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DOMINIC MALCOLM

SPORT AND SOCIOLOGY



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Dominic Malcolm



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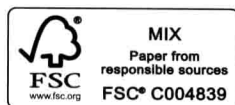
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SPORT AND SOCIOLOGY

- How has our understanding of sport been shaped by sociological ideas?
- How can the study of sport help sociologists to understand wider society?

The sociology of sport is a subdiscipline approaching maturity. This is the first book to stand back and reflect upon the subject's growth, to trace its developmental phases and to take stock of the current fund of knowledge. It offers a 'state-of-the-art' review of the sociology of sport and investigates those areas where sport has come to influence the sociological mainstream. The book also examines how the sociology of sport has attempted to engage with a popular readership, and what the consequences of such engagement have been.

Focusing on touchstone issues and concepts within sociological discourse, such as race, gender, celebrity, the body and social theory, the book assesses the successes and failures of the sociology of sport in influencing the parent discipline, related sub-disciplines and the wider public. It also asks to what extent the sociology of sport can be said to be autonomous, distinctive and distinguished, and challenges students of sport to extend their work out of the narrow confines of the subdiscipline and across disciplinary divides.

As the first book to provide a history of the sociology of sport and to clearly locate the contemporary discipline in the wider currents of sociological discourse, this is important reading for all students and scholars interested in the relationship between sport and society, whether they are working in sports studies or in the sociological mainstream.

Dominic Malcolm is Senior Lecturer in the Sociology of Sport at Loughborough University. His main research themes are the socio-historical study of cricket, and the sociology of sports medicine.

Frontiers of Sport

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Sport and Sociology

Dominic Malcolm

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Part I
The sociology of sport

1

TOWARDS A SOCIOLOGY OF THE SOCIOLOGY OF SPORT

I was recently a guest at a wedding. During dinner I was asked what I do for a living. I said that I teach in a university.

‘What do you teach?’

‘Sociology of sport.’

‘Oh yes, what’s that?’

‘It’s about the role of sport in society: why athletes take drugs, how football is becoming more commercial, why certain types of people take part in sport more than others. That sort of thing.’

My new friend looked bewildered. ‘Oh right, that’s really interesting. I love all that sports psychology stuff.’

Why the confusion I wondered?

The confusion is clearly not over the word ‘sport’. Sport could be described as a cultural universal. Across the world and throughout history, people in all human societies practise, and have practised, some kind of physical leisure pursuit we would recognize as sport. Indeed, German historian Johan Huizinga (1938/1949) argued that rather than defining the human species as *Homo sapiens* (‘man’ of wisdom and reason) a more valid term might be *Homo ludens* (‘man’ the player). The most prominent contemporary sporting spectacle takes its name from the contests of the Ancient Greeks which can be traced back to Olympia in 776 BC. People might not like sport, but they know what it is. It may also appear to be something which is very basic, something natural.

Sociology is also widely known, but perhaps not as well understood as sport. This is not because sociology is particularly new. While the first sociologists were more commonly thought of as historians or political philosophers (Burke 1980: 15), the term ‘sociology’ can be traced to the early nineteenth century and Auguste Comte’s rejection of Belgian statistician Adolphe Quetelet’s notion of ‘social physics’ (Goudsblom 1977). During the nineteenth century the term slowly became part of the public

4 The sociology of sport

vernacular and sociology departments were established at several major universities around the turn of the century (Chicago, 1893; London, 1907; Sorbonne, 1913). But in contrast to historians, philosophers or psychologists whose object of study is defined in fairly simple terms – the past, ideas, individual behaviour – sociology deals with something rather more abstract and ephemeral; that is to say, ‘society’. Society is complex. Society is not natural.

