicate that changing institutional configurations have implications for sport organisations’ insider role in public policy processes (Bergsgard and Rommetvedt 2006, Enjolras and Holmen Waldahl 2007, Meier and Fuchs 2014, Stuij and Stokvis 2015). Bergsgard and Rommetvedt (2006), for example, show that in Norway where ‘the corporatist apparatus has been downsized, organized interests have increased their parliamentary and administrative lobbyism’ (p. 23). Similarly, Enjolras and Holmen Waldahl (2007) found that the politicising of sport is ‘exemplified by the NOC’s [Norwegian Olympic Committee and Confederation of Sports] new lobbying activity, reflecting an increasing self-awareness of its capacity to influence political decision, due to the deep anchoring of sport among the Norwegian people’ (p. 214). Alongside these developments are the increasing number of organisational movements and quasi think tanks seeking to lobby governments (e.g. the Sport Matters Group in Canada [Sport Matters 2017]; Sport and Citizenship in the European Union [Sport and Citizenship 2017]; Sports Think Tank in the UK [Sports Think Tank 2017]). Regardless of the issues they advance, the significance of these interests lies with the apparent willingness on the part of governments to recognise policy advice from ‘expert’ non-governmental organisations (NGOs). In Sweden, this willingness is reflected in a recent public inquiry that underscores civil society organisations’ legitimate and rightful role in public policy processes and the need for public authorities to ‘use and develop methods and policy documents concerning consultation with civil society’ (SOU 2016: 13).
Together with previous studies, these examples draw attention to the active political role now played by sport organisations, indicating that public policy advocacy is an emerging feature of contemporary sport policy processes. This is our point of departure and rationale as we advance the purpose of the paper: to analyse strategic representations and legitimacy production in contemporary sport policy advocacy processes. Our empirical base is verbatim transcripts of public hearings with representatives of six political parties that were arranged by the Swedish Sports Confederation (SSC) prior to the 2014 election to the Swedish parliament. Comparable to the examples of policy advocacy provided earlier (e.g. Sport Matters), we consider these hearings as an emerging phenomenon, emblematic of sport organisations’ evolving role as legitimate public policy advocates and reflective of their new expectations to develop and exercise a strategic political role.

To conceptualise our focus on strategic representations and legitimacy production in policy advocacy processes, we rely on the concept of framing as it is used in organisation and social movement studies (cf. Benford and Snow 2000, Cornelissen and Werner 2014). In these contexts, framing is a process through which reality is socially constructed, negotiated and given meaning. We lean particularly on Creed, Scully, and Austin’s (2002) notion of framing in the context of advocacy as the production of legitimising accounts – meaning-making processes that encompass the promotion of certain problem definitions, causal interpretations and solutions (Entman 1993). We furthermore consider the production of legitimising accounts as institutionally productive and produced (Entman 1993, Benford and Snow 2000, Creed et al. 2002, Sam 2003, Cornelissen and Werner 2014; see also Suchman’s 1995 conceptualisation of legitimacy management). This means that while it is ‘an active, processual phenomenon that implies agency and contention at the level of reality construction’ (Benford and Snow 2000, p. 614), framing nonetheless occurs within a cultural context, with all extant social stock of meaning constituting the cultural resources with which legitimising accounts are built (Entman 1993, Benford and Snow 2000). Drawing on these conceptualisations, we address two research questions (RQs). First, what legitimising accounts are produced and deployed by the SSC during the hearings? Second, to what wider systems of meaning are those legitimising accounts connected and how?

**The context of Swedish organised sport**

Swedish sport, like its counterparts in many other countries, has several characteristics that render it an actor with considerable political muscle. First, unlike other civil society domains (e.g. culture), Swedish organised sport – commonly called the Swedish sports movement – enjoys a monopoly on the delivery of voluntary and competitive sport in Sweden (Bergsgard and Norberg 2010). Second, organised sport is numerically by far the largest of the Swedish ‘classic popular movements’ such as the labour or temperance movements. Approximately 3 million members, out of a population of 9 million, organise, lead and participate in activities carried out in approximately 20,000 sport clubs. These clubs are all federated to 1 or several of the 70 national sport organisations that together form the organised voluntary sports’ umbrella organisation: the SSC. Third, despite its size, organised sport is held together by a horizontally and vertically integrated organisational architecture that is underpinned by democratic governance structures (Fahlén and Sterling 2016).

