

The Social Significance of Sports

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The sociology of sport has a history of academic marginalisation: for being a sociological study of an activity prioritised for its physical, rather than socio-cultural attributes; and for being a study of an area of life associated with 'leisure' and perceived by many to lack real social significance. In the early years, the fledgling discipline of sport studies/sport science sought legitimacy by adopting the methods and theories of the positivist and physical sciences – initially overlooking the historical, social, economic and political features of sporting cultures. It is only relatively recently that the sociology of sport slowly emerged as an area deemed worthy of serious scholarly attention.

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Sport is recognised for its significance in most societies - culturally, economically and politically - and this has increased the demand for qualified specialists who are able to provide knowledge and advice which can explain and predict the relationship between sport and social realities, events and issues.

Sociologists of sport are increasingly involved in a range of state, non-governmental, and industrial initiatives and policies covering areas as diverse as increasing participation rates, the benefits and risks to health of various forms of sporting physical activities, and the role of sport in the economy.

In most developed nations, university courses in the sociology of sport and the related field of sport development recruit well. Graduates from such programmes also enter a marketplace rich with employment potential. For example, suitably qualified graduates are sought in community sports development programmes in local authorities and voluntary organisations; for the development and management of sport and leisure facilities; as physical education teachers; undertaking administrative and management roles in Sports Councils and governing bodies of sport; hosting mega-sports events; and work in the media and sports journalism. These are good pragmatic reasons for developing a sociology of sport programme, but there are equally strong reasons grounded in the meaningful nature of sport to participants and spectators, and the ways in which sport may promote social justice, expose social and political exploitation and oppression, and contribute to the creation of more democratic and humane social worlds.

Sporting activities have been a key feature of societies since ancient times, exemplified in the Olympic Games of ancient Greece and the Roman era of gladiatorial and other contests, through medieval folk games, surviving the limitations of the Puritan Reformation era, and eventually taking on forms more familiar to those of us in the modern world after the Enlightenment. As the Industrial Revolution spread, so sports and play became rationalised and organised from their

base in Northern Europe and exported globally by European colonisers and missionaries through the twentieth century. The development of sports both within and across nations has often been grounded in a (flawed) belief that sports inherently 'build character': an assumption which overlooks the fact that people experience sports in different ways, that different sports offer different opportunities, and that sports are not inherently wholesome activities as demonstrated by levels of violence, injury and drug usage in some sports.

While the experiences and organisation of sports vary through time and place reflecting and producing cultural practices, increasing capitalist expansion and dimensions of globalisation means that the structure and culture of the dominant rule-governed achievement-driven sport forms are increasingly similar the world over, while at the same time new forms of sports and sporting subcultures have emerged and spread. This is the case not only for participants, but also for spectators, with the emergence of mega-sports events such as the Olympic Games, various world championships and other commercially-driven sports events, commanding significant global attention and creating a multi-billion market for the global media, corporate sponsors and related industries.

One result of this media coverage is that major teams and individual athletes have become global celebrities, providing the basis of an industry in sports tourism where spectators will travel to follow their teams, and athletes will promote and endorse the products of their sponsors. In societies with strong economies and ready access to the media, sport is a significant part of everyday lives and often integral to individual identities, family, work and personal relationships, and permeating society right through to the level of political interdependencies. Sociologists of sport are interested in understanding how and why people become involved in sport, what are the meanings and impact of being involved in sport, and what is the process and effect of changing or withdrawing from sports participation whether through choice, 'burnout', injury, age or changes in life circumstances. Furthermore, sports events have taken a central role in political relationships within and between countries. Political leaders around the globe use sports to enhance their own popularity, and most countries around the world have at some stage used sports events to enhance their status in global political relations with variable consequences for participants and spectators.

However, it is only relatively recently that scholars have turned their attention to the sociological study of sport. In keeping with many new sciences, the fledgling discipline of sport studies/sport science sought legitimacy by adopting the methods and theories of the positivist and physical sciences – initially overlooking the historical, social, economic and political features of sporting cultures. The sociology of sport has, therefore, had a history of academic marginalisation: for being a sociological study of an activity prioritised for its physical, rather than socio-cultural attributes; and for being a study of an area of life associated with 'leisure' and perceived by many to lack real social significance.