At the conjunction of these two phenomena are people who call themselves ‘sociologists of sport’. Part of that territory is to explain, and sometimes justify, to a variety of audiences what it is we do. And just as the layperson finds this association difficult to understand so sociologists of sport have trouble justifying what they do to the two worlds to which they most closely relate. As Pierre Bourdieu (1987a) aptly observed, the sociology of sport is ‘doubly dominated’, marginal to the sociological ‘mainstream’ and resisted by sportspeople who assume that outsiders cannot fully understand their social world.

Consequently, this book examines what sociologists of sport do and considers the outcomes of their efforts. In order to do this the book traces the ways in which sociology has engaged with, and sought to better understand, the world of sport, and at how others – from the fields of ‘sociology’, ‘sports studies’ and ‘sport’ – have engaged with the sociology of sport. The book charts how the sociology of sport has developed and identifies the ways in which it is developing. Although much of what is said along the way illustrates what sociologists of sport have done, and introduces the reader to the key research themes and advances in knowledge, as such this book is not *about* the sociology of sport, it is *a sociology of the sociology of sport*.

The sociology of professions and the sociology of sport

One way in which we can try to understand what sociologists of sport do (and why they do it) is to compare this occupational group with those we call ‘professions’. One could argue that sociologists of sport are members of the sociology profession or, more broadly, the university teaching profession. But sociologists of sport are a (relatively) clearly defined occupational (sub)group, a *subdiscipline*. Sociologists of sport claim to be able to ‘profess’ about sport in society. Robert Dingwall warns that ‘the separation of a sociology of professions from a sociology of occupations has been a blind alley’ (1983: 12). Consequently, a brief look at some of the ideas in the sociology of professions will help to develop a framework through which we can structure our observations about the people who identify themselves as sociologists of sport.

A number of the arguments in Max Weber’s seminal statement, ‘Politics as a Vocation’, are relevant here. According to Weber, ‘Politics, just as economic pursuits’, and here we might substitute the sociology of sport, ‘may be a man’s [sic] avocation or his vocation’ (1991: 83). Weber noted that most citizens take part in day-to-day aspects of politics, such as voting at elections or joining the associations which today we call pressure groups. In a similar vein much of the population, albeit a disproportionate number of men, take part in the sociology of sport as an avocation. Sport is central to the identity construction of many in contemporary societies, acting

at times like a 'surrogate religion' (Dunning 1999: 6). Moreover, while sports fans are usually concerned with scores and league tables, they also discuss 'social issues' in sport such as drug scandals, the relationship between the media and sport, the commercialization of sport, etc. In this respect, when people talk about sports, much of what they say touches on the subjects which sociologists of sport call their own. For many the sociology of sport is an avocation. This is somewhat ironic given the apparent incomprehensibility of the sociology of sport to the layperson.

A smaller group of people in society, Weber argues, take part in politics (again think sociology of sport) as a vocation; that is to say, in some senses 'professionally'. As Weber notes:

There are two ways of making politics one's vocation: Either one lives 'for' politics or one lives 'off' politics. By no means is this contrast an exclusive one. The rule is, rather, that man [sic] does both ... He who lives 'for' politics makes politics his life, in an internal sense. Either he enjoys the naked possession of the power he exerts, or he nourishes his inner balance and self-feeling by the consciousness that his life has *meaning* in the service of a 'cause' ... He who strives to make politics a permanent *source of income* lives 'off' politics as a vocation, whereas he who does not do this lives 'for' politics.

(1991: 84)

Sociologists of sport, like politicians, live both 'for' and 'off' their subject. Those who teach in universities use the subject as their main source of income and, in contrast to sports history (see Chapter 8), there are few 'amateurs' in the field. However, many sociologists of sport, I would suggest, also live 'for' the subject. For instance, most people who teach the sociology of sport have a passion for sport in some form (though conversely some of society's most ardent critics of sport are also sociologists of sport). (See Chapter 10.) Whereas biochemists inevitably have to switch off when they leave the lab, sociologists of sport are constantly exposed to new data. For the sociologist of sport, sport is both work and play. Unlike politicians, sociologists of sport will rarely feel, let alone enjoy, 'the naked possession of power', but, as I go on to discuss in the book, working with and in the media may afford a minor degree of celebrity and a brief opportunity to bask in the spotlight of public recognition (see Chapter 9). Others may feel that their life has meaning in the service of a cause when social changes reflect, for instance, what sociologists have argued about racial or sexual inequality (see Chapters 4 and 5). A limited number experience honour and prestige within the subdiscipline. In examining their output and products we should consider that sociologists of sport are motivated by a combination of personal interest and altruistic service.