Noteworthy for the present topic is that whereas some countries lack a strong national coordinating NGO (e.g. Canada), Sweden lacks a government agency that deals exclusively with sport policy, such as Sport Canada, UK Sport, the Australian Institute of Sport or Sport New Zealand (Sam 2015). Instead, the SSC performs two disparate and contradictory tasks. One is externally defined, although self-imposed and sought after, and concerns the SSC’s role as ‘acting on behalf of government’ in the distribution of the currently 200 million EUR in annual central government funds. This feature of the sport–government arrangement is not insignificant because, as Stryker (2000, p. 180) points out, ‘constitutive rules shape actor expectations about whose influence attempts and which influence strategies are more or less likely to be effective.’ The second task, which is internally defined, yet derived from the SSC’s standing in a historically neo-corporatist country (Lundberg 2014), is to represent the sports movement by ‘establishing and nurturing
relations with the government, the parliament, agencies and other organisations’ and to ‘form public opinion, advocate and attempt to influence decision makers in matters of importance for Swedish organised sport’ (Riksidrottsförbundet 2010, p. 18–19).

**Methods**

**Data sources and collection**

Sweden is a parliamentary democracy, with the people being nationally represented by the Swedish Riksdag, which has legislative power. The government implements the decisions taken in the parliament. Every fourth year in September, elections are held for the Swedish parliament, county councils and municipal councils (Regeringen 2016b). A few months (April–June 2014) prior to the 2014 parliamentary election, the SSC together with FORUM, an umbrella organisation for civil society organisations in ‘the social area’, invited representatives (either party leaders or party secretaries) of six parliamentary parties to public hearings on issues related to civil society public policy in general, and public sport policy in particular. To the best of our knowledge, and as referred to in the hearings, this was the first time that either the SSC or FORUM had arranged this type of formalised public dialogue with politicians as part of their advocacy activities during a period of election campaigns.

The hearings, which were transcribed verbatim by the first author, were moderated by a representative of the SSC and took place in front of both a live and web audience. However, none of the participants refer to the hearing as being broadcasted or filmed, other than in relation to technical issues. All six hearings follow the same structure. They begin with a FORUM representative making a 5–10-minute civil society perspective commentary on the party programme of the particular party that is represented during the session. Thereafter the (then) Chairwoman of the SSC, or on a few occasions the SSC’s General Secretary asks the party representative a number of questions, followed by answers to these questions by the party representative and at times follow-up questions by the SSC or FORUM representative. The hearings close with the audience asking questions that are answered by party representatives. **Table 1** displays an overview of the hearings and their participants.

**Data analysis**

Because our interest is in the SSC’s legitimacy production in sport policy advocacy processes, we focused our analysis on the dialogue between the SSC representative and the politicians. Furthermore, since we were concerned with meaning-making as strategic representation and legitimacy production, we analysed the transcribed verbal expressions using our conceptualisation of the various aspects of the production of legitimising accounts as sensitising concepts (Bowen 2006). Specifically, subsequent to reducing the data through the concentration of meaning technique (Kvale and Brinkmann 2009), the analysis proceeded in three stages. We first sorted the data using our operationalisation of framing as encompassing (1) the promotion of certain problem definitions and causal interpretations, and (2) proposed solutions (Entman 1993). Second, we generated data-driven themes within this broad analytical frame in order to address our first

