

Prologue

This book seeks to provide a critical sociological interpretation of modern sport. To that end, I employ a critical development of core theories and substantive research themes within the sociology of sport. Other disciplines – notably anthropology, history, human geography, political science and political philosophy – contribute substantially, to broaden the interpretative horizons.

Its global popularity alone ensures that sociologists cannot ignore sport. The 2002 World Cup finals of football (or ‘soccer’) drew a cumulative 28.8 billion television viewers in 213 countries. The 2000 Olympics involved 199 participating nations in 300 events, assisted by 47,000 volunteer staff, reported on by 16,000 accredited media workers, and watched by 6.7 million spectators. In the United States, the NFL’s Super Bowl is watched by over 120 million viewers, and peaked in 1996 at 138.5 million people, the highest-ever national audience. At grass roots level, tens of millions participate in sporting pastimes, notably the football codes,¹ skiing, basketball, gymnastics, track and field athletics, and volleyball.

There is no single reason for sport’s huge cross-cultural appeal. Like love, truth and art, sport is a kind of human medium that conjoins people. Modern sport promises playful pleasures to players and spectators; new skills are tutored and learnt. Different sports facilitate controlled, pleasurable interaction with particular landscapes. In our increasingly ‘performative’ consumer culture, the physical endeavour of sport compensates for sedentary working practices. All sports are rule-governed, enabling easy transmission across cultures; yet the rules and techniques of sports may be transformed to suit local needs. Sport allows different cultures to explore old and new identities and

conflicts, in particular concerning community, gender, social class and ethnicity. Sport's political ethics – with reference to 'sportsmanship' and 'fair play' – reflect dominant, liberal-democratic ideologies in the West. Institutionally, sport has been a normative training ground for young elites, notably the English aristocracy and international business leaders. The economics of sport are now dominated by a power matrix that features top sports governing bodies, transnational corporations and global media networks.

The global economic, political, cultural and social growth of sport is indexed by the sudden, rather belated expansion of 'sport studies'. The volume of material published in recent years is staggering, an industry hastened by the founding of new journals. While all academics must now 'publish or perish', sport studies has mushroomed since the late 1980s; new departments or faculties have evolved under a challenging diversity of appellations, such as kinesiology, human movement, sport management, leisure and recreation, or the more prosaic moniker of physical education. While this expansion reflects intensified public and commercial emphasis on leisure practices and body cultures, even the most conservative of teaching institutions cannot deny that sport studies is highly popular within the student 'market'.

Towards a sociological definition of sport

When seeking definition, the word 'sport' is somewhat slippery, and carries significant pre-industrial associations with aristocratic 'hunting and shooting' field activities. For *Chambers Twentieth Century Dictionary*, to 'sport' (as a verb) is to 'frolic', 'make merry', or 'amuse'; and to 'wear' and 'exhibit'. 'Sport' (as a noun) denotes 'recreation', 'games' and 'play'; or 'amorous behaviour', 'mirth', 'jest' and 'dalliance'. The social actor, the 'sportsman', is plainly a 'good fellow'.

Sociological definition of sport requires more modern, systematic classification. Adapting McPherson, Curtis and Loy (1989: 15–17), I suggest that sport is:

- 1 *Structured* by rules and codes of conduct, spatial and temporal frameworks (playing fields and time limits on games), and institutions of government.
- 2 *Goal-oriented*: aimed at particular objectives, e.g. scoring goals, winning contests, increasing averages; thus winners and losers are identifiable.
- 3 *Competitive*: rivals are defeated, records are broken.

- 4 *Ludic*, enabling playful experiences, germinating excitement.
- 5 *Culturally situated*, in that 1–4 correspond closely to the value systems and power relations within the relevant sport's host society.

Criteria 1–4 distinguish sport from other practices like walking or exercising that lack, for example, competition. Criterion 5 implies that any transformation of the culture in which sport is played may well lead to the categorical reinvention of sport *per se*. Hence, the sociology of sport must also focus on inter-group struggles to control and change the meaning of sport.

The above criteria enable an inclusive approach towards listing 'sports'. Despite their competitors' limited physical activity or fitness levels, our definition does stretch to include games like darts, bowling, snooker, pool and motor-racing. Each requires intensive physical engagement and proficiency in hand–eye co-ordination. Each pastime is structured, goal-oriented, competitive and ludic. Moreover, these pastimes' custodians and practitioners advocate their sport status; their equipment is retailed by 'sports' shops; and their key news is reported by 'sports' media. Despite their antediluvian goals, I include 'blood sports' here, but only in discussion of historical struggles over the 'culturally situated' meaning of sport.

