



The cultural sociology of sport: a study of sports for sociology?

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Despite its universality, the world of sport is magnificently, yet often subtly, playful, and diverse. At the same time, sports' ubiquitous presence in many of our lives is thoroughly mundane and a spectacle of ritual-like proportions. Kids, youth, and adults play sports and exercise routinely, for fun, with passion, and as a healthy but tiresome obligation. And every four Olympic years, on any given Sunday—or under the glow of the Friday Night Lights for that matter—millions of people assemble to watch sports at the arena or in front of a screen. Again and again, sports, with their familiar seasonal patterns, are created and recreated as cultural systems gravitationally bound by our play to familiar symbols, myth, codes, and narratives.

For anyone concerned with the symbolic dimension of social life, sports offer a laboratory par excellence. Under scattered sociological labels, sport is found to be a great topic with which to theorize. Surely, most cultural sociologists are aware of play, games, and later, sports, as not simply elementary forms of symbolic action (Durkheim 1995 [1912]; Caillois 1979 [1958]), but also as the ludic modalities that beat the pulse of our civilizations (Elias and Dunning 1986) and personal existence (Mead 2015 [1934]). As aesthetic renditions of social life (Geertz 1973a), sports twist and turn our myths and realities, at times predictable and sometimes surprisingly artistic, to hold our attention in their own reality (Barthes 2009 [1957]; Gumbrecht, 2006). Doing sports, actors, in split-second dramatics, practice their impression management and dramaturgic loyalties (Goffman 1959); form communities (Fine 1987, 2015) generate emotional energy (Collins 2004); and make leaps of faith that not only change sporting identities, but our social being (Corte 2022). There is something about sport as a symbolic universe, a microcosmos, cut off from but nested within the broader social universe that, to culturally oriented sociologists, makes it good fodder for thinking.¹

¹ Inspired by conversations with Michael DeLand.

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It takes a special set of lenses, and interests, too, perhaps, to clarify the polyvalent capacities of sports. In the parent discipline of sociology, many have been more concerned with the serious topics of the economy, politics, and inequality, preferably in social realms that are not just “silly” play. For a cultural sociologist inclined to combine these serious topics with the study of symbols and cultural institutions, a quick glance at the rules and regulations of games—the standardization and bureaucracy that make up their global language—makes sports seem predictable rather than creative, reproductive rather than transformative, simplistic rather than artistic. The subdiscipline of sport sociology—balancing its integrity amid applied, ameliorative research, and its predominant use of the critical cultural studies tradition (Coakley and Dunning 2002)—has bred a field content with viewing social inequalities through the lens of sport, to evaluate sport actors and organizations. Accordingly, some sport sociologists want to stick to this script and warn that a pluralistic use of theories can “unwittingly” sustain its own “marginalization and putting its future at risk” (Pike et al. 2015, p. 361). Others are careful critics who note that in following this unidirectional path sport sociology has lost out on vital dialogues (Bairner 2015; Bruce 2015) and has offered little to sociological theory (Carrington 2010). However, calling attention to cultural sociological analysis—from Durkheim, Geertz, and Goffman to today’s cutting-edge work in cultural sociology—can help revitalize a truly meaning-centered study of sports, and, perhaps, bring sports back into our work of sociologically theorizing symbolic forms.

Sociological checks and balances are important and should not be forgotten, but to make progress, sociology needs to move beyond its prejudicial view of sports as silly, unserious, boring, or simply polluted by ideology and social power. Sports are not mere bread and circuses, but is also transformative. At the sports theater we interpret and stage social life in ways that can help set the public agenda and that can change the life course of communities and individuals. Those of us who profess an interest in culture should therefore embrace and leverage the many examples that can highlight diversity and creativity, and thus challenge simplistic reductions of sport to a stylistic activity pitting winners against losers. Various sports in different cultures shape delicate and radically diverse life worlds. In culturally and aesthetically contingent ways, the many options for figure-skaters’ and pugilists’ artistry, and for soccer and basketball trash-talk, can tell us much about how we symbolically maneuver social and institutional power structures. More attention should be given to the “hows” and “whys” of people who make competition bearable, enjoyable, and to those who challenge unfair sports. In a fragmented and complex modernity (Alexander 2017), we need to foreground agency within the plausible limits of fair play and unjust sports.