**Table 1.** Overview of the hearings and their participants.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Hearing no.</th>
<th>Party</th>
<th>Party representative</th>
<th>SSC representative</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>The Christian Democrats</td>
<td>Göran Häglund, party leader</td>
<td>Karin Mattson-Weiber, SSC chairwoman</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>The Left Party</td>
<td>Jonas Sjöstedt, party leader</td>
<td>Karin Mattson-Weiber, SSC chairwoman</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>The Social Democrats</td>
<td>Carin Jämtin, party secretary</td>
<td>Birgitta Ljung, SSC secretary general</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>The Moderates</td>
<td>Kent Persson, party secretary</td>
<td>Birgitta Ljung, SSC secretary general</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>The Green Party</td>
<td>Åsa Romson, party leader</td>
<td>Karin Mattson-Weiber, SSC chairwoman</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>The Centre Party</td>
<td>Michael Arthursson, party secretary</td>
<td>Karin Mattson-Weiber, SSC chairwoman</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
RQ: What legitimising accounts are used and produced by the SSC during the hearings? In a final third stage, and with the aid of previous research and policy documents, we analysed the wider systems of meaning at play, i.e. the institutional embeddedness of the problem definitions, causal interpretations and proposed solutions expressed and produced during the hearings. This final step corresponded with our second RQ: To what wider systems of meaning are those legitimising accounts connected and how? Miles and Huberman’s (1994) contrasting/comparing tactic was used throughout the process to validate the analysis. In the sense that it is a single case of legitimacy production, the results are generalizable primarily through context similarity and pattern recognition (Larsson 2009). Importantly, the phrasing of these RQs and the earlier analytic strategy convey our theoretical assumption of, and interest in, how advocacy can be both a strategic process of legitimacy construction and a process in which extant stocks of cultural meaning circumscribe the material available for such advocacy.

Results and analysis

In this section, three legitimising accounts are presented and analysed, one at a time. This is for the sake of analytical parsimony, though we acknowledge from the outset that some themes cut across the three accounts. Cross-cutting themes (such as the instrumental use of organised sport) appear largely because the legitimising accounts constructed and conveyed during the hearings draw on older and more recent systems of meaning. Although we are aware that the SSC is represented by two individuals during the hearings, for the sake of readability we will use the expression ‘the SSC states’, or similar in the presentation. For the same reason, quotes are marked with the number in order of the hearing and we refer to Table 1 for the specifics of each hearing.

Lack of access to sports facilities and other sports spaces threatens the ‘Swedish model’

The Swedish sports movement’s relationship with the state has historically been monopolistic and Swedish voluntary sport has been positioned as the extended arm of the welfare state into the sport and leisure area. This means that the SSC has been the government’s sole partner in formulating and implementing government sport policy. The legitimacy of this monopolistic position has rested on a mutual agreement of a sport-for-all ideal, i.e. a translation of the rights-based, general principles of the welfare state onto the area of voluntary sport (Bergsgard and Norberg 2010).

This system of meaning (in which everybody’s right to participate in sport is a cornerstone of the ‘the Swedish model’) is used as cultural material in framing the growing inaccessibility of sports facilities and other sports spaces as a problem needing government intervention. A prerequisite for all associational activities, the SSC claims, but particularly for the sports movement, is having somewhere to carry out activities. An acute shortage of sports facilities, but also of access to land, air and water thus threatens ‘the Swedish model’ (sport-for-all), which the SSC argues is the basis for ‘all of our commitment’. The following statement by the SSC representative during hearing no. 2 is illustrative of this problem definition and causal interpretation:

You (Jonas Sjöstedt) put strong emphasis on everybody’s right to participate, and that’s the foundation for all of our commitment, and I agree with you—that’s what’s unique about the Swedish model. At the same time, this model is threatened, for several reasons. One is the lack of sports facilities, not least in the major cities, where the lack of facilities is visible already in the planning stages. When areas such as Hammarby Sjöstad are built, there is no recognition of the need for meeting places, football fields, etc. I’d like your comment on that. Everybody’s right to participate, yes, but that’s only in theory if resources are insufficient.

Arguably, the rationale made visible in this statement is that because of the SSC’s monopolistic position, sport-for-all should be understood as voluntary organised sport (i.e. activities provided by clubs affiliated to the SSC) for all. By stating that the government does not provide sufficient conditions (in this case access to sports facilities and other sports spaces) for the sports movement’s delivery of
organised sport as a welfare service, the SSC thus suggests that the government violates one of the most fundamental principles of the welfare state: the principles of rights-based, general systems.

