

Sport and Social Mobility

Crossing Boundaries

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Sport and Social Mobility

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Ramón Spaaij

To my parents, and to the memory of Celia da Cal

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Introduction

A boy who played with a ball made of socks, who moved on to play with a professional ball, on professional pitches, in teams that made history. I saw the world, met great people—wonderful people. I never expected to fly so high

(Edson Arantes do Nascimento 2006: 5).

The biography of Brazilian football (soccer) star Edson Arantes do Nascimento, known worldwide as Pelé, is indicative of the advantages professional sport may bring to individuals who grow up in poverty, as well as to disadvantaged communities where sport may provide an important form of organized social activity, identity and excitement. For many poor young people, sport presents “the prospect of escape into a better world, at least a lift out of the direct poverty” (Walvin 1995: 122). The sporting success of athletes from impoverished backgrounds fuels the imagination of young people who grow up in similar conditions and encourages them to aspire to building a better future through sport. Quite apart from the real possibilities of a professional career and the upward social mobility that it offers, however, sport tends to be seen by young males in particular as a means to go abroad and escape the difficult life conditions experienced at home (e.g. Poli 2010).

In reality, upward social mobility through professional sport remains mainly in the realm of myth, but such is the power of this myth that aspirants will go to great lengths to succeed. Sport acts as an opiate of the masses “by perpetuating the belief that persons from the lowest social classes can be upwardly mobile through success in sports” (Eitzen 2000: 372). Research by Poli (2010: 1001–2) shows that upward career paths of football players recruited in Africa to major European clubs “are few and hide the numerous failures, not only sporting ones, which confront players who leave the continent to pursue their ambitions abroad.” Although difficult to estimate with any precision, the proportion of footballers coming to Europe for trials and who succeed in signing a professional contract is very low. Moreover, even though the possibility of social advancement through sport exists, it tends to be elusive. Lever (1983: 136) points out that for the vast majority of Brazilian football players, football provides only fleeting social mobility, leaving their educational levels unchanged:

At about age thirty most players find themselves with few work skills, more debts than cash reserves, and only memories of their brief careers. . . . Typically he has trouble adjusting to retirement. He has little choice but to accept a low-level job that is hardly commensurate with his newly acquired middle-class tastes. All too often, players return to the poverty-stricken environment from which they came.

2 Sport and Social Mobility

Not only are high-flying careers in professional sport very scarce, but professional sport is also a precarious means of securing a living (Leonard and Reyman 1988; Eitzen and Sage 2003). A serious injury can destroy a player's career, which is limited anyway by age eroding physical abilities and possibly diminishing motivation. This is what actually happened to Pelé's father, Dondinho, whose damaged knee ligaments ended his flirtation with professional football.

In terms of non-professional forms of sport, however, many policy-makers point to significant social, health and economic benefits, both in western societies and in developing countries. The following statement by the United Nations Inter-Agency Taskforce on Sport for Development and Peace (2003: 1–2) might be seen as typical of the claims made for sport:

Sport—from play and physical activity to organised competitive sport—has an important role in all societies. Sport is critical to a child's development. It teaches core values such as co-operation and respect. It improves health and reduces the likelihood of disease. It is a significant economic force providing employment and contributing to local development. And, it brings individuals and communities together, bridging cultural or ethnic divides. Sport offers a cost-effective tool to meet many development and peace challenges, and helps achieve the [Millennium Development Goals].

In contemporary political discourse, sport is being analyzed not only in terms of its economic impact but also in terms of its potential to promote tolerance, intercultural dialogue and peace, social cohesion and social inclusion, as well as to combat crime, poverty, homelessness and unhealthy lifestyles (e.g. Sport England 1999; Coalter et al. 2000; Morris et al. 2003; UNICEF 2006; Coalter 2007; Nichols 2007; Sugden and Wallis 2007; Kay et al. 2008; Ministry of Health, Welfare and Sport 2008; Levermore 2008; Levermore and Beacom 2009a; Sherry 2010). Researchers and policymakers tend to emphasize the multidimensional nature of sport's social impact, which has been summarized by its advocates in a single phrase: the global "power of sport" (International Sport for Development and Peace Association 2010).