During the latter part of the twentieth century, the sociology of sport slowly emerged as an area deemed worthy of serious scholarly attention. Sociologists have focused on the social conditions under which sports are organised and take place; and the cultural contexts which frame these activities, influence people's opportunities to take part and the meanings of them in individual's lives. Sociology is often viewed as complex and problematic because it challenges social

patterns, relationships and organisation. For example, sociologists often ask difficult questions about relations between men and women, different ethnic and class groups, and people with disabilities. They may query why men's sport is seen as 'natural', while women and girls have been marginalised and their sports performances regarded as unnatural or inferior. They have challenged ideas about relations between skin colour and physical ability. And they have argued for opportunities for people across social classes and with disabilities to take part in a full range of sporting activities. In so doing, sociologists of sport have often recommended changes which alter the status quo and erode the power of dominant groups.

Currently, a websearch of texts dedicated to the study of 'sports in society' will identify approximately 7,000 books. There are a large number of journals including some devoted to the sociology of sport and others which often publish papers related to the sociology of sport. There are also several national and regional associations, including the International Sociology of Sport Association (ISSA) which sponsors publication of the *International Review for the Sociology of Sport*; the European Association for the Sociology of Sport (EASS) which sponsors the publication of the *European Journal for Sport and Society*; the North American Society for the Sociology of Sport (NASSS) which sponsors publication of the *Sociology of Sport Journal*; ALESDE (the Latin American Association - Asociación Latinoamericana de Estudios Socioculturales del Deporte); the British Sociological Association Sport Study Group; the Japan Society of Sport Sociology; and the Korean Society for the Sociology of Sport. To illustrate the significance of the work of these scholars, let us look at one recent sporting development: the India Premier League for cricket.

Case Study: Social Significance of the India Premier League

In 2008, the Indian Premier League (IPL) for cricket held its inaugural tournament and changed the face of national and international cricket. The IPL is a competition between eight Indian-based teams who play a competition of Twenty20 cricket – arguably a more spectator-friendly form of the game as it is faster and shorter than the traditional test match which often takes five days to complete. It would be interesting to hear the response of CLR James, a former cricketer for the West Indies who learned to play the game when the British colonised his homeland of Trinidad (as they also did India, home of the IPL) and who wrote in 1984 'What do they know of cricket who only cricket know?' (James, 1984, preface); by which James meant that if we want to know about and understand sports, we must also know about the social and cultural contexts in which sports are created, maintained, and changed.

The development of cricket in India identifies many dimensions of globalisation processes, from its history steeped in colonial relations with Britain, through its more recent adoption of a US-style structure and organisation, global media and sponsorship deals, and international participants and spectators. The introduction of cricket to India is largely attributed to the imperial conquest of the country by the British Empire during which time British colonisers 'exported' many sports forms, including cricket. It remains the case that the most internationally active and successful teams in cricket are former British colonies, who often take great pride in challenging this hegemony and beating the former coloniser. Cricket has also been used for positive international relations between countries, perhaps most famously in the Cricket Diplomacy between India and Pakistan in 2004.

The IPL itself is based on the franchise system used in many professional sports in the USA. The Board of Cricket Control for India (BCCI) owns the infrastructure and loans this to the franchise. This means that teams were not required to spend enormous amounts of money on the initial infrastructure, there also is a cap on the maximum that can be spent on players' salaries, teams are evenly balanced because the players are drawn from a pool, and it is likely that all of the teams make a profit. The franchises ultimately were sold collectively for US\$723.6 million, and by the second season in 2009 it was estimated that the IPL's net worth was close to US\$5 billion.

The funding of the IPL is largely grounded in its 10-year broadcast rights deal with Sony-owned Multi Screen Media (MSM) and World Sports Group (WSG), which was renegotiated for US\$1.8 billion in March 2009. There also is a brand protection scheme such that a license is needed to use the BCCI-IPL name, marks (logo) or footage for the large global television audience. The title sponsor is the real estate company DFL and there are three official partners, three official sponsors and three digital sponsors. In 2009, while team sponsorship declined by approximately 15% in the context of a global economic recession, on-air advertising increased through the introduction of timeouts during games, as a result of which 118 two and a half minute slots were sold to advertisers. The IPL is one example of how sponsors want to attach their brand to an exciting and pleasurable activity, so that people assume that the feelings experienced while watching a game are dependent on the product and company sponsoring the event, and they will then develop a lifestyle which includes consumption of the product and also will not challenge corporate interests in sport or in other spheres of life.