In addition to looking at individual motivation and practice, this book seeks to examine how sociologists of sport combine and act as a profession. Though much debated, social scientists generally identify certain traits which are characteristic of 'professions'. Keith MacDonald, for instance, defines professions as 'occupations based on advanced, or complex, or esoteric, or arcane knowledge' (1995: 1). Magali Larson,

more succinctly and with a different emphasis, argues that 'professions are occupations with special power and prestige' (Larson 1977: x). Eliot Freidson (1970), in his discussion of the medical profession, outlines some of the characteristics which make a profession a 'special kind of occupation'. Professions are 'special', he says, in the sense that they are typically identified as providing the authoritative and definitive voice over a particular area or practice. Professions typically have the capacity to be autonomous and self-directing and control the recruitment of new members and hence access to this authoritative status. Professions may legitimize their lack of external accountability on the grounds that what they do is so complex that others simply do not have the ability to assess their work. Subsequently they may try to reassure others of their good intentions by publishing ethical codes which, for instance, indicate that they only act in the interests of others rather than themselves (e.g., the hippocratic oath in medicine).

To what extent does the sociology of sport community exhibit these 'professional' traits? Sociologists of sport can operate some control over recruitment through the supervision and examination of Ph.D.s, the refereeing of journal articles, etc., but as subsequent chapters show, these barriers can be easily circumvented by other academics. Similarly sociologists of sport do not have ethical codes of their own but will, typically, point to the codes published by the professional bodies of the parent discipline. Sociologists of sport can, however, seek to assert their authoritative status by contrasting the scientific rigour and depth of their own knowledge with the impressionistic and ad-hoc research of journalists, or the limited engagement with sport of 'mainstream' sociologists. But whether sociologists of sport can claim to be the definitive authority over their subject matter is a more debatable point for, as I go on to spell out in some detail, sociologists of sport have constantly had their work evaluated by academics in adjacent subdisciplines, in the sociological 'mainstream' and by 'non-academic' cultural commentators on sport. A further area examined in the book is the degree to which sociologists of sport have demonstrated or convinced others that what they do is both distinctive and distinguished.

Subsequent developments in the sociology of professions have placed more emphasis on the differences rather than the similarities between professions. Comparative analysis has shown that there is no single trajectory along which occupations move towards some kind of model professional status. In fact, identifying sets of characteristics such as these tell us rather more about what a profession claims to be and do than what it actually is or does. Freidson, for instance, argued that the professional person is 'more their present than their past ... more the outcome of the pressure of the situation than of what they have earlier "internalized"' (1970: 90). Descriptions of traits are, therefore, ideal types and, perhaps more importantly, the legitimizing ideologies which professions mobilize to protect their own interests. Put another way, it would be naive to accept at face value the claims of sociologists of sport that they have undertaken a specialist programme of training which has endowed them with a unique set of complex research skills, and that their immersion in the field provides a broader and more reliable knowledge base than, for instance, sociologists *per se*. What, in fact, they might be trying to do is to bolster their 'special power and prestige' relative to others by providing a shorthand rationale for the *a priori* superiority of

their viewpoint. Relative expertise is an empirical question, albeit it somewhat subjectively measured.

