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SPORT & PEACE

a sociological perspective



Brian Wilson

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of that chapter, entitled 'Growth and Nature: Reflections on Sport, Carbon Neutrality, and Ecological Modernization', appear in chapter 8 of this book.

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Finally, this book, quite simply, would not have been produced without the encouragement, patience, and love of Desiree Sattler—thank you.

Preface

In the opening chapter of his international bestseller, *How Soccer Explains the World: An Unlikely Theory of Globalization*, journalist Frank Foer reflects on time he spent with supporters of the notorious Serbian football club, Red Star Belgrade. Foer describes their well-earned reputation for using intimidation tactics to ‘police’ Red Star players who are not performing to an acceptable standard, and their frequent attacks on supporters of rival teams who are caught in the wrong place at the wrong time. Most startling is Foer’s account of the key role that these supporters—actively recruited by the Serbian government—played in the paramilitary offensive against the Croatian people and army during the Balkan Wars of the 1990s. As Foer put it, ‘Red Star fans would become Milosovic’s shock troops, the most active agents of ethnic cleansing’ (2004, p. 13).

Foer’s depiction would seem to sit strangely beside portrayals of sport in the work of international non-governmental organizations (NGOs) like Right To Play and Shoe4Africa. These organizations are well known for their use of sport as a tool to support development efforts and conflict transformation in war-torn and/or poverty-stricken regions of Africa, the Middle East, and elsewhere. It is not uncommon to see media stories that describe how these sorts of groups use recreational sporting events as forums to educate about HIV prevention, to rehabilitate and (re)integrate child soldiers, and to bring together groups that have been in conflict—offering ‘neutral’ settings where empathy can be developed and positive relationships built.

In this book, these types of seemingly contradictory portrayals are linked through an exploration of sport’s complex and multi-layered relationship with peace. Certainly, as Foer recognizes in his book, not all soccer fans are violent, and sport supporters of all backgrounds may collectively stand for a variety of peace-related issues. An example of this emerged in coverage of recent protests in Egypt:

Last Thursday, the Egyptian Soccer Federation announced that they would be suspending all league games throughout the country in an effort to keep the soccer clubs from congregating. Clearly this was a case of too little, too late. Even without games, the football fan associations have been front and center organizing everything from the neighborhood committees that have been providing security for residents, to direct confrontation with the state police . . . The involvement of the clubs has signaled more than just the intervention of sports fans. The

soccer clubs' entry into the political struggle also means the entry of the poor, the disenfranchised, and the mass of young people in Egypt for whom soccer was their only outlet. (Zirin, 2011)

At the same time, I will use existing research and writing by sociologists to help explain the role of sport in peace, war, and violence—and to demonstrate why it is necessary to understand the social and cultural contexts within which sport-related conflicts take place before attempting to make sense of these conflicts. I use various theoretical lenses to further this book's exploration of, among other topics, international sport for development and peace groups like Right To Play—and the reasons that even these groups have attracted some well-founded criticism.

Of course, this look at the sport–peace relationship leads to questions and topics that extend well beyond international development and soccer-related conflict. For example, and recognizing that recent Nobel Peace Prize winners include environmentalists like Al Gore and Wangari Muta Maathai, I will consider debates about the potentially negative environmental impacts of maintaining sporting venues like golf courses and ski hills, and hosting major sporting events like the Olympics, and critically examine responses by sport managers and others to these issues. I will also encourage reflection on how sport can be a forum for educating about environmental issues, and ponder how the creation of cross-border 'peace parks' might promote reconciliation and intercultural relationships through environmental recreation.

I will recognize how sport has for years been used in diplomatic efforts, noting the various meanings and consequences of cultural exchanges like the oft-celebrated 1972 Canada–USSR hockey series, and public diplomacy efforts associated with the Beijing Olympics and the FIFA World Cup in post-apartheid South Africa. I acknowledge also the role that sport has played and continues to play as a forum for protest against (for example) the use of native mascots by sport teams, or against forms of economic globalization commonly associated with the overseas sweatshops of Nike and other athletic apparel companies.

This journey into sport's relationship with peace is also intended to inspire thinking about how physical education and other styles of pedagogy through sport can perpetuate violent attitudes among boys and men who are commonly socialized within misogynist and homophobic sporting cultures—or, conversely, how physical education and sporting contexts can be forums that enable reconciliation between conflicting groups. I will similarly consider how the sport–peace linkage is relevant to thinking about how sport media may perpetuate forms of cultural violence through the stereotyping of particular ethnic or racial groups and how more progressive sport commentary and coverage is possible in the form of what I call sport-for-peace journalism.

