

Mainstreaming an Emerging Field

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Reflections on Sociology of Sport: Ten Questions, Ten Scholars, Ten Perspectives

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Sport is seen as the most individualized and depoliticized of subject matters. As commonly perceived, sport helps in deriving either individual pleasure (playing or watching) or national pride. Going beyond these notions, this Kevin Young edited book brings more nuanced and layered meanings of sport and its deeper ramifications in terms of gender discrimination, racial segregation, social exclusion, etc. Ten scholars from America and Europe, from different social and political contexts, analyse the complexities of the sociology of sport as an academic discipline and practice. The arguments have been presented in the book from a range of theoretical frames - functionalist, feminist, Marxist and post-modernist/ post-structural sometimes combining them to articulate theoretical pluralism. The book highlights how within the discipline of sociology, the sub-discipline sociology of sport is seen as peripheral and marginal thus creating hierarchization of specializations. This is quite evident in the way professional associations organise thematic sessions in their annual conferences. For example, the sociology of sport does not even figure as worthy of discussion among the 52 themes organised by the American Sociological Association during its annual conference. The book has 10 chapters. A critical assessment of each chapter is provided below:

The first chapter elaborates on how sport is a powerful space of learning for oneself and others about leadership, friendship, resilience in the face of failure, unfairness about gender, racial difference, sexuality and many other issues. Drawing from sport media narratives, Tony Bruce explains certain moments when those who are usually marginalized such as sportswomen cross the boundary into respectful public visibility through sport. In analysing this phenomenon, the author focuses on emotion as a social practice using third wave feminism. The author uncritically affirms saying she teaches sport and physical education programmes where most students are sport fans, there is never shortage of current and relevant examples of all kinds of issues that provide sources for fruitful discussion and student selected content for assignments. The author goes on to say that as sociologists of sport, “we can use our knowledge in hands-on ways, including working towards “practical interventions that may help sport play a role in saving the world”. The author also states that she has developed a pedagogical approach that embraces a reciprocal approach in which the teacher and student learn from each other. In some senses, she presents a slightly romantic and functionalist perspective but does recognize that this perspective does not capture the complexity of outcomes, power relations and local struggles.

In the second chapter, Cora Burnet has argued that studying sport provides a valuable lens from which to consider race, gender and class in South African society and that sociological

inquiries have focused on critiquing apartheid sport. She points out that sport was a major tool to rally support against the apartheid regime since 1960s, while in 1990s, it was again sport which was used by the first democratically elected government to bridge the racial divides. She further states that sport has become a major industry world-wide and globalisation a formative force. Therefore, sport should be studied in order, to challenge the status quo of powerful neo-colonial networks built around mega events and multinational foundations. Of course, she says that sport cannot be a panacea for all social problems because one needs to investigate social problems in their complex manifestations, otherwise this will contribute to a biased or reductionist understanding. The author rightly argues that there is a need to scrutinize sociological knowledge for Eurocentric or neoclassical biases in order to empower African-based academics to produce rather than consume knowledge, making it relevant and contextual. She concludes by asserting that sociology of sport needs to diversify into domains such as Olympic Studies, Community Sport Studies, etc.

In Chapter 3, Jay Coakley narrates how difficult it is to accept sociology of sport as a course within sociology. It was a struggle where faculty had to combine other related areas like leisure to float sociology of sport. Jay argues that the purpose of sociology of sport is not to discover ultimate truth about sports but to understand the meanings and consequences of sports under varying social conditions for people from diverse social and cultural backgrounds. Sport matters because they are sites for social interaction, identity formation, commerce and power relations, reification of nations and national identities, mobility and meritocracy.

In Chapter 4, Agnes Elling says that sport has become increasingly important in Dutch society as it has changed from a peripheral to a central socio-political activity. This is primarily because elite sport became a major and highly mediated business and socio-political field. Using a Foucauldian framework, the author explains inclusion/exclusion dynamics in sport, particularly how gay men are underrepresented in mainstream competitive sports compared to straight men, migrant women to non-migrant women.

In Chapter 5 Steven V Jackson focused on the role of media in constructing forms of national identity in Canadian context. She argues that the circuit of cultural commodification is a useful framework to understand the concepts of corporate nationalism, media violence, sport-alcohol nexus, sport migration and citizenship. Against the background of the rising dominance of neo-liberal university where the only knowledge that counts is that which makes a profit, she says that we need to go beyond public relations rhetoric and sport celebrity charity initiatives that are more often about self-aggrandisement than in effecting sustainable social change.

In Chapter 6 Mary Jokane using critical feminist theory argues that sport is a critical and useful site for the reproduction and maintenance of male power and privilege. Analysing the athletics in American context, she says that sport creates and reinforces a cult of masculinity and rewards violence.

In Chapter 7, Adopting the concepts of sociological craft and academic habitus, Joseph Maguire analyses the sport culture in Britain. Tie breaks in tennis, penalty shootouts in football and sudden death play offs in golf evoke a range of emotions. Hence, if social life can be conceived as a game through which identities are established, tested and developed than sport can be viewed as idealized form of social life.

In Chapter 8, Ray Mccree describes the commercialisation of sport and how Carribean sport has come under the influence of global sport industry. She analyses this phenomenon through multiple theoretical frames of Gramscian hegemony, cultural imperialism, neo-Marxism, and structuration theory. She says that sport can facilitate social change at the same time it can also facilitate particular modes of domination and hierarchy along the lines of race, colour, ethnicity, gender, class, ability and region.

In Chapter 9, Fabien Ohl narrates her own upbringing in the French middle class and how her passion for football in high school was perceived as brainless, violent, corrupted and unfair. She says that Bourdieu's lens reveals the hidden dimension for sport cultures. For instance, sociology of sporting discourses mainly based on cultural and economic capital and what people really consume reveals different dimensions of society.

In Chapter 10, Pfister analyses sport from a gender perspective by bringing rich experience from Germany, Denmark and the US. In Germany, new forms of physical activities or unorganized forms of 'sport for all' have emerged such as 'trim and fitness' exercises with or without apparatus, aerobics, jogging and hiking as well as 'street sports' like roller skating, street soccer, street basketball since 1950s. In contrast, the elite or professional sport which is popular today is intrinsically interwoven with doping, match fixing and violence because it is used for the presenting the sporting nation to the international community. Admitting that sport cannot solve major problems of current societies such as poverty, social inequality, gender stereotyping, racism, etc, the author asserts that it can nonetheless address problems in a limited way. For example, in Chicago, churches have created a midnight basketball league to keep gang members off the streets and limit violence. She traces how sport in Denmark has undergone drastic change from merely producing students as physical education teachers to researchers who need to mobilise research grants and publish it in high impact journals.

This book is presented in a way that is interesting to the reader by providing number of anecdotes and biographical accounts of the authors. At the same time the book maintains the required academic rigour and style despite its arguments flowing from personal narratives to more serious academic issues. However, the book confines its focus to American and European sport contexts which may not capture the non-western cultural specificities. The book is quite useful to students of sociology, cultural studies, gender studies, healthcare studies and general readers.