The idea that sport might be directed toward wider social objectives is central to the development of modern sport. Many of the aspirations that are currently voiced in relation to sport and social policy can be traced, in one form or another, through the history of modern sport. In the nineteenth century, several European states were concerned with the physicality of their agents and the general population, not only in preparation for war, but also for hygiene and health. Sport has also been central to social movements such as muscular Christianity (MacAloon 2006; Booth and Tatz 2000), the *mens sana in corpore sano* ethos and "rational recreation" interventions in the late nineteenth century (Giulianotti 1999; Kidd 2008),

and to the establishment of organizations such as the YMCA (Saavedra 2009). However, as Kidd (2008) notes, the contemporary manifestation of the “power of sport” movement is different, *inter alia*, in the rapid explosion of the agencies and organizations that are involved and the extent to which it has been championed by the United Nations and other international governing bodies and transnational NGOs. This movement has been gaining momentum to the extent that, at least for football, it arguably has “the potential to transform the role and perception of the world’s most popular sport” (Fleming 2009: 9). Given this, Fleming (2009: 14) asks whether football, in its evolution from disorganized beginnings to a social phenomenon and global industry, can now become equally successful and renowned in the field of social development. To realize this ambition, some advocates argue, sport as a global “social project” needs to be carefully designed (e.g. Beutler 2008).

The battle lines of the “power of sport” debate are yet to be drawn. At present, two seemingly contradictory tendencies hold sway. The first tendency refers to the ways in which research into the social impact of sport tends to be organized and conducted. The challenges of conceptualizing, measuring and explaining social outcomes of sport are plenty, and the existing body of research is generally poorly equipped to meet these challenges. Presumed social benefits of sport remain under-explored empirically (Long and Sanderson 2001; Bailey 2005; Tacon 2007; Bloyce and Smith 2010), with most studies failing to gather the necessary evidence to demonstrate such outcomes and to make a rigorous assessment (Collins et al. 1999; Donnelly et al. 2007). Coalter (2007: 2) rightly notes “the absence of an understanding of processes and mechanisms which either produce, or are assumed to produce, particular impacts and outcomes”: what works, what processes produce these effects, for which participants, in what circumstances, and what are their limitations? These are fundamental questions that require increased methodological and empirical rigor. Moreover, Tess Kay makes the important point that many studies are narrowly focused, project-specific and concerned primarily with unpicking how immediate behavioral impacts are affected by program delivery processes. Systematic analysis of contextual influences lies outside the scope of most studies, and so too does consideration of the longer-term impacts of sport participation.¹ There is thus a need for greater and more sustained engagement with empirically grounded research and innovative methodologies that enable the collection and analysis of high-quality data (Kay 2009).

A second, related tendency of the “power of sport” debate is its predominantly functionalist and utilitarian underpinnings, with many of its proponents viewing sport as an antidote to a variety of social problems. In this view, sport is an inherently wholesome, harmonizing and cohesive force which has enormous potential in relation to the promotion of the “collective good.” In its contemporary manifestation, the “power of sport” movement has for the most part been devoid of critical and theoretically-informed

reflection (Black 2009; Darnell 2010). However, sociologists of sport have been critical of functionalist and utilitarian interpretations of sport, and rightly so. Hargreaves (1986: 3) makes the important point that:

Sports activity . . . can never be adequately explained purely as an instrument of social harmony, or as a means of self-expression, or as a vehicle for satisfying individual needs, for this ignores the divisions and conflicts, and the inequalities of power in societies, which if we care to look more closely, register themselves in sports. Nor can their social role be explained simply as a means whereby the masses are manipulated into conformity with the social order, capitalist or otherwise, for to do so is to regard people as passive dupes, and it ignores their capacity to resist control and to stamp sports with their own culture.

As Patriksson (1995: 128) observes, sport (like most other activities) is not a priori good or bad, but has the potential to produce both positive and negative outcomes. Indeed, Eitzen (2006: 29) asserts that although sport has a unifying function to some degree, for the most part sport reinforces the social inequalities in society: “the losers in sport have been and continue to be the poor, racial minorities, and women.” A sociological understanding of the social impact of sport, then, requires a critical approach which examines both “winners” and “losers,” and which reflects more critically on its own values and socio-historical locations.

A key proponent of a critical sociological approach to sport, Maguire (2005) notes the degree of involvement on the part of many people who investigate or write about its social impact. According to Maguire, “power of sport” advocates tend to be firmly embedded in the global sports industrial complex. Studies are often funded, commissioned and/or supervised by organizations that have a vested interest in demonstrating the social benefits of sport, particularly those studies which involve contract evaluation research. Due to their actual involvement in sport circles and/or their quest for status, funding and academic/professional advancement, researchers often appear unwilling or unable to exercise sufficient detachment, opting instead for varying forms of involved advocacy in the “sport for development and peace” movement.

The importance of detachment to counter-balance problems of involvement is well established in the social sciences. Norbert Elias’s (1987) notion of detachment refers to a disciplined, qualified exercise in self-distancing, that is, the individual stands back from reflected objects of thought in order to see them afresh. The aim for sociologists, then, is to recognize and understand their involvement and to distance themselves, as much as possible, from their own values in their research. This approach, Elias argues, would facilitate a better, more reality-congruent understanding of the issues related to the area of research. In other words, the “sociologist-as-participant” must

be able to stand back and become, as far as possible, the “sociologist-as-observer-and-interpreter” (Maguire 1988).

The involvement-detachment debate and the related (though not synonymous) notion of reflexivity provide an orientation that is of practical and ethical relevance to the entire research process. At the very least, they sensitize researchers to the fact that their orientations are shaped by their socio-historical locations, including the values and interests that these locations confer upon them. This orientation presents “a rejection of the idea that social research is, or can be, carried out in some autonomous realm that is insulated from the wider society and from the biography of the researcher” (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007: 15). It also highlights that the production of knowledge by researchers has consequences which are not neutral in relation to what are widely felt to be important values, nor are they necessarily desirable. This orientation offers an important corrective to some of the de-contextualized, romanticized generalizations about the “power of sport” that continue to hold sway.

Although this orientation appears at odds with the aforementioned call for greater research engagement, both orientations are in fact highly complementary in that they can keep one another in check through simultaneous processes of *self-involving* (i.e. deep engagement with the object of research) and *self-distancing*. In other words, they enable researchers to cultivate a critically engaged position. Both orientations should be kept in balance: too much self-involving can lead to over-rapport and diminished reflexivity, whereas too much self-distancing can lead to under-rapport and speculative theorizing, inviting criticisms of elitism. In this book, this twofold orientation is used to produce critical sociological engagement at three levels:

- *Theoretical-conceptual*. Are the (western) social science concepts we use universally applicable or situationally specific? Are some historical or cultural conditions not so different that these conceptual categories are analytically inappropriate and reductionist? In other words, what are their analytical uses and limits in different socio-historical locations? In this book, these questions are addressed in relation to the key conceptual categories used, notably the notions of social mobility, social capital and cultural capital.
- *Political-ideological*. Is the social change produced in and through sport ephemeral or durable? Is the “power of sport” not a form of “false consciousness,” to borrow Marxist terminology; that is, isn’t the social impact of sport superficial and self-defeating rather than “real” and profound? Is there a danger that the “power of sport” discourse reproduces rather than resists or transforms the existing social order and attendant social inequalities, while disorganizing and fragmenting subordinate groups? In this book, I explore an intriguing paradox of social development through sport: while sports programs aimed at wider social objectives tend to be highly regarded

by disadvantaged youth and their families, such programs tend to construct disadvantaged young people as a social problem, and their ulterior political-ideological aim is often to discipline and “civilize” the target group rather than enhance their agency and autonomy. Little research has explored the idea of development through sport as a form of social control due in part to the aforementioned degree of involvement on the part of advocates of the “power of sport” discourse. However, as this book will show, the issue of social control is of great import for fully grasping the complex and at times contradictory outcomes of participation in sport.

- *Methodological.* There is a need for greater and more sustained engagement with empirically grounded research and, as part of this, with methodologies that enable the collection and analysis of culturally sensitive, high-quality data. There is also a need for flexibility and creativity in the exploration of under-examined or unanticipated avenues of inquiry, for example by incorporating new social media into the analysis. It is also of vital importance to actively engage with research participants and their communities to enhance the usefulness of the research results and to ensure that all voices are fairly heard and represented.

Building on this orientation, this book provides a critical examination of the ways in which sport contributes to, or inhibits, upward social mobility of disadvantaged people in different social contexts. Clearly, social advancement through sport should be understood in its particular social contexts. The nature and meanings of sport participation and its impact on people’s lives vary significantly depending on the social setting and can be better understood when they are compared in relation to two or more meaningfully contrasting cases or situations. Specificities in time and space matter; social practices are always inherently spatial in character, and they are also bound by and constructed over time (Field 2005: 103–4). The approach taken in this book, then, is one that treats social relationships and behavior as constituted by social agents in specific circumstances and with access to unequally distributed assets. It uses a comparative design to improve theory development in regard to sport participation and social mobility, building on a comparison of four cases with the aim to produce nuanced understandings of the lived experience of sport in different social contexts.

ON METHOD

Scholars are uncertain not only about the potential social impacts of sport but also about the capacity of research to reveal them (Kay 2009). Successive attempts to establish a statistical, causal relationship between sport and singular outcomes “can be seen as a rather crass effort to bang square pegs