The SSC moreover claims that beyond formal access to sport facilities, it is paramount that facilities are located close to users and that getting to them is easy and cheap. To ensure adequate numbers of facilities and their appropriate location, the SSC states that organised sport’s position in community planning processes must be strengthened, proposedly by including the word ‘sport’ in the Planning and Building Act. This solution, the SSC argues, would ensure that spaces for organised sport are established when existing areas are redeveloped or when new ones are constructed. The SSC representative during hearing no. 2, again, stated that:

We do a lot of work through our districts (District Sports Federations) but one issue that we pursue centrally is trying to bring the small word ‘sports’ into the Planning and Building Act, because it’s missing today. There is an obligation to plan for play and recreation, but not for sport spaces. We would like it there (in the Act), because we feel that it is very important to create opportunities not only for play and recreation, but for sports too.

By framing voluntary organised sport as a welfare state service, the SSC calls upon the government’s obligation to provide appropriate and adequate conditions for sport activities as welfare activities. This means invoking the sport movement’s position as a monopolistic welfare deliverer and requesting the government to protect this position in legislation (expressed more particularly in the legal assurance of establishing facilities for organised sport). The production of this legitimising account can thus be interpreted as an attempt by the SSC to secure its place in the government machinery and to reaffirm its historical role as a partner in government policy-making and implementation.

**Increased control of public support to sport**

The SSC’s position as the extended arm of the government has historically been accompanied by far-reaching block funding, a resource allocation principle that reflects the rights-based welfare state (Bergsgard and Norberg 2010). Up until the 1990s, the government had refrained from formulating specific targets and monitoring its grant allocations. In that sense, the SSC’s privileged position as the sole recipient of government funds for sport corresponded with its autonomy in how to use these grants. This combination has been legitimised with reference to sport’s standing as a popular movement (Norberg 2004). Wijkström and Einarsson (2011, p. 26) argue that the notion of popular movements ‘can be described as a holy terminological cow in Sweden.’ Indeed, ‘the concept is strongly rooted in, and still carries positively charged watchwords such as, democracy, openness, membership, joint action and strong grassroots support.’ Popular movement status is an important criterion in the allocation of public funds and it is also recognition of an organisation’s intrinsic value and its supposed function as a counterweight to the state and as a key player in societal development (Wijkström and Lundström. 2002). Because of this, the Swedish sports movement, in its self-image and presentations of self, has always allied itself with the popular movement concept (Lindroth 2002).

The SSC subsequently uses this connection as cultural material in constructing and articulating the problems around targeted funding, the argument being that erosion of block-funding in favour of targeting (i.e. focusing areas of spending) and earmarking (i.e. specifying funding conditions) undermines the sports movement as a popular movement. Sport, the SSC argues, is increasingly regarded as a deliverer of welfare services, a development that is clearly unwanted: ‘When dealing with the voluntary sector, local authorities, the parliament, and the government cannot formulate goals, allocate resources and then expect us to deliver results. It just doesn’t work that way for us’ (Hearing no. 5). According to the SSC, this expectation is problematic because it undermines the sports movement’s internal democracy and self-governance. From hearing no. 5 again, ‘we get our mandate from our members. We’re of course aware of, and agree with the fact that the
government sets objectives for their sport policy, but one must not forget that we get our mandate from our members.’

The SSC thus invokes the notion of popular movements as ‘the backbone’ of society and democracy itself. In doing so, the SSC argues that its independence, autonomy and internal democratic governance system must be guaranteed and respected because of its socio-developmental function. This system of meaning is used to qualify the argument that changes in funding structures are unwanted and inappropriate because they undermine the aspects of the sports movement that are a prerequisite for this very function. Implicitly, then, the development is positioned as a threat to Swedish society ‘as we know it’.

To counteract unwanted developments in public funding structures and goals, the SSC unsurprisingly states that sport itself must be put in charge of the allocation and use of public resources to sport, and the (supposed) decrease in volume of these resources must come to a halt. This claim is qualified with reference to sports ‘intrinsic value’. However, as if in doubt of the soundness of this argument, the SSC also refers to the accomplishments made by organised sport in non-sport areas, and argue that these warrant a leverage of the voluntary work performed in the sports movement:

“We’ve touched on this issue of voluntary organisations as ‘welfare service deliverers’ versus having an intrinsic value. This is a constantly ongoing discussion – should public support be earmarked and allocated to specific activities and objectives or should sports, Forum, or whatever voluntary organization, be free to decide how to use public funds. We feel, of course, that it is important that we’re able to make those decisions through our own democratic order. We feel like there’s a pressure in the reversed direction, so it would be interesting to get your view on that, but also on the volume of the support. You mentioned women’s shelters, but for us it’s important that the volunteer work is leveraged with a sound financial support because we achieve so much. (Hearing no. 3)"

Such tendency to base arguments for public support in organised sport’s instrumental function is evident in the following quote from hearing no. 6 in which participants were discussing civil society’s role in combating youth unemployment:

“I think that perhaps, in general, that we [the Swedish sports movement] relate to so many policy areas that we don’t really fit in anywhere. We have links to all ministries, and that’s our great strength, but it’s also a weakness with regards to issues like these, because we’re not even considered. Take the issue of jobs, being a young voluntary leader, gaining that experience and those networks that a club increases youth employability.

But that’s such a hands-on application, and because of that it sort of passes by unnoticed.

Claims for additional funding are thus made possible by advancing a system of meaning in which organised sport can and does contribute to the fulfilment of non-sport goals. Although the readiness, willingness and ability of Swedish sport organisations to contribute to the fulfilment of externally formulated policy aims have been questioned in numerous studies (Stenling and Fahlén 2009, 2016, Fahlén and Karp 2010, Fahlén 2011, 2015, Karp et al. 2014, Stenling 2014a, Aggestål and Fahlén 2015, Fahlén et al. 2015), the government’s ambition to use sport as a vehicle for public policy objectives remains unchanged. This development is best exemplified by Sports Lift, a government-initiated programme, encompassing 53 million EUR in additional public funding (Prop 2015/16:1), and the allocation of 7 million EUR annually, for the purposes of intensifying the sports movement’s work to integrate newly arrived immigrants.

**Government agencies fail to recognise and respond to the distinctiveness of voluntary sports clubs (VSCs)**

A recent system of meaning, compared to that of ‘popular movements’, that is used as cultural material during the hearings, revolves around the concept of ‘civil society’. In this thought model, civil society is one of three societal sectors: public, voluntary and market, with actors in these sectors having mutually different raisons d’êtres, roles, tasks, motives and rationales for action (see Wijkström and Lundström 2002, Wijkström and Einarsson 2011 for an illustration of this model). Voluntary organisations, for their part, are thus ‘expected to have a distinctive character and an added value:
good qualities that voluntary organisations have but that are missing in public sector organisations or private corporations.‘ (Gavlin et al. 2010, p. 8, see also Wijkström and Einarsson 2011).

In the face of recurrent financial crises, the usage of the concept ‘civil society’, and the associated expressions distinctive character and added value, broke through in Sweden during the 1990s. The civil society concept was a new perspective that, compared to the notion of popular movements, held promises of a reinvented and reinvigorated delivery of core welfare functions (Amnå 2005, cf. Adams 2011 for a discussion of a similar development in the UK). Since 2010, the state budget and policy area instead of actions are unacceptable and encourage they have a 2016a added value, application, where they actually do not increasing tendency to treat VSCs as corporations. Speciﬁcally, the SSC urges the government, the parliament and the associated life: 

During the hearings, this distinctiveness underpinned the SSC’s criticism of government agencies’ increasing tendency to treat VSCs as corporations. Speciﬁcally, in the SSC’s framing of the problem, agencies are acting ‘meddlesome’ and thereby show a lack of understanding and will to uphold the distinctive character of associational life. In so doing, agencies are allegedly not making a proper application of the legislation and the (official) public policy on civil society. As exempliﬁed by the below quote from hearing no. 5, according to this understanding of the problem, associational life is built on commitment and the authorities’ actions risk killing that commitment and thereby ‘crowd out’ associational life:

One of our key issues in the election is what we call the preconditions for associational life. Turning this into a slogan, we state that ‘associations are not corporations!’ I know that you are pretty familiar with this issue, but for us this is an issue that has to do with, as you mentioned initially, these questions are not part of political discussion. We think that the official public policy on civil society is good, and the one for sport is good, but we have noticed that something is happening in government agencies’ application, where they actually do not make a distinction between corporations and voluntary associations, even though the policies and the politicians have clearly stated that there is an important distinction. Our argument is that associational life is part of the Swedish cultural heritage. Sweden would not be the same society without this strong grass-roots commitment. So for us, these are extremely important issues. Just to give you an example, we can list quite a number of authorities that we’ve had problems with: the Competition Authority, the National Food Agency, and so on. The Fortiﬁcations Agency is one of them, I’ll have to grab the opportunity since I know that you’re an orienteer. Orienteering is a sport that traditionally has had very good opportunities to use land to practice and perform sport, motor racing is another. However, when we had a meeting with the general director of the Fortiﬁcations Agency about a year ago he said, in response to the straight up question from us ‘Does it matter if [it is] Ica Sweden Ltd. or Hellas Orienteering Club with which you’re dealing?’, he said: ‘No, it does not matter. It works the same either way, market rules apply.’ So, given that the regulation is from 1999, and no changes have been made to it, something must have happened in the authorities’ interpretation of that regulation.

The aforementioned statements show the SSC using the notion of a ‘sector-society’ as cultural material in its advocacy work. As previously described, according to this thought model, civil society and its actors are different from both the public sector and the market – they have a distinctive character that needs to be nurtured and maintained. If they are not treated accordingly, the added value derived from this distinctiveness is endangered and furthermore, if the government fails to act on this problem, it is at fault.

To amend the problem of voluntary sport organisations being treated as corporations, the SSC argues that politicians need to ‘stand up for’ the preservation of the distinction between VSC and corporations, and for the distinctiveness of civil society organisations by enforcing the implementation of the legislation and public policy on civil society. Words simply must be put into practice, the line of argument goes. Specifically, the SSC urges the government, the parliament and the political parties to stress that the government agencies’ actions are unacceptable and encourage
the agencies to engage in dialogue with the sports movement. This call for a disciplining of
government agencies is exemplified in the following quote from hearing no. 1:

We would appreciate if the National Board of Health and Welfare got a signal about keeping a dialogue with us, in
order to make them aware of this. We understand that you’re prohibited from saying ‘Do this!’ but... We could put
the nurse in the cafeteria so that she’ll be there if medical assistance is needed, but we would rather not ‘game the
system’, but I believe that it is important that the authorities get a signal to consider what we are.

In this legitimising account, then, the SSC cites the sector society model in order to ground the
argument that it is the government’s responsibility to discipline its agencies and enforce legisla-
tion. Whether such advice would be heeded is indeterminable but it certainly indicates a level of
confidence on the part of the SSC in its role as an interest group advocate. This is not least because
Swedish administrative law prohibits ministerial rule over government agencies’ relations with
individual actors (Wenander 2016).

Discussion
The ‘Results and analysis’ section outlined three sets of problem definitions, causal interpretations
and proposed solutions (RQ1), illustrating how both long-standing and contemporary ideas of the
sport–government relationship in Sweden were used as cultural resources in these framing
processes (RQ2). The preceding analysis raises two aspects for discussion: (1) the possible reasons
for, and consequences of, the SSC’s contradictory legitimising accounts, and (2) the transformations
of the institutional conditions of sport that are implied by the emergence of phenomena such as
the hearings analysed here.

Contradictions in the policy advocacy age of wisdom and foolishness

The case under consideration is characterised by contradictions in the narratives advanced by the
SSC. On one hand, the SSC draws on the historically anchored and mutually contradictory notions
of organised sport as a voice-producing popular movement (i.e. an opposition to the state), and as
a designated and entitled deliverer of a welfare service (i.e. an integrated part of the state). On the
other hand, the SSC invokes more recent ideas of organised sport as third sector organisations that
have an added value because of their distinctive character, a distinctiveness that it is the state’s
obligation to preserve. Moreover, and again quite contradictory, the SSC eschews the state’s
increasing demands for accountability in relation to funding, while simultaneously claiming that
sport organisations are an untapped potential in terms of the delivery of non-sport objectives.

