

Sport, Exercise and Social Theory

An introduction

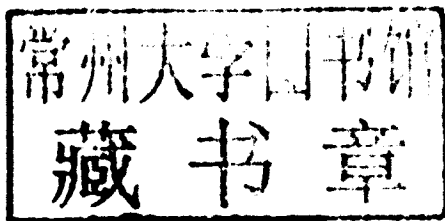
Gyozo Molnar and John Kelly

ROUTLEDGE


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AN INTRODUCTION

GYOZO MOLNAR AND JOHN KELLY



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SPORT, EXERCISE AND SOCIAL THEORY

- Why are sport and exercise important?
- What can the study of sport and exercise tell us about wider society?
- Who holds the power in creating contemporary sport and exercise discourses?

It is impossible to properly understand the role that sport and exercise play in contemporary society without knowing a little social theory. It is social theory that provides the vocabulary for our study of society, that helps us ask the right critical questions, and that encourages us to look for the (real) story behind sport and exercise.

Sport, Exercise and Social Theory is a concise and engaging introduction to the key theories that underpin the study of sport, exercise, and society, including feminism, post-modernism, (Neo-)Marxism, and the sociological imagination. Using vivid examples and descriptions of sport-related events and exercise practices, the book explains why social theories are important and how to use them, giving students the tools to navigate with confidence through any course in the sociology of sport and exercise.

This book shows how theory can be used to debunk many of our traditional assumptions about sport and exercise and how they can be a useful window through which to observe wider society. Designed to be used by students who have never studied sociology before, and including an entire chapter on the practical application of social theory to their own study, it provides training in critical thinking and helps students to develop intellectual skills that will serve them throughout their professional and personal lives.

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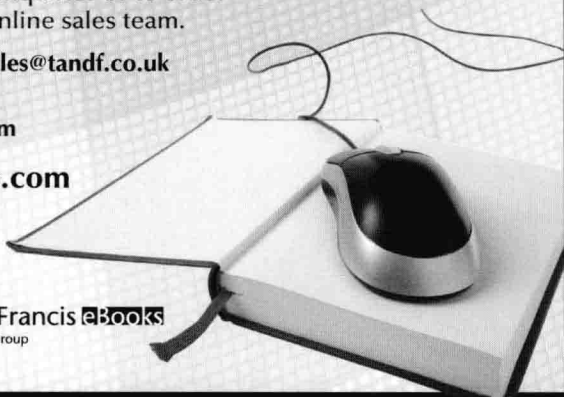
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

This book is first and foremost about sport and exercise, activities that are generally associated with fun, fair play, and the pursuit of healthy lifestyles, often viewed as separate from the challenges and toils of everyday life. It is no coincidence that the word *sport* emerges out of *disport*, meaning to indulge oneself in pleasure. Many of us who work within or study these spheres of activity already know the pleasure of playing, coaching, and watching sport and have been told of the benefits of engaging in regular bouts of exercise. Sport also provides many of us with a sense of belonging – most clearly witnessed perhaps during international sporting events that elicit the devotion of millions of strangers within the same country to form the ‘imagined community’ (Anderson, 1983) of the nation. Exercise, meanwhile, has become a major contributor to our sense of self, with health and fitness increasingly becoming our personal responsibility and marker of the responsible citizen. Yet, sport and exercise affect us in a multitude of ways that are often not obvious or clear and sometimes reveal surprising or even shocking aspects of their use and experience in our societies. We aim to shed light on some of these latent relationships for students, in tandem with helping them learn about social theory and how it can enable us to develop deeper understanding of sport and exercise and the societies in which they exist and, perhaps, flourish. Though our primary aim with this book is to enable students’ greater understanding of sport and exercise in the twenty-first century, an implicitly connected aim is to develop their knowledge and ability to apply social theory, which we hope will improve their understanding of the complex and constant interplay between these activities and society.

