

Coding the Body Sport as a Social Practice

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In contrast to general theories that claim to explain sports practices, a recent book sheds light on the forms of socialization and the institutions that make sports an eminently social phenomenon.

Reviewed: Jean-Michel Faure and Charles Suaud, *La raison des sports. Sociologie d'une pratique universelle et singulière* (The Reason of Sports: Sociology of a Universal and Unusual Practice), Paris, Raisons d'Agir, 2015, 354 p.

Whether from a political or sociological perspective, sports always appears as a “minor” phenomenon. Yet this situation stands in blatant contrast to the public attention it enjoys in our day, as seen in its constantly expanding media presence. This paradox can be explained in multiple ways, whether one emphasizes sports’ exceptional character as a practice and spectacle, one that, obeying its own rules, seems to operate in a realm of weightlessness compared to the rest of social life; or whether one believes that Marcel Mauss and Norbert Elias have already said all there is to say about the topic, the former in a classic article that calls attention to the cultural dimension of every one of our gestures,¹ the latter by working into his general theory of the civilizing process the rise of modern sports as a means of externalizing “violence control.”² Such a perspective is, however, particularly harmful, almost as much as those that essentialize sports’ purported properties by granting it every virtue—sports as an inherent factor of health, integration, and education³—or every vice—sports as an essential tool of capitalist domination.⁴ Jean-Michel Faure and Charles Suaud have completed the project outlined nearly forty years ago by Pierre Bourdieu in a lecture at the Institut National des Sports et de l’Éducation Physique (The National Institute of Sports and Physical Education,⁵ or Insep⁶), demonstrating that sports constitutes a privileged

¹ Marcel Mauss, “Les techniques du corps,” *Journal de Psychologie*, XXXII, n°3-4, 1936, reprinted in *Sociologie et Anthropologie*, Paris, Presses universitaires de France, 1950, p. 365-386. The text is available from the website on “Classics in the Social Sciences hosted by the University of Quebec at Chicoutimi:

http://classiques.uqac.ca/classiques/mauss_marcel/socio_et_anthropo/6_Techniques_corps/Techniques_corps.html. An English translation, “Techniques of the Body,” which appeared in *Incorporations*, ed. Jonathan Crary and Sanford Kwinter, New York, Zone, 1992, is available here:

http://isites.harvard.edu/fs/docs/icb.topic1458086.files/Mauss_Techniques%20Body.pdf

² Norbert Elias and Eric Dunning, *Quest for Excitement: Sport and Leisure in the Civilizing Process*, Oxford, Blackwell, 1986.

³ For a sociological discussion of these discourses, which are currently riding high, see notably the special issues on “L’intégration par le sport” (Integration through Sports) in *Sociétés contemporaines*, n° 69, 2008; “La double réalité du monde sportif” (The Double Reality of the Sports World”), *Savoir/agir*, n°15, 2011; and “Sport et social” (Sports and the Social), *Informations sociales*, n°187, 2015.

⁴ This is the thesis of the proponents of the radical critique sports theory. See, for example, Jean-Marie Brohm, *Sociologie politique du sport*, Nancy, Presses Universitaires de Nancy, 1992 [first edition, 1976].

⁵ This institute was founded in 1975 to provide unique training and socialization resources to those identified as “high level athletes,” before being renamed—significantly—the National Institute for Sports, Expertise, and Performance in 2009.

standpoint for understanding the way in which the social world is literally incorporated—and not only, as with Mauss, the way in which society shapes the body.

It is not insignificant that modern sports developed in conjunction with the rise of the nation-state, in that, due to its plasticity, “which opens almost infinite possibilities for *struggles over symbolic marking*” (p. 15), it constitutes an essential auxiliary to the task of monopolizing symbolic violence—and not simply, or even initially, physical violence—represented—again, from Bourdieu’s perspective⁷—by the modern state. Specifically, the state claims to embody the universal, to say “where things stand with what is” (to quote a phrase by Luc Boltanski that the authors also use) in a way that is distinct for each nation. This claim to universality also impacts sports, as the book’s paradoxical subtitle suggests, reminding us that the “universal recognition of sports rests on the singular character of a practice in which the acquisition of bodily techniques becomes an end in itself” (ibid).