One insight emanating from the study is thus the way in which the SSC uses quite diverse
systems of meaning (both in terms of content and sequencing) as rhetorical devices during the
hearings. This diversity shows that legitimacy production, while being institutionally situated, is an
active political process by which reality is socially constructed, negotiated and given meaning
(Entman 1993, Benford and Snow 2000, Creed et al. 2002, Cornelissen and Werner 2014). Indeed the present findings bear much resemblance with observations of other legitimacy processes in
sport, described as both ‘geared toward creating new institutions and grounded in an established
institutional order’ (Stenling 2014b, p. 517). To build on this point, we offer two further considera-
tions in relation to the contradictory character of legitimacy production.

First, the SSC displays a great sensitivity to, and knowledge of, the cultural tools that are
available in the construction of their legitimising accounts. Where these accounts encompass an
array of seemingly contradictory systems of meaning, they are a reflection of the strategic and
political nature of legitimacy building (cf. Suchman 1995). Indeed strategically, the production of
legitimising accounts in policy advocacy processes is inherently intended to persuade targets of a
particular interpretation of reality (the advocate’s). Because of this, the SSC might consider ‘more is
more’ as a guiding principle – the more ingredients you add (in terms of systems of meaning), the
stronger the case. Contradictory claims are thus one unintended consequence of this strategy and they are far from benign. Research elsewhere notes that multiple claims potentially result in the addition of new mandates and/or in the cycling of policy objectives (cf. Sam 2011, Sam and Ronglan 2016).

Second, the contradictory character of legitimising accounts may be understood as a form of path dependency (cf. Karp et al. 2014), in which the SSC is ‘locked in’ to its diverse historically anchored narratives but also compelled to be up to date and responsive to a changing environment. From this perspective, in their legitimacy production, the SSC simply cannot disregard the historically close sport–state relationship, nor its own monopolistic position. However, neither can it disregard that times have changed and that other cultural material may be more potent or persuasive, because it would undermine the representation of the SSC as a modern and development-oriented organisation. The historically close SSC–state relationship has been facilitated by a mutual responsiveness (e.g. Norberg 2004) and the SSC’s suggestions of their potential role in combating youth employment, for example, is from this perspective a pertinent iteration of such responsiveness.

**Disciplined targets, influential insiders and insulators?**

One implication raised by this paper is that a focus on the *output side* of sport policy processes has led scholars to neglect an essential condition of such processes: that the targets of policies are organisations (which despite claims of all-inclusiveness), represent their *membership* and not the wider population. This means that, as with civil society actors in other policy areas (e.g. unions or environmental groups), sport organisations represent a special interest. As political actors in this capacity, sport organisations, much like unions, arguably play a role on the *input side* of public policy processes.

Insofar as this ‘pressure game must be played out in arenas created by existing structures’ (Casey 2003, p. 247), it is important to acknowledge that changing sport–government relations are transformations to the very structures in which organised sport participates in the policy process. Government’s increasing use of sport to further public aims most certainly circumscribes sport’s autonomy and self-governance. However, such changing institutional conditions simultaneously create opportunities and a strategic imperative for organised sport to build credibility, legitimacy and support for their membership’s cause. Indeed organised sport is increasingly both able and compelled to ‘make sport’s case’ with the government. Roles, from the theoretical standpoint conveyed here, are institutionally derived (e.g. Schütz 1967), and we suggest that we are witnessing the emergence of the role for sport organisations as ‘influential insiders’ as an addition to their role as ‘disciplined targets’. As insiders, sport interests thus appear as ‘insulators’ – that is, guardians or gatekeepers of sport, neither wishing to compete in response to market forces (because they are distinct) nor wishing to be accountable to public sector forces (because they are a counterweight to the state).

In this perspective, we consider the hearings have emerged as part of changes to the ‘rules of the game’ and in parallel to the increasing emphasis on civil society involvement in public policy processes (e.g. SOU 2016:13, Regeringen 2016a). In other words, they are both a result of, and a sign of changing institutional conditions in which new phenomena pertaining to the policy process arise. As such, this research speaks to the SSC’s claims over its ‘right to govern’ – its legitimacy as an autonomous policy advocate and its enacted role as ‘influential insider’ and ‘insulator’. In that sense, it speaks to how organised sport’s attempts to discipline the government – rather than the reverse – may take shape. The hearings, as do policy advocacy activities performed by similar sport policy advocacy groups (e.g. the Sport Matters Group in Canada [Sport Matters 2017]; Sport and Citizenship in the European Union [Sport and Citizenship 2017]; Sports Think Tank in the UK [Sports Think Tank 2017]), thus represent a (new) opportunity for the sport sector to influence change and/or signal resistance to existing policies, bureaucratic practices and reforms.
Concluding remarks