Sparking sport: historical and international dimensions

Sociology is the inquisitive child of modernity, its questions being traditionally directed towards industrialized and industrializing societies. Anthropological and historical standpoints afford crucial comparative perspectives on the categorical range of sporting practices, and the interconnections between these practices and power relations, community identity, codes of social conduct, and metaphysical belief systems. It is useful to outline the historical and cross-cultural influences in the sociogenesis of modern sports. This reveals both the centrality of power relations in sports' social history and important cultural differences in the foundation of modern sporting traditions and institutions. This sociological dichotomy – concerning structured power relations and elements of cultural agency – is a key theme throughout the book.

Many ball games like polo, the various football codes, and tennis originated in ancient pagan rituals or medieval springtime festivals. The modern Olympic games inherited sporting disciplines from the original Greek games, including sprinting, the long-jump, javelin throwing and wrestling. However, the British were key figures

in transforming games and pastimes into codified sports, and then transmitting these cultural practices internationally. Until the late nineteenth century, British schoolboys had been adept in ‘hard-drinking, horse-racing, gambling, blood sports, prize fighting and sexual indulgence’ (Mangan 1998: 179), but through the ‘games cult’, discipline was enforced and unruly energies dissipated, establishing sports like football, rugby, field hockey, boxing, lawn tennis, squash, and track and field athletics (Mangan 1981: 15–18). British influence overseas opened up distinctive channels of international diffusion, along imperial and trade routes, for the different games. As Perkin (1989: 217) notes, ‘where the public-school boys went in large numbers, inside or outside the Empire, there cricket and rugby prevailed, and where the horny-handed sons of toil, or at least of the counting house, predominated, there soccer fever tended to infect the locals and become endemic.’ Dominions like Australia and South Africa embraced the games cult. The Australians were the first to codify football, as their sport of Australian Rules, in 1859. Across southern Africa, football and boxing became particularly popular among indigenous peoples. In the Indian subcontinent, cricket was favoured, although local peoples reinvented its intensely colonial value system. After national independence in 1947, *kabaddi* underwent ‘sportization’ as different local rules were harmonized and playing procedures standardized.

North America’s aristocracy and upper middle classes enjoyed tennis, polo and cricket, but up to 1914 new ‘national’ sporting traditions were forged. Baseball, spread initially by the army in the mid-nineteenth century, gained mass popularity among the lower classes; young males at leading universities took up American football; meanwhile, the Christian movement invented basketball and volleyball as alternatives to existent sports. Canada’s national sports were ice hockey and lacrosse, the latter developed from the game played by the indigenous peoples.

In Germany in the early nineteenth century, Friedrich Jahn founded the *Turnverein*, a set of nationalistic disciplines combining gymnastic drill with military training (notably fencing) (Segel 1999: 209–11). The Czech equivalent, *Sokol*, spread across central and eastern Europe. To meet competitive demands among German sportspeople, handball was invented and popularized after the First World War to challenge football’s popularity. France’s major contribution has been largely political and administrative, promoting a remarkably prescient, cosmopolitan vision of sport’s global potential. Baron Pierre de Coubertin founded the modern Olympic games, first contested in Athens in 1896. The

French were catalysts for establishing football's governing body, FIFA, in 1904. France's distinctive sporting event is the Tour de France, the world's most prestigious cycling race. While football's European hegemony remains intense, shooting and the alpine sports are strong across the Alps and Nordic nations. In Ireland, hurling and Gaelic football were established to counteract perceived British cultural imperialism, and maintained strong grass roots support. In Latin America, there are no noteworthy indigenous sports; football dominates, but baseball is hugely popular in Central America. In Japan, traditional martial arts were transformed into sports like judo and karate according to Western criteria. Baseball has long-standing popularity; gymnastics remains important in school curricula, but football is now rooted within Japanese popular culture.

Contents of the book

To provide this sociological analysis of sport, the book is divided into twelve chapters and concludes with an epilogue. This distribution of intellectual labour, in theory at least, should make for diverse, concise discussions; but obviously they cannot be encyclopaedic. Each chapter, of course, could in its own right become a book twice the size of the one you are now reading; the bibliography would be several times longer, despite it presently being close to twice chapter length. I have endeavoured to deploy a reasonable range of sociological texts, taking account of likely readership interests and, of course, my disciplinary research interests and theoretical commitments.