Varied and Variable Cultural Codings

Precisely because it simultaneously brings into play the body⁸ and a set of rules that purport to be universal, sports constitutes a critical space for socialization, as well as for the imposition of meaning by specific groups which, in turn, must be identified. In the book’s first part, entitled “Genesis and Function of Sports,” the authors begin by considering the arduous necessity whereby sociologists must free themselves from thinking like a state—that is, the distinct but naturalized vision of the world the state promotes—in order to analyze sports. To assist their readers in doing so, they trace the genesis of modern sports in France, a process they understand as the “social history of successive and concurrent codings that individuals and, through them, institutional or social groups have placed on bodily practices that are detached from ordinary life and which assign themselves the goal of bodily mastery” (p. 32). Drawing on the many works that have studied the decisive period in France when modern sports became autonomous, at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, they consider in particular the way gymnastics was coded by schools, adopting a stance in relation to traditional games that resembles the position the French language once took in relation to local patois, to borrow a comparison from historian Maurice Agulhon: in the name of universalism, they extricated a cultural activity from local practices, while offering it, in compensation, a degree of social recognition. The case of cycling, however, and the circumspection it inspired on the part of schools as well as the Catholic church, which some industrial and media interests were able to exploit, and particularly the appropriation of English cricket by the inhabitants of the Trobriand Islands (of Malinowski fame) through the game known as *Kayasa*, which was firmly embedded in traditional social relations, demonstrate that struggles for definition are never determined in advance, nor—most importantly—do they consist of a universal process.

Having recalled how little justification there is in the myth of continuity between modern sports and the ancient Olympic Games, even if the former were closely tied to the construction of an independent Greek state, the authors demolish another myth—a scholarly but still tenacious one: that of the place of sports in (as previously mentioned) Norbert Elias’

⁶ Pierre Bourdieu, “How Can One Be a Sports Fan?,” in *The Cultural Studies Reader*, ed. Simon During, London, Routledge, 1993 p. 339–355.

⁷ See his recently published Collège de France lectures on this question: Bourdieu, *On the State: Lectures at the College de France, 1989 – 1992*, Polity, 2015 (2012).

⁸ Michel Foucault, for example, called attention to the body’s central place in the disciplinary *dispositifs* that followed that of punishment in the early modern era in his work on what he called “biopolitics.” See, among other sources, Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan, New York, Vintage, 1995 (1975).

theory of the civilizing process. The authors draw on the work of well-known anthropologists and historians, such as Marshall Sahlins, Jack Goody, and E. P. Thompson, to show the extent to which this theory is ethnocentric, simultaneously privileging the standpoint of Europeans, particular social classes, and the state, thus blinding it to the symbolic dimension of violence, which, as Bourdieu among others has shown, has been a crucial and persistent characteristic of social relationships and state building.

After these (re)clarifications, the authors descend to the institutional level, in order to examine the actors and understand the logic that guides their “choice” of practices in the French context, bearing in mind that the “locus of sports”—that is, the social classification of various disciplines—varies from country to country and period to period—in contrast to more naïve approaches that attribute practices to particular social groups on the basis of supposedly inherent properties. Yet in opposing this approach, it is just as important not to subscribe to an overly deterministic vision, of the kind that is often wrongly imputed to Bourdieu’s theory of fields, and to consider the “meaning” that agents invest in their practices, knowing that the latter are nevertheless inscribed in a previously existing, heavily codified framework. Put differently, the point is to “understand social agents who are in a position to make their choices. [And] because sports are classified and classificatory, individuals use them to construct themselves as social agents” (p. 103).

Because clubs constitute these practices’ primordial space, the authors consider several case studies to show the variability of the social rules through which games in sports are defined. They devote many pages to the Racing Club of France. Founded in 1882, it is one of the oldest and most prestigious of French clubs, offering a distinct conception of high level sports, founded on unabashed exclusivity and the accumulation of athletic as well as social and academic