With ideals of thick description (Geertz 1973b), I argue that we should flesh out the cultural structures of sports—their codes, myths, and narratives, as well as their modalities of play, games, fun, and sports themselves—with empirical data. The hallmark of cultural sociology, cultural autonomy (Alexander and Smith 2003; Spillman 2020) will then allow us to show how empirically verifiable symbolic processes within and about sports shape social life. Embracing ambivalence and contradiction as key structural features of culture and of sports is vital, and not just for empirical enrichment through surprising analyses, nor simply to make theoretical advances



through cases that allows us to adjust taken-for-granted truths. It is vital because the masking of diversity and the concealment of existential ambiguities are political and ethical mistakes.

Sports are multifaceted, existential spheres. Here, various cultural modalities allow us to imbue games with characters and identities as we aesthetically reshape inequalities, stage altruism, and play out the serious politics that shape today and tomorrow (Broch 2022). We immerse ourselves in sports due to the many structural forms that allow us, even serve us, to fuse the personal with shared meaning. This is why we play, for better or for worse. Sports are experiential realms where we stage and process personal and public concerns—a hermeneutic work carried out by contestants and audiences alike. The microcosmos of sport is never far from, and always in, dialog with its orbiting cultural systems of codes, narratives, and myths. To get at these meaning-making processes, to expose how sports shape our lives, it is time to pick up a set of new lenses that can bend the light towards our eyes in ways that reveal more aesthetically attuned and tenacious ways to relativize, historicize, and culturalize sports.²

At hand is therefore a special issue about sports *for* sociology. The grand ambition is a cultural sociology of sport that goes beyond sub disciplinarity and prosaic endeavors that are mostly interesting to a very small niche of social scientists.³ Yet, all the same, this ambition capitalizes on the unused theory-potentials of the subdiscipline of sport sociology that generously encompass anthropology, history, human geography, social psychology, political science, and even philosophy. As a collaborative effort, this special issue aims to bring sports into the center of sociology by asking how its varied affordances and problematics can help us understand, advance, and adjust sociological ideas about the symbolic dimensions of social life.

If we take Spillman's (2002) characterization of cultural sociology to heart, we will look at sports both as one of our specialized institutions that organize social life *and* see sport cultures as a part of a "whole way of life," and thus work to join insights from the disciplines of sociology and anthropology, respectively. The reward is a study of sport that not only allows us to explore how sport is different and similar to our many other institutions, but that always situates sports among the many other institutions that make up social life generally.

For this purpose, a generous definition of sports is beneficial. Room should be made for a variety of sport disciplines and cultures: for organized sports and unorganized leisure and play; for cultures concerned with sports and cultures within sports; for symbols used by athletes; and sport symbols, metaphors, and icons used outside sports. This entails a relentless chase to discover how the experiential realms of sports are diverse and how we can use these insights to subsequently diversify cultural and social analyses.

² Cultural sociology relativizes, historicizes, and culturalizes to provide case centered insights useful in the production of sociological knowledge (Reed 2012).

³ My formulation of a cultural sociology of sports is inspired by Besnier, Brownell, and Carter (2018) who ambitiously aim to direct an anthropology of sports in similar ways.



Taking a lead, first out in this special issue are Hartmann, Manning, and Green who explore the well-trodden terrain of race, sport, and politics. Diving into the hyper-commercialized sports media that many a sport sociologist has exposed as cultivating capitalist egotism and limiting the transformative potentials of critically conscious athletes, Hartmann et al. flip the script. Leveraging the moment when the Black Lives Matter movement entered sports, they rethink this familiar topic through observations of athletes' race-based activism. Combining a collection of luminous examples of protest and activism with the concept of social performance, the critically conscious athlete is *given* agency, and sports are revealed as stages where we dramatize the dynamics of social struggle. While the sport stage is already there—endzones painted and baskets mounted—we clearly see that athletes still have to make sports into avenues for resistance and political expression. They must perform criticism. “Common sense,” you might say, but Hartmann, Manning, and Green use cultural sociology to ask us to rethink the significance and social political functioning of sports. They urge us to use sports to study how various “deep play” platforms allow “public displays of struggles over race and racisms.” In this way, they challenge our ideas about agency in highly stylized institutions and go far in indicating that the relative autonomy of culture and sports is not only a prerequisite for athlete activism, but that sports are emblematic of the Turnerian (1982) scenes we use to dramatize social struggles.