By the time of the second IPL season in 2009, the competition had already become a truly global event, not least because it was moved from India to South Africa as a result of safety and security concerns. This followed a series of events in the region of India which were defined as terrorist-based - including an attack on the Sri Lankan national cricket team in Lahore, Pakistan in March 2009 - and taking into consideration that controversial national elections would occur in India during the tournament. The countries of South Africa and England offered to host the competition. Part of the reason for the choice to relocate the tournament to South Africa was its closer proximity in time to the Indian TV audience and, in contrast to the UK, the fact that the same television company owns the rights to the IPL and international cricket, which eased the television and sponsorship deals. The move not only facilitated the promotion of the tournament to an international audience, but it also was predicted to provide a billion rand boost to the South African economy. Jacob Zuma, who was newly elected as the President of South Africa during the event, closed the tournament and, in so doing, adopted the familiar stance taken by many politicians of attaching himself to a successful sporting event and so enhancing his own popularity.

The players in the IPL reflect the process of global athlete labour migration witnessed in many professional sports. In 2009 the players consisted of 29 Australians, 2 Bangladeshi, 7 English, 134 Indian, 6 New Zealanders, 17 South Africans, 14 Sri Lankans, and 4 from the West Indies. Of the coaches, 4 were Australian, 1 was from New Zealand and 3 were South African. Kevin Pietersen, a South African who plays for England, became one of the world's richest cricketers when he was paid US\$1,550,000 to play for the Royal Challengers Bangalore. However, the relationship between the IPL and the English Premier League (EPL) was problematic at the outset of the Indian tournament. The IPL was viewed as potentially undermining the EPL which

paid significantly lower wages and so was likely to lose many top-flight players attracted by the large pay packets on offer in India. As a result, the IPL proposed a partnership with the EPL, allowing players to compete in India in the spring and England in the summer in the new Twenty20 Super Leagues which were created to meet the increased demand for this version of the sport, with both tournaments to be played at times to suit live and television spectators.

In addition to the IPL reflecting broader global socio-economic issues, it also embodies many of the controversies experienced throughout sports. For example, uneven gender relations continue to be experienced in many sport cultures. In India, women's cricket only came under the umbrella of the BCCI in 2007, giving some benefits in terms of better organisation and sponsorship deals, but there remains inequity and, with respect to the IPL, this is a male-only event where women have taken on the traditional role of cheerleader, admired for their sexual attractiveness rather than athletic abilities and serving as a sideline to the main (men's) event. In India, this has proven controversial not only in terms of gender relations, but also because many deem public exposure of the body as culturally offensive.

Cricket, as with many other sports, also has a history of deviant behaviour. There have been a large number of allegations, some proven, of match-fixing and ball-tampering. One of the most famous cases surrounded the former player and Pakistan coach, Bob Woolmer, whose death in 2007 during a tournament followed a series of allegations regarding match-fixing and resulted in an extensive police investigation. The ICC set up a cricket anti-corruption unit which was chaired by Lord Condon who claimed in 2007 that "the tempting and very profitable prospect for a corrupt sportsman is that working alone or with others he can fix the outcome of a sporting event or indeed part of it and achieve a very significant healthy coup". Condon allegedly also stated that the IPL increased the chances of corruption in cricket, especially following a controversial mobile-phone gambling contest which was set up when the tournament was moved to South African in 2009. The competition involved people guessing by SMS the sequence of runs in the following over, which many believed could lead to players being bribed to ensure a successful outcome for some gamblers.

Other concerns regarding deviant behaviour also are related to the health and well-being of the players. For example, the IPL has an anti-doping code which aims to prevent the use of performance-enhancing substances. In 2008 Mohammad Asif, a Pakistan fast bowler, was the first player to test positive in the inaugural IPL season. There also have been concerns that the increased opportunity for players to compete year-round in different countries may increase the risk of injuries. In the first tournament, the Australian player Matthew Haydon was injured while playing in the IPL and, controversially, Cricket Australia subsequently deducted his pay because he was unable to complete an international tour. In 2009 the English player Andrew Flintoff was injured and needed a knee operation which also resulted in time out from the England season, although without the same financial penalty experienced by Haydon.

The case of the IPL illustrates how it is impossible to fully understand the modern world, without considering the role of sport in political, economic, social and cultural dynamics. In its short history, the IPL has impacted national and global economies, contributed to the international tourism industry, and illustrated issues in social relations and problems related to health and cheating. A sociological study of the IPL indicates how India's sports, as well as its economy,

are being globalised. The IPL has created demand for other sports, and India's developing economy has enabled the country to successfully bid to host future Commonwealth Games, cricket World Cup and Formula 1 events. Consistent with many developed countries, India is also looking to sporting activities to address health issues such as rising population obesity levels, which are almost certainly related to the increased consumption of 'Western' foods and sedentary lifestyles. This insight into the IPL demonstrates the potential offered by sport for transformative social, economic and political regeneration. The sociology of sport can enable us to understand, predict and influence the future role of sport in societies.

Suggested Readings:

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