Professions, therefore, need to be viewed not simply as altruistic groups working for the good of society but as people who undertake similar types of work and see that they might gain certain collective benefits through cooperation. While sociologists of sport, like most professionals, have internal disputes and divisions, professional bodies attempt to project an image of unity for others to consume. In this regard Larson (1977) pointed towards the 'professional project', where a combination of individual aspirations and collective action lead to two main outcomes: market control by the group and social mobility for individuals. Similarly Andrew Abbott (1988) pointed to the *system of professions* that develops through the interrelations of competing professions or groups. Thus, as we go through this book, we will look at the degree to which sociologists of sport have benefited from collaboration through an exploration of their relations with competing and complementary groups working in adjacent and overlapping subject areas.

The sociology of sport as a 'profession'

How then do sociologists of sport conceive of their 'profession'? The goals, aims and roles of this group can be identified in the mission statements of organizations established to represent sociologists of sport.¹ There are four such bodies which an English speaker might turn to in this regard: the International Sociology of Sport Association (ISSA) which is the main global body for sociologists of sport; the continental associations of the North American Society for the Sociology of Sport (NASSS) (which competes with ISSA in terms of influence), and the European Association for Sociology of Sport (EASS); and the Sport Study Group of the British Sociological Association (BSASSG). There is no equivalent national body in Australia. The multiplicity of organizational missions complicates the picture, but also provides an insight into the diversity within, and some of the tensions which underlie, the sociology of sport.²

The BSASSG and NASSS provide relatively terse descriptions of themselves as organizations that 'promote research and scholarship in the sociology of sport' and 'explore sociological aspects of play, games and sports' respectively. The EASS notes that its purpose, 'is the promotion of social sciences and social research in sport at the European level'. It is, moreover, the only organization that seeks to define sport within its statutes, noting that "'sport" refers to all forms of human movement which aim to maintain or improve physical fitness or mental well-being, create or improve social and cultural relationships, or obtain results in competition at all levels'. ISSA, perhaps in an attempt to assert its status over its continental competitors, speaks not of the organization's aims, but of those of the sociology of sport per se. In this it provides perhaps the most detailed statement, applying the definition of sociology – the study of human beings and the societies they form – to the sport-specific context – 'the examination of the role, function and meaning of sport in the lives of people and the societies they form.' ISSA further provides illustrative examples of the substantive areas that stem from this aim including: explaining the emergence and diffusion of

sport; the process of socialization into sport; the clash between different sports (sub-) cultures; the investigation of inequalities in sport, etc.

Two aspects of the scope of the sociology of sport emerge from these comparisons. First, how broadly or how narrowly do sociologists of sport define sport? While sociologists of sport have devoted some considerable time to defining sport (see Chapter 2), most definitions include a similar combination of features: structured, goal-oriented, competitive forms of play (McPherson *et al.* 1989). Some, like Jay Coakley (2007: 6), argue that such 'traditional' definitions should be used with caution because the focus on organizational structure may lead us to overlook the sport-like activities of relatively marginalized groups who lack the power and resources to 'institutionalize'. The professional bodies representing sociologists of sport reflect these differing views. NASSS speaks of also including play (not competitive) and games (not necessarily physical), while EASS refers to a broad spectrum of human movement which may range from competitive activities to, in fact, almost any physical activity people say they enjoy. The second point of note is how narrowly or how widely sociologists of sport define sociology. We can, for instance, contrast the flexible approach of EASS which refers to social sciences and social research with the more rigid approach of ISSA which defines the borders of sociology relatively narrowly. As a profession, therefore, sociologists of sport fail to exhibit a consensus over the meaning of the two main words which make up the title of their subdiscipline.