In the end, what will become clear is that while debates persist about *how* sport is related to peace, it is unquestionable that sport and peace are integrally linked. They are linked in the work of practitioners interested in using sport to deal with social problems, and for sporting event promoters and corporate executives hoping to align themselves (and their brands) with the feel-good stories that often emerge from sport-for-peace work. With these trends in mind—and for better and worse—it should be no surprise that linkages between sport and peace are becoming part of the popular imagination.

• • •

This book is ultimately driven by the well-founded assumption that hope for positive changes in society comes, first, from identifying and understanding social problems that exist in society—and identifying viable solutions and alternatives. The arguments underlying this book are therefore grounded in a sociologically informed understanding of the ways that sport has become better than it was (e.g., for many women and girls, for youth interested in alternative, non-competitive sport)—and an awareness of sport-related social problems that continue to emerge and exist. For example, the battle to promote access to sport and physical activity for those with limited economic resources is ongoing. As well, corporate groups are increasingly influencing the decisions of those responsible for dealing with sport-related social and environmental problems—a trend that has led many sociologists to question whether democratic principles are being undermined as those motivated ultimately by profits are taking the lead on some of the key issues of our time.

In my investigation of these issues I am guided by what Henry Giroux (2007) has called an ‘educated hope’, the idea that by understanding and identifying injustices in and around sport we are not only better positioned to create change—we are also emboldened to do so. I am similarly inspired by the challenge set out by sport journalist Dave Zirin (2008)—who has urged members of the sociology of sport community to ‘break out of the academic ghetto’, to ‘eschew excessively coded and obscure language’, and to ‘fight to become part of the general discourse of sports conversation, both on campuses and in the broader sports world’ (p. 28). Responding to this, I spend the following chapters featuring the work of many sociologists of sport who are already ‘off the bench’.

• • •

I have organized this book into four main parts. Part 1, Introduction to the Study of Sport, Sociology, and Peace, includes an introductory chapter that outlines the value of critical and sociological thinking about sport and peace and offers definitions of key terms. Chapter 2—Theory, Sport, and Peace:

Tools and Lenses for Seeing Sport in Context—is intended to equip readers with tools for ‘seeing’ the sport and peace relationship from a variety of perspectives. I discuss a range of sociological theories that commonly influence researchers who study sport and demonstrate how it is that the opinions we hold about sport can often be traced back to the theoretical lenses through which we prefer to look. This chapter offers a platform upon which all the subsequent chapters in the book rest, because a proper understanding of various sociological theories is crucial if we are to make sense of the sport–peace relationship. It is also the chapter where I advance an argument for privileging critically oriented theories because they help us see and ask questions about the inequalities that exist in and around sport, and ways these inequalities are perpetuated—fundamental questions for those of us concerned with promoting positive forms of peace.

With this background, I proceed to Part 2, Exploring the New and Old Politics of Sport and Peace, which includes chapters 3 and 4. Chapter 3—Sport, Diplomacy, and Nationalism—discusses what Lincoln Allison (2005) refers to as an ‘old politics of sport’, which in this case means an examination of ways that governments use sport as part of their efforts to promote nationalism and unity. This also means exploring sport’s role in foreign policy, and especially how sport is used to gain prestige and recognition in the international community.

In chapter 4—Sport, Global Politics, and Peace—I focus on what Allison (2005) describes as a ‘global politics of sport’. To do this, I define and discuss the term ‘neo-liberalism’—a term that is central to contemporary discussions about sport-related politics, and one that will draw our attention to ways that the policies and ideologies that influence government and corporate decision-making trickle down to the lives of those in and around sport. I then examine the term ‘globalization’, another concept commonly used to help sociologists explain how it is that sport-related politics have become not only global in scope, but also heavily influenced by transnational corporations. The term ‘corporate nationalism’ is similarly introduced here to help us see and understand some implications of nation–corporation linkages. Chapter 4 concludes with a broader look at the complex relationships between globalization, peace, and sport, with particular attention to what Thomas Friedman (2000) called the ‘Golden Arches Theory of Conflict Prevention’.

While chapters 3 and 4 identify many sport-related social problems that can be traced back to political decisions made ‘from above’, chapters 5 and 6 consider ways that grassroots activists, educators, and scholars respond to some of these problems ‘from below’. These chapters make up Part 3 of the book, Peace Activism, Peace Education, and a Sporting Praxis. In chapter 5, I examine the possibilities for peace promotion within and through sport, focusing on sport-related social movements and social change. The chapter features work by sociologists who examine the relevance of sport subcultures

that promote and embody anti-competitive and pro-community values, and considers the extent to which these groups undermine, challenge, and/or offer alternatives to dominant sport culture. The chapter also includes an overview of research on sport-related social movements—movements that explicitly attempt to incite social change through, for example, organized lobbying and protest against the use of mascots and mascot names such as ‘Indians’, ‘Redskins’, and ‘Braves’ that are considered degrading by many aboriginal groups and others. As a whole, the chapter highlights the range of sport-related activities that might be considered activist and resistant, and considers whether and how these activities make a difference in the lives of activists and in the broader structures and political entities that are often the target of protest.

The discussion about strategies for proactively addressing problems that exist within and around sport continues in chapter 6—Pursuing Praxis: Peace Education, Critical Pedagogy, and the Sociology of Sport. The focus here is on how forms of peace education—and particular forms known as ‘critical pedagogy’ especially—can be used to raise awareness about ways that sport is enabling and constraining. I discuss specific strategies that have been used to facilitate forms of sport-related praxis, featuring a series of short case studies that explore the utility of creative film and writing about sport and social inequality, community-based ‘action research’ focused around barriers to accessing recreation and sport, values-based peace-building physical activity and programs, and anti-violence education led by athletes.

In Part 4—Key Topics and Pressing Concerns in Sport and Peace: International Development, the Environment, and Media—I discuss sport’s relationship with international development, environmental issues, and the media. Although any number of topics could have been chosen for this section, these stood out for me because they are at the centre of so many contemporary discussions and debates about the relationship between sport and peace. For example, chapter 7—Reflections on Intervention and Imperialism in the Sport for (International) Development and Peace Industry—follows up on issues that have emerged as the United Nations and sport for development and peace (SDP) groups like Right To Play have brought attention to (and advocated for) sport-driven development efforts in countries of the Global South (i.e., ‘developing’ countries). In this context, I address critical questions about the work of and pressures on NGOs in an era when these organizations are increasingly required to fill gaps left by government. Debates and issues around the ‘development’ concept are also explored, as are strategies and theories of peace-building and conflict resolution that underlie the work of Right To Play and organizations like the Mathare Youth Sport Association (based in Nairobi, Kenya) and Football 4 Peace (run out of the University of Brighton in the UK). Football 4 Peace, and especially the work of sociologist-activist John Sugden, who is one of the program’s leaders, is featured here as a way of showcasing how Sugden and his colleagues use a sociological imagination to

inform their efforts to enable conflict transformation and intercultural understanding for Jewish and Arab children and youth in Israel.

Chapter 8—Sport, the Environment, and Peace: Debates and Myths about Carbon-Neutral Sport—also focuses on one of the key peace-related issues of our time. That the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) and the International Olympic Committee host the biennial World Conference on Sport and Environment—a conference that brings together sport-related corporations, mega-event organizers, NGOs, and others interested in minimizing sport’s impacts on the environment—is evidence of the issue’s relevance for major international governing bodies. Of course, the work of these powerful groups is not immune to critique, as I will show in this chapter. In fact, I spend much of the chapter outlining ways that sport has been critiqued for its impact on the environment and discussing how sport-related organizations and corporations respond to these critiques. With the latter point in mind, I outline why claims by sport-related organizations and mega-event organizers to be carbon neutral might not be as progressive and unproblematic as they seem. In this context, I introduce Schnaiberg and Gould’s (2000) ‘treadmill of production’ metaphor as a way of outlining how consumer societies are designed in ways that put the natural environment at risk. This chapter also explains how natural environments can be platforms for peace-building—drawing on emerging research on the role that peace parks can play in conflict resolution.

The final chapter in this section, chapter 9—Towards a Sport-for-Peace Journalism? Problems and Possibilities in Sport Media—was chosen in response to ongoing concerns expressed by sociologists and others about ways that sport-related media are consistently implicated in the promotion of violence, war, and militarism. The chapter speaks to this issue through an overview of research on sport media’s links with violence/war/military, and discussion of how particular ideological positions and inequalities are reinforced through these connections. With these issues in mind, I then challenge researchers, journalists, and others to contemplate the possibility of a sport-for-peace journalism.

Finally, chapter 10—Six Summary Arguments and a Minor Utopian Vision—concludes the discussion and book. In this chapter I examine the key arguments and observations that underlie the book’s various chapters, summarize suggestions for social change drawn from the work of key theorists and practitioners that appear throughout the text, and consider ways to pursue a more peaceful and peace-promoting sport in the future.

• • •

Decisions about what topics to feature and how to feature them are for any book necessarily selective and guided by the preferences and experiences of the author. This book is no exception.

For example, my choices were partially guided by a series of impactful sport and peace-related experiences I had during a research leave I took in 2007—a leave granted by the University of British Columbia where I work. I spent the early part of the year at the United Nations–mandated University for Peace (UPEACE) in Ciudad Colon, Costa Rica, where I was exposed to a curriculum that is based entirely around the study of peace—with streams for postgraduate students interested in peace education, environmental security and peace, international peace studies, gender and peace, international law and human rights, and ‘media, peace, and conflict’, among other topics. I was especially struck by the emphasis on ‘peace and the environment’ and ‘peace and media’, and spent time thinking about how a peace studies–influenced approach to these topics might be informative for sociologists of sport—thinking that led to the development of chapters 8 and 9.

My research leave also took me to Kampala, Uganda, where I had the opportunity to attend the East African meetings of Right To Play, and visit Right To Play program sites around the city. I should state here that my writing about the sport for development and peace industry in this book includes a set of critiques of work done by organizations like Right To Play, and especially of a system that requires such organizations to compete with other humanitarian groups for funding and survival—a system where international development agencies sometimes play an uncomfortably prominent role in local communities. At the same time that I understand and agree with many of these critiques, I should also be clear that these visits to the Right To Play sites in Uganda opened my mind to the inspiring on-the-ground work that is being done in many areas, and the role that international sport for development and peace NGOs can play in promoting community and health. In a similar way, recent research I conducted in the Rift Valley of Kenya—which included interviews with high-profile distance runners who organized and were featured at ‘run for peace’ events intended to bring together warring tribes following Kenya’s post-election violence in late 2007—highlighted the key role that sport and respected athletes can play in reconciliation efforts. These thoughts are reflected in chapter 7’s discussion of the pros and cons of sport-related international development work and chapter 6’s exploration of sport-related social movements.

The final leg of my leave took me to Beijing, China, to attend the pre-Olympic World Conference on Sport and the Environment, co-organized by the Beijing Olympic Organizing Committee (BOCOG) and the United Nations Development Programme. The conference included a trip around Beijing’s cutting-edge event venues where tour guides highlighted the astonishing progress—driven by innovation and new technologies—that had been made on environmental issues in the soon-to-be Olympic city (e.g., venues designed to collect rain water and conserve energy). I noted other remarkable (and at times troubling) pro-environment initiatives that were taking place—from

razing areas of the city to plant trees, to the banning of polluting taxis from the roads.

In fact, the one-minded focus on innovation and technology, and the apparent lack of reflection on whether mega-sporting events like the Olympics might be a bad idea (i.e., that they might, under some circumstances, do more harm than good; that they might negatively impact more vulnerable groups while benefiting more wealthy groups) inspired chapter 8's critical examination of the dominant 'ecological modernist' approach to dealing with environmental problems—the approach that guides the work of recent Olympic Organizing Committees and many other sport-related organizations and corporations.

Of course, my choice of topics for this book was ultimately informed by research and writing I have been doing for several years in areas related to sport and social movements, youth culture and recreation, social inequality and mass media, and the environment. In chapter 6 I refer to previous studies I have conducted on the importance of new media in the formation and functioning of contemporary sport-related social movements (Wilson, 2002; Wilson, 2007a), while in chapters 6 and 7 I draw on research I conducted with Lyndsay Hayhurst and Wendy Frisby, where we demonstrate how forms of sport-for-peace activism are ironic in the sense that practitioners are often attempting to resolve sport-related problems in ways that inadvertently perpetuate these same problems (Wilson and Hayhurst, 2009; cf. Hayhurst, Wilson, and Frisby, 2010). Chapter 8's discussion of sport and environmental issues—and especially the critical look at claims about carbon neutrality by those in sport-related industries—is based on studies I am conducting with Brad Millington on ways that sport organizations and corporations are responding to concerns about the environment (Millington and Wilson, 2010b; Wilson, *in press*; Wilson and Millington, *in press*). Chapter 9's call for a sport-for-peace journalism is similarly based on a study I am conducting with Dominique Falls that considers how the principles of peace journalism proposed by Galtung (1998), Hackett (2007), Lynch and McGoldrick (2005), and others might be relevant for sport media. This same chapter was influenced by my research with Bob Sparks and others on ways that various forms of inequality and violence are perpetuated through mass media (Wilson, 1997; Wilson and Sparks, 1999; Millington and Wilson, 2010a). My arguments about the value of sport for underserved youth are similarly informed by studies I conducted with Phil White on the 'tolerance rules' youth develop in recreational drop-in centres that target diverse sub-groups of low income young people (Wilson et al., 2001; Wilson and White, 2001, 2003).

All this to say, this book offers a necessarily partial, selective, and in many ways personal view of sport and peace. I am up-front about this partiality and selectivity in hopes of inspiring an honest, open, but certainly evidence-driven conversation about a complex and controversial topic of immense contemporary relevance.

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PART I

Introduction to the Study of Sport, Sociology, and Peace