Most sociologists (and, hopefully, historians too) would agree that society as a whole is socially constructed, and social habits are not set in stone. Social practices, values, and beliefs change and transform over time. What once was acceptable and cherished may now be frowned upon and uncouth or vice versa (see Chapter 7 for a more detailed discussion). For instance, our thoughts and perceptions about healthy lifestyle and the required amount and type of exercise have changed (for an historical account regarding men's exercise, diet, and grooming habits, see Luciano, 2001). Another example would be the gradually vanishing amateur ethos and associated values initially underpinning modern sports that have almost completely been replaced by hard-core professionalism (see Ingham and Loy, 1993). That is, sport and exercise have different meanings to different people in different places and in different time periods. The meaning(s) attached to them can diverge from society to society and from period to period, but so, too, can it differ at any one time in the same society. That is, sport and exercise always have multiple meanings.

Shifting social values and practices are not unique to sports and exercise. Other social structures undergo similar social processes, too. Education is one of the largest social structures affecting most of us during our life, and it also both enjoys and suffers the results of social change. One of these relatively recent changes that we have experienced is linked to widening participation in the higher education (HE) sector and, thereby, to the number and expectations of students entering university life (e.g. see Taylor, 2007). Therefore, it is safe to say that the landscape of British HE has significantly changed in the last decade and that it continues transforming (for a thought-provoking discussion of this, see Sparkes, 2007). In considering these socio-political currents, a primary rationale of this book is to respond to the rising changes in HE and to meet and cater for the emerging needs of current student cohorts.

Sociology, too, both as an academic discipline and everyday practice, has evolved greatly, and there is now a wide range of novel and recycled approaches and theories used and issues covered. The continuous transformation the sociology of sport and exercise has undergone is another rationale for writing this book and for providing a current outlook on the sub-discipline. However, despite the aforementioned changes, the basic purpose and nature of sociology and the sociology

of sport have remained relatively unaffected: That is, they focus on both the social (structures) and the personal (agency). On a personal (micro-) level, sociology is about helping us understand, decode, theorise, and interpret our own and others' behaviour in society (social structures). On a society-wide (macro-) level, sociology investigates the ways in which social structures operate and affect each other. We argue that today considering both the micro- and macro-aspects of society, supported by appropriate and sufficient empirical evidence, is essential for undertaking sociological studies to be able to unfold the multiple meanings that our fast-paced information societies (Feather, 2008) currently create and carry.

Due to its direct connection and sensitivity to past, present, and (hopefully) future social practices, sociology should not be considered an elusive abstraction invented and written about by secluded social scientists safely positioned in their ivory towers (although, sometimes, this might be the case). On the contrary, it is (and should be) a concerted effort and rigorous craft to reveal, interpret and, potentially, remedy social issues. The critical and inquisitive mind that can be developed and achieved through engagement with sociology (e.g. reading, debating, and writing about contrasting socio-political ideas) is, we would argue, an essential skill that is transferable across academic disciplines and everyday-life situations. We all have some degree of sociological imagination, and we all are, to varying extent, sociologists as we encounter, interpret, and negotiate a wide range of social situations on a daily basis. We also have the tendency to develop patterns and routines of thinking and acting and, thus, take specific aspects of our social practices and existence for granted. This is partly why when our students are first asked to provide examples of sport being used for political purposes, they highlight almost universally the Berlin Olympic Games of 1936 as the 'Hitler Games' or the 'Nazi Games'. Sometimes, they are able to point the 'political' finger at the ex-Communist bloc countries for their (ab)use of sports during the Cold War in their quest to demonstrate what they regarded as the moral superiority of communism over Western capitalism. Our students, therefore, pinpoint numerous examples of steroid use or extreme regimes for child athletes. Our students, however, seldom see 'our' own political use of sport. When we accept 'our' social norms and conform to the expectations and practices inherent in 'our' wider society, we may cease thinking deeply and critically about why we do