What is seen as the purpose of these professional bodies? NASSS is described as 'organized exclusively for *educational* purposes to promote, stimulate, and encourage ... sociological study' and seeks to cooperate with bodies having 'the same purposes' (emphasis added). EASS is perhaps the polar opposite, with no reference made to education, merely the provision of 'scientific advice' and the 'promotion' of sport-related research. The EASS mission explicitly refers to the goal of serving political bodies through 'support [of] European institutions such as the EU and the Council of Europe'. ISSA specifies a more diverse range of goals in its mission statement. The aims of ISSA include contributing 'to the knowledge base of sociology' and 'the formation of policy', including that of 'governments, NGO's and sport organisations'. ISSA further argues that sociologists of sport can 'highlight aspects of the general human condition' and make the world 'less wasteful of lives and resources' through debunking popular myths about sport and critically appraising the actions of those more powerful groups involved in sport. Sociologists of sport are claimed to 'seek to generate knowledge that will contribute to "human development" as opposed to "performance efficiency"'. Finally, while the BSASSG also seeks to influence public debate, engage with 'user constituencies' and liaise with groups with complementary (NB not as NASSS states 'the *same*') scholarly interests, an interesting and subtly different claim is also made. The aims of the BSASSG include the representation of 'the professional interests of those engaged in the sociology of sport'. It is, therefore, the only body to refer specifically to the 'professional project' of sociologists of sport and their place within the system of professions.

Certain tensions and divisions in the sociology of sport are evident within these very differently constructed statements. For instance, should the sociology of sport be

an inward-looking profession content to generate knowledge for itself, or, as most explicitly stated by ISSA, a constitutive part of sociology? Sociologists of sport have debated this issue for many years. For instance, Rick Gruneau (1976) critiqued Donald Ball's assertion that one could identify two approaches within the sub-discipline, a sociology *through* sport and a sociology *of* sport. The former was defined as an attempt to contribute to sociological knowledge by using sport-related data, and the latter as an attempt to provide an analysis of the social aspects of sport using sociological frameworks. Gruneau dismissed such a distinction as merely 'two sides of the same coin' for one cannot understand one without the other. More concretely, we cannot understand an aspect of social life (e.g., sport) without reference to the broader social structure, and we cannot understand society without knowledge of its diverse and interlinking subcultures. Though the logic of Gruneau's argument is convincing, it remains the case that within the sociology of sport the different levels of importance which people have attached to the subdiscipline's impact on the broader world of sociology, compared, for example, to physical education, have always been a source of tension (see Chapter 2). In this regard we need to ask how sociologists of sport have sought to influence both the broader discipline and broader world of sport, and what success they have had?

Should the sociologist of sport contribute to sports performance? While ISSA explicitly rejects this idea, EASS fully embraces it. This difference reveals the historical tension between the sociology of sport and the sports sciences. Such struggles are not unique to sociologists of sport. For many years a tension was evident between those who called themselves medical sociologists and those who called themselves sociologists of medicine. The former saw their role as contributing towards medicine through the use of sociological analysis, while the latter saw themselves as sociologically critiquing medicine as a social institution (Waddington *et al.* 2006). The nomenclature used by the subdiscipline's professional groups indicates a consensus on this matter with all referring to sociologists of sport rather than sports sociologists. Yet it remains the case, as Coakley acknowledges (2007: 18–19), that some orientate their research more to 'improve athletic performance, coaching effectiveness, and the efficiency and profitability of sport organizations' because they see themselves as part of the larger field of sports sciences rather than sociology, while others focus more on the cultural issues which are related to sport because they see themselves, first and foremost, as sociologists.

A third tension revealed in these statements centres upon how and in what ways research conducted by sociologists of sport should be applied. While all sociologists of sport would, on one level, wish their scholarship to have an impact on the broader social world (see Chapter 9), disagreement arises over how the research agenda should be drawn up. Ironically, given that NASSS is the body that most explicitly prioritizes educational purposes over policy formation or collaboration with political bodies, North Americans have been at the forefront of this debate. In 1989, Andrew Yiannakis lamented the fact that an applied sociology of sport had been hindered in the 1960s and 1970s and argued that 'if sport sociologists are truly interested in the worth of their research, logic dictates that their findings be put to the test in the world of sport' (1989: 5). Countering this, Alan Ingham and Peter Donnelly expressed concern that seeking