The opening three chapters explore the broad influence of the three founding fathers of sociology: namely, Emile Durkheim, Max Weber and Karl Marx, in relation to sport. Durkheimian sociology emphasizes sport's function in promoting social cohesion and solidarity through quasi-religious rituals. Sport may be seen to promote social order at two levels: at systemic level, as claimed by structural-functionalists, through harmonious connections between sport and other institutions; at everyday level, as indicated by Goffman, through particular interaction rituals that protect the 'face' of social actors.

Weberian sociology facilitates deeper understanding of sport's interpretative and rationalized aspects. Interpretive sociology focuses on the complex, varying meanings and identities of social actors within sport. Weber, Guttman and Ritzer point us towards considering the impact upon sport of our highly rationalized, bureaucratized modern society. Despite significant respective strengths, both Durkheimian and

Weberian perspectives underplay political economic factors that shape social relations.

By contrast, Marxist theories address conflicts that underlie sports within modern capitalism. For different 'neo-Marxists', sport reproduces the signature iniquities of industrial capitalism, like exploiting workers/athletes and manipulating consumers/spectators. However, such arguments oversimplify Marx's understanding of the complexity of power relations at any historical moment.

These discussions lead into an analysis of 'Cultural Studies' in chapter 4. More plausible Cultural Studies approaches utilize sustained fieldwork and theory (notably from Gramsci and Williams) to examine how culture (including sport) is a site of struggle for subordinated social groups, notably the working classes, young women and ethnic minorities. The concept of 'resistance' needs to be deployed judiciously, alongside notions of 'transgression', as associated with the carnivalesque. I advocate a 'structured polyphonic' approach towards sociological investigation of sports cultures.

The first four, more theoretical chapters provide the crucial conceptual bases for examining four more substantive themes in the next chapters, relating specifically to 'race', gender, the body and space. The first two of these chapters, on 'race' and gender, have become key research domains within Cultural Studies. I examine each issue with substantial reference to their modern sporting history, highlighting the long-term social construction and cross-cultural complexity of these respective research fields. I explore how sport has contributed to racist mythologies, and whether it offers alternative social mobility for non-whites. I assess sport's role in shaping distinctive gender norms, identities and experiences, with consideration given to both women and men.

The next two chapters examine two key sites of sporting practice: namely the body and the sport landscape (or space). Foucault's theories of the corporeal and spatial disciplining of populations feature prominently. While modern sport facilitates some bodily transcendence, risk of injury and permanent harm remain connected to wider patterns of social inequality. Sporting landscapes generate strong emotional attachments at individual and collective levels, but are bedevilled by spatial rationalization and commodification.

The next two chapters examine the sport-centred contributions of two major international sociologists, Norbert Elias and Pierre Bourdieu. Elias's 'process-sociological' standpoint examines society as a game wherein participants, spectators and governing bodies are 'interdependent' and caught in the constant flux of play. His theory of

the civilizing process has been employed to trace sport's social history and, more problematically, to explain sports-related violence. Bourdieu proposes a more critical, concerted sociological standpoint that connects sporting 'tastes' to inter-group struggles. Bourdieu's later work became more overtly politicized through trenchant critiques of social inequality and 'neo-liberal' government policies.

The final chapters, on the postmodern and globalization, examine two of the most important debates within social science over the past two decades. Postmodern trends are located in the growing significance of mediated sport, the interpenetration of sporting codes and disciplines, the reorientation of stadiums towards fantasy consumption, shifting or 'neo-tribal' forms of sports identification, and the collapse of sports-defined distinctions between high and low culture. Latterly, globalization has become the key theme within contemporary sociology. Modern sport illustrates *par excellence* the globalization of cultural practices and social relations, while our focus should now turn to political reforms within the governing bodies of most global sports.

The twelve chapters provide a plethora of critical sociological arguments and observations regarding sport. In the epilogue, I integrate these arguments to provide recommendations for future research and critical analysis within the sociology of sport. My sociological emphasis insists on the complex interrelationships between social structures and institutions, systematic power inequalities, community identities and cultural agency. My overall challenge to the controllers, custodians, competitors and constituencies in and around sport is to enact major reforms that will enhance egalitarianism, democracy and participatory justice within their respective disciplines.