Commissioners and presidents who say that sports and politics do not mix really get sociologists going. Repeatedly, critical sport sociology has proven that apolitical sports are a myth. Yet, few have theorized the symbolic grammar of this myth, shown how it is recreated and exposed how sports' apolitical politics are challenged and changed. Our second paper does just this. With the pandemic forcing people to isolate and seek new forms of sociality, Klima takes as his point of departure the thriving world of eSports and the Blitzchung controversy wherein the professional player Ng Wai Chung was banned due to his calling to “Liberate Hong Kong” from China. Klima shows how eSports is not only a gaming community, but also a symbolically structured gaming sphere with a code generating the myth of apolitical sport. To our surprise, Klima does not need critical theory to expound the myth (in the pejorative sense of the term); skillful and politically conscious actors are doing this work for him. In this, he uses civil sphere theory (Alexander 2006) to highlight how gamers bring the civil sphere to bear on eSports. Indeed, when politics enter sports, they are often thought to intrude on the apolitical gaming sphere. For politics to influence sports, then, we need code switching that makes general politics into an apolitical, harmless part of the game. Political activism needs to be translated as apolitical, or considered to be politically correct, or “pro-democracy protests,” and therefore perceived as a good cause that sports should adopt. Klima thus opens up a dynamic analytic space no longer satisfied with exposing sports as political. Rather, this is a study exploring when and how sports are part of the social dramatics where contests over good and bad politics, and the very limits of freedom of speech, are fought.

Among the most well-established truths in sports sociology is that sports contests, militarization discourses, and the patriarchy intersect to produce the glorified, machinelike warrior athlete (Trujillo 1995; Messner 1994). In a relentless fashion,



the third paper relativizes and culturalizes to show how a growing public concern about sports as racist, sexist, colonialist, and ableist should make us revisit the sport-as-war thesis. West leverages a case study of the Australian media reporting on the 2018 Invictus Games in Sydney. In this sport event for military veterans wounded, injured or infirmed during their service, the one-sided romanticization of war has been replaced by a shifting, fragmented, critical, and multidimensional view on the military–civilian relation. West uses studies on cosmopolitan sentiments, increased sensitivity towards violence, deliberation on the inadequacies of military welfare models, and a more general disenchantment of war. Together, these make up a civilian–military meaning system about the “unnecessary suffering” caused by war that changes how we think about sports. The Invictus Games allows audiences to support the physical and social rehabilitation of the vulnerable soldier-athlete, as well as the cultural rehabilitation of those who have served their country. As a cultural critic, West argues that this narrative places health responsibilities with the individual, and silences critical voices concerned with the inadequacies in welfare, health systems, and military organization. Notably, imbued with identity politics, the sport-war narrative masks the social structures that put us at advantaged and/or disadvantaged positions.

While the first three papers of this issue elucidate how sport cultures are transformed by emergent social contexts and civil spheric forces, the fourth paper turns the study of sports on its head. Exploring the reality program *MasterChef USA*, Grindstaff and Grosplik expose how sport itself becomes the *background representation*, a cultural code, driving interpretations and actions in game shows. Even though sport sociology abounds with studies explaining how social gender relations shape sports, few have explained how sport as a metaphor and symbolic force shapes non-sporting organizations and communities. Grindstaff and Grosplik combine the Eliasian (Elias and Dunning 1986) concept of sportification—a process distinctive to the modern development and consumption of competitive play—with critical cultural studies. This allows them to argue that sport competitions are gendered masculine and thusly, when cooking is sportified, *MasterChef USA* reproduces hegemonic masculinity. Trophies are phallus-like; becoming ‘the best’ separates the masculine restaurant-worthy chef from the feminine amateur cook; the heroism of competition reshapes the everyday chore of cooking into a masculine endeavor. An illuminating piece on how sportification shapes a vast proliferation of reality programming, these authors also make us think about how sport vocabularies shape our social landscape where influence is rated by how we excel in competition that tends to sensationalize mundanity. Perhaps, sports as a metaphor, myth, and code, when used to understand and narratively shape entertainment and social life, is less progressive than actual sports?

In their chase for records, statistical measurements, and “fair” crowning of a one true champion, sports can come off as the epitome of rational and bureaucratic modernity (Guttman 2004). Figure skating would seem a relevant example, with the International Judging System (IJS) for the International Skating Union standing as an emblematic form of modern, standardized sports. Surely, being a calculated, cold fish who strategizes to maximize scores seems to be the best option. Yet, instead of taking this familiar route, Ji explores how figure skaters



train to be able to present an artistic persona that puts on a social and embodied performance of publicly recognizable emotions. The goosebumps we get from an epic routine, in other words, have been incited by figure skaters who assess how to use the possibilities and limitations of their bodies—being muscular or slender—in cultivating mind-blowing performance of the athletic or the artistic figure skater. These personas are deeply personal, yet culturally recognizable ideal types enchanted with myth-like rationality in technical finesse and the mesmerizing routines that “defy” technical regimes through performances of the “authentic artist.” The performance of a supreme athlete is at times achieved at the expense of the honorable artist and vice versa. Importantly, Ji shows that figure skaters are interpreters that carefully shape their bodies through meaningful training regimes. Here, drills are used as opportunities to imbue routines with the aesthetics of effortless artistry, and of an archetype that resounds the myth of natural talent.

What is the worst thing that can happen if sport sociology connects more with the parent discipline and, say, symbolic interactionism and cultural sociology? Ending this special issue on a high note, DeLand’s ethnography draws us deep into the world of pickup basketball. We can almost hear the ball bounce across the court and swish the net as DeLand illustrates how sport history, public culture, and game rules are spun in evaluations of a player’s character. Joining theories of charisma with the concept of key symbols, micro-sociological and performative moments in pickup basketball are revealed as modalities that serve players to make charismatic statements. At the center of the analysis stands a simple yet powerful declaration. “And one!” As a technical term, this statement refers to the chance for an additional point when having been fouled in the attempt of shooting. Yet, it only *refers* to the chance, since this additional point is not counted in pickup basketball. Nonetheless, the statement remains powerful as it signifies widely felt cultural and emotional “truths” about the game. As such, a multidimensional study emerges to show how “And one!” moments condense and elaborate the character contests in basketball, and a vast symbolic landscape of urban and Black experience outside the court. In pickup, “the characterological forms of meaning take center stage” DeLand argues as he shows us some of the cultural forces and magnetism that are at play when we, as social beings, maneuver the space between micro and macro symbolic structures.

So, what sociological questions can we ask about social life and culture through the lens of sports? What is it that the experiential realm of sports can tell us about the symbolic processes, characterology, and resonance that are at play when we sustain, break, and enjoy interaction? What does sport tell us about how the iron cage (DiMaggio and Powell 1983) is constraining, but also penetrable, legitimated, and made bearable through performance? What can we learn from an intensified study of sportification if we are interested in how a seemingly definite cultural phenomenon spreads to shape social life? And conversely, what are the meaning-making processes that intervene when institutions and their specific interests surrender to civil demands? Indeed, what can sports tell us about the symbolic systems that attract our attention and that generate hope in spite of physical impairment and violence in symbolic and real combat and wars? How should we conceptualize and weigh agency and structure as we study how athletes protest our societies’ overwhelming



racial inequalities? All of these big questions are dealt with in this little special issue on the cultural sociology of sports.

In various ways, sports fuse athletic and social performances (Broch 2020). Athletes execute left and right turns, jumps, pushes, and pulls, as well as throws, catches and pirouettes. At the same time, or better yet, prior to the moment of action, and in its aftermath, the experiential realm of athletic conquests is interpreted and imbued with codes, myths, and narratives. In this process, sport cultures themselves transform into symbols, metaphors, and background representations that we use to direct social life elsewhere. A cultural sociology of sports, a study of sports *for* sociology, shows how sports are part of social life in this manner, as a specialized institution and as part of a whole way of life. Comparison and pluralistic theorizing about meaning-making processes become key. Our aim is to reawaken the idea that sports are fruitful to consider as we try to unlock new understandings about the symbolic dimensions of social life.

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