The purpose of this paper has been to analyse strategic representations and legitimacy production in contemporary sport policy advocacy processes. In pursuit of this purpose, we addressed two RQs whose formulation were grounded in a framing perspective (e.g. Entman 1993, Benford and Snow 2000, Cornelissen and Werner 2014), and in a conceptualisation of policy advocacy as involving the production of legitimising accounts (Creed et al. 2002). The first asked what legitimising accounts are produced and deployed by the SSC during the hearings. The second RQ asked which wider systems of meaning were connected to those legitimising accounts and how.

We initially suggested that the dichotomy ‘best of times’ and ‘worst of times’ (Casey and Dalton 2006) may be illustrative of contemporary sport–government relationships. In light of the contradictions made visible through our analysis, we suggest (following Charles Dickens’ trope) that it may also be ‘the age of wisdom’ and ‘the age of foolishness’. Common wisdom would dictate that state and social movements might better be able to address broader societal issues in tandem rather than in isolation. To this end, it is the age of wisdom insofar as the platforms for information exchange could well be said to be expanding and solidifying. Perhaps in recognising this, the SSC has recently established an entire department dedicated to sport policy advocacy (Riksidrottsförbundet 2017). The SSC’s strategic plan for 2016–2017 states that, ‘The Swedish Sports Movement needs to develop methods in order to strengthen the impact of our joint advocacy activities’ (Riksidrottsförbundet 2015, p. 13). It could however also be the age of foolishness on the part of the sport lobby, for it is arguably difficult to represent a special interest by invoking notions of generality and commonality while simultaneously making claims of distinctiveness and isolationism. In the long run, such contradictions arguably run the risk of making policy advocacy framing accounts illegitimate.

This above form of ‘convening’ is important to the extent that it demonstrates an emerging legitimacy of the sector in the eyes of the ‘state’. It is also important from the standpoint that the positions, justifications and frames highlight the elements of policy that are contentious, debatable and political. Forums such as these hearings are therefore a particularly well-suited example of sport organisations’ strategic representations and legitimacy production in contemporary sport policy advocacy processes. While on the surface these hearings appear as an ad hoc form of consultation, they are nevertheless also deliberative forums in which problems are recognised, interpreted and accentuated. They are important because policymaking is ultimately characterised by changes in public understandings of policy problems (Elder and Cobb 1983). By extension, such deliberations point to matters of ownership and responsibility for particular problems, where interests may wish to appropriate certain problems for reasons of status, growth and legitimacy. Moreover, it is here where interests draw up the terrain for future political exchanges. Indeed it is reasonable that such hearings may be undertaken again in the next election cycle, with future hearings further legitimising the connection between party politics and the sport movement, a tenuous link to say the least.

In closing, we would like to highlight this study’s contribution to furthering a perspective on sport organisations not only as targets of political programming but also as political organisations that play an active role in the input side of the policy process. While the analysis provided here shows the simultaneously institutionally situated and active processual character of strategic representations and legitimacy production in public policy advocacy processes, we suggest that future research continues to explore questions pertaining to this type of institutional politics (Stryker 2000). Examples of such questions could revolve around how sport organisations’ legitimacy production varies between levels in sport systems, how legitimacy production is internally constructed and managed in sport organisations, how arenas and targets for sport policy advocacy become constructed as appropriate or the extent to which legitimising accounts vary with the intended policy advocacy arena and target. Taken together, these questions are important not only because of the democratic processes they unpack but also because such processes may ultimately signal the direction of policy reforms.
Notes

1. The live recordings of the hearings were also made available for later online viewing. They can be accessed at http://www.socialforum.se/?article=nu-tar-vi-tempen-pa-civilsamhallespolitiken.
2. Acts on market competition, food, consumption and health care are examples of legislation, the interpretation and application of which, strongly affect civil society organisations’ (including sport organisations’) activities (SOU 2016:13).

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