what we do and how our acts, values, and practices may affect us and others. In other words, we allow society's norms and values to dictate the rules of our life and, in turn, transform our sociological awareness into meek acquiescence. To have our sociological imagination wither away is one of the outcomes of dominant ideologies – perhaps an aim of powerful people sympathetic to such ideologies – because in our somewhat subdued state, imprisoned by our own ready-made busy lives, we may forget (or not bother) to ask vital questions, even if we are aware that questions should be asked, which those with a critical mind might. For instance, by being acquiescent and believing in dominant narratives, we may never recognise that: hosting mega events such as the Olympics always has drawbacks; sports are not inherently or universally benevolent and good for wider society; being overweight may not be as dangerous to our health as being on a diet or as detrimental to our psychological well-being as the social stigma attached to being branded overweight; social class and our upbringing do have significant effects on our life chances; carrying out 'sex tests' on athletes may be viewed by some as assault and/or surveillance of the body gone too far; and we have not only the right but responsibility to express our disagreement with social structures such as government, education, and the corporate media, particularly when the decisions and values they make and promote around sport and exercise are done in *our* name.

To illustrate the complexity of roles sport and exercise play in our societies, please consider the following: Whilst writing this book, we were struck by the number and range of television news items around sport that appeared as mainstream news stories distinct from the usual separate 'sport section'. In a one-week period alone, these stories ranged from one of China's most famous athletes, Yao Ming, heading an anti-shark fin soup campaign to protect sharks from industrial killing, to a debate about eight-year-old children cage fighting in the north of England, to a major politician discussing the possibilities of 'Brand UK' on the back of the London 2012 Olympic Games. Within a short space of time, these stories had been joined by Dan Wheldon's fatal crash at the USA Indy Car event in Las Vegas; Marco Simocello's death at the Malaysian Grand Prix; England football captain John Terry's alleged racist remarks to an opponent; and the Scottish government's debate on a new law designed to prevent political expression at Scottish football matches. The field

of exercise is just as contentious and is no stranger to the media, where our attention is often drawn to various news items that detail how much we should exercise and what physical activity we should carry out. With regular frequency, we are bombarded with 'expert' advice regarding what to wear, drink, and eat before, during, and after exercise and are informed that it will all make us healthy(ier), more attractive, and ergo, socially more acceptable.¹ In addition to being coerced into (not only doing but) consuming exercise, we are exposed to hyper-masculine male and hyper-thin female bodies that are portrayed as desirable, achievable, and associated with health and high social status. By fuelling our desire to be 'healthy' and possess the ideal body (for men: masculine and lean; for women: thin but shapely), various media messages and advertisements encourage us to buy the latest, state-of-the-art equipment, products, and nutritional supplements to achieve the physique that 'everyone wants'.

By revealing the centrality of sport and exercise in our lives in a number of competing and contradictory ways, the preceding examples provide another rationale for writing this book and discussing sport and exercise from sociological perspectives. Whether we are considering the use of sports stars for ideological purposes, questioning our drive for obtaining the ideal body, debating the fitness and moral arguments around schooling young boys in competitive combat, treating a nation-state as a brand, discussing the dangers of high-speed racing events, bemoaning the lack of role models in top-class sport, or alleging the widespread racism and bigotry in sport, one thing is certain: Sport and exercise are no mere *reflection* of society; they are at its kernel. Consequently, in line with the aim and promise of sociology and like many sociologists before, we persistently seek to find and, through this book, encourage students to continuously search for answers to respond to the question: 'Why do we do what we do in the field of sport and exercise?' In the next sections, we explain what we wish to achieve with this book and outline our main goals and the structure of this volume by providing a brief overview of the chapters that follow.

WHAT WE WISH TO ACHIEVE

We have been involved in HE for more than ten years and, during that time, we have taught a range of sociology of sport and exercise-

related modules at various universities in the United Kingdom and the United States. The common denominator of our experience in HE has been the realisation that learning about sociology has the potential to be challenging, as the subject is frequently perceived by students as abstract and overly theoretical. Undergraduate sport and exercise sciences students, in particular, have often expressed their difficulty with learning sociology (i.e. understanding and applying theories), and they sometimes seem to prefer and cope better with other, more practical modules. However, the very essence of sociology (and, it could be argued, many other disciplines as well) is theoretical engagement through thinking with classic and modern (post-modern) conceptual frameworks to generate lucid summations of societies (or of a specific sub-section of a society), social values, social practices, and individuals' perceptions of society and themselves. So, to be sociological and critical, we must also be theoretical.

Our discussions with students and careful consideration of our students' feedback throughout the years have led us to write this introductory sociology book for mainly sports and exercise sciences students to help them get successfully acquainted with the discipline of sociology and, in so doing, further their knowledge and understanding of sport and exercise. That is, our main aim is to bridge the gap between students and social theories and to afford an informative and accessible textbook that practically explains and critiques a range of well-established and emerging sociological approaches and theories within the areas of sport and exercise. Even though chiefly aimed at sport and exercise students, we think that students outside of these areas but with an interest in sociology would benefit from reading this book to help them realise that both sports and exercise have a range of obvious and hidden social connotations.

Unfortunately, we do not have a magic wand and cannot dispense with the jargon of sociology, but we seek to be more sensitive than others before us to the needs, ability, and reality of many contemporary sports students having little or no prior learning experience of sociological theories.² Hence, we aim to provide clear accounts of sociological perspectives by explaining and critiquing them in the contemporary world and applying them to selected sport and exercise examples. We have sought to create an effective learning resource that students can use and reuse throughout their university studies to gain and reinforce

their sociology-related knowledge. In doing so, we endeavour to help students in building a solid conceptual foundation that will enable them to develop more informed and critical sociological accounts of their sports and exercise habits and general social surroundings.

In attempting this, we outline a selection of key sociological perspectives that have contemporary utility in aiding understanding of twenty-first-century sports worlds and exercise habits. These theoretical approaches are then applied to a number of selected sporting examples – historical and contemporary – and students are shown how these theories can help explain and debunk common claims and critically inform our understanding of the structural and individual power (or lack of it) particular groups/actors have in the world of sport and exercise. We believe that by embedding a selection of sporting examples within the theoretical chapters, students will more easily connect theory and evidence. This also demonstrates some of the ways theories, concepts, and related ideologies have been and can be used to manufacture consent (i.e. to make masses believe that sports are all-embracing, apolitical, and positive, benefiting society as a whole).

We can, thus, summarise our two main objectives: First, we make an attempt to facilitate the genuine application of sociological perspectives to sporting examples in ways that are not artificial or ‘stuck on’. In our experience, too many students think in ways that result in their trying to ‘fit’ the sport example artificially into the theoretical framework. They resultantly misunderstand and/or misrepresent the sport or exercise example and the theoretical explanation, thereby creating a misfit between theory and evidence. This phenomenon probably derives from the fact that students often struggle to come to terms with the concept, meaning, and relevance of sociological theories, in fact with a range of sociological theories, which would be essential in properly conceptualising sport-related social issues. Thus, they automatically select the one that, for whatever reason, they find easiest to describe. By doing so, they limit themselves, curb their sociological imagination, and distort the sociological explanations of otherwise intriguing and relevant examples. In many instances, students with promising sociological observations and social examples to explore fail to demonstrate good levels of theoretical insight because of misinterpretations and/or selecting the only – but not necessarily

relevant – theory they believe they understand. Consequently, and second, with this book, we also make an attempt to provide a potential remedy for such mono-theoretical thinking and application of sociology by making a range of theoretical approaches accessible to students. Whilst each chapter discusses a range of sporting examples, some examples are repeated across chapters to demonstrate to students how different perspectives can be used to explain the same sporting example in different ways. Of course, each reader should form her or his own opinion regarding which theoretical explanations are the most appropriate, insightful, and believable.

Whilst utilising mainly contemporary sociological theories, we aim to explain, wherever appropriate and necessary, their classical roots or historical links and to encourage students to develop their historical sensibility and understanding. Thus, each chapter provides a general overview of a selected theory and a biographic note of the central thinker(s) within that perspective. At the beginning of each chapter, we introduce a sport or exercise example, which we will refer back to in the chapter to explain and reiterate key concepts to help ease students' comprehension of sociology, its application, and the terminology surrounding it. These sport and exercise examples may occasionally draw wider links to other (sub-) disciplines (e.g. media studies and gender studies), showing an inter-disciplinary approach to understanding the complex nature and interconnectedness of sport and exercise in society. Occasionally, we draw wider links to other theories to illustrate how some explanations can benefit from combining more than one theory (e.g. see Chapters 5 and 6). We then examine specific concepts associated with that perspective and apply them to selected sport and exercise examples. The penultimate section of each chapter is a critical overview of the theoretical perspective covered. The main aim of this section is to demonstrate that no social theory is perfect and that we, sociologists, should always maintain an open and inquisitive mind, being critical of our own theoretical perceptions and limitations. Given the complexity of contemporary societies, we cannot (and should not) seriously claim that one theory can fully and perfectly explain every human action and cultural subtlety. With our investigations, we may try to achieve a reasonable account or reality-congruent explanation but, we would argue, that is as far as we can go. The last section of each chapter provides further readings whereby we direct students to classic and relevant sources

that, in practical terms, could be used by a wide range of students studying sport science/sport studies degrees.

We have also included a number of 'Reflection' boxes embedded in chapters. These boxes have many functions from providing brief definitions of selected concepts to detailing examples of engaging theory and evidence or serving as reminders and/or aids for understanding. In these boxes, we have featured a variety of 'Let's stop and think' questions to encourage critical reflection from students to practice and enhance their sociological imagination (see Chapter 2). We advise students to think about the examples and questions included in the chapters and discuss them among themselves and with their seminar tutors.

In this book and through the following chapters, we continuously argue against the tendency to artificially separate theory and evidence and society and sport, and we deploy an array of examples to demonstrate the socio-cultural embeddedness of sport and exercise. In doing so, we argue against the belief that sport is a social institution external to social actors and, thus, is a 'protuberance on society', transcending local – regional – global social issues or that sport simply mirrors society, assuming a passive, obsequious role within a great monolithic social entity. We encourage using sport and exercise as a window through which to gaze critically at society as we believe that each cannot be understood without the other.

STRUCTURE OF THE BOOK

In the second chapter, we unfold the meaning of sociological imagination by explaining what C. W. Mills means by this concept and what its key features are. After defining sociological imagination (SI), we turn our attention to the importance of differentiating between social issues and personal troubles and outlining the range of sensibilities that the active use of SI involves. We also provide a brief biographical note on Mills to illustrate his rebellious nature and achievements in sociology.

We begin the third chapter by looking at Emile Durkheim's work, in particular, his examination of the relationship between the individual

and society. This involves looking at his concepts of the division of labour, mechanical and organic solidarity and his theory of suicide. We then discuss the post-1940s functionalist perspectives and how they can help us explain and understand sport, exercise and society, with reference to Talcott Parsons' work on social systems and social structure. We conclude with a functionalist analysis of sporting examples.

In the following chapter, we chart the (neo-)Marxist journey beginning with the works of Karl Marx, discussing his concepts of class, alienation, and ideology. We then turn to the Frankfurt School that became known for applying Marx's work in the modern age. With the help of Pierre Bourdieu's influential class analyses, we show that cultural forms such as sport and exercise join economic wealth as major conduits of class in the twenty-first century.

In the cultural studies chapter, we begin by showing how culture is viewed as contested terrain to be understood according to particular social and political contexts. The historical development of the perspective is then briefly outlined, including explaining its links to neo-Marxism. In the second part of the chapter, cultural symbols are shown to have multiple possible meanings, and these representations are explained as part of signifying systems that become normalised and/or conventional. This leads us into a discussion of the power to give meanings and values to cultural practices. This is where we consider the position of Antonio Gramsci's concept of hegemony to help explain how mass consent is achieved in stratified societies among competing class groups.

In the symbolic interaction chapter, we locate the approach's origins from its functionalist antecedents before charting its journey from George Herbert Mead's work on 'the self' and the subsequent establishment of symbolic interaction by his ex-student Herbert Blumer. We then turn attention to Blumer's ex-student Erving Goffman, whom we discuss in detail by outlining his famous symbolic interaction dramaturgy model before applying it to the world of sport and exercise.

In the chapter on process-sociology, we outline the significance of Norbert Elias, the first modern mainstream sociologist to pay extensive attention to sports, and some of the key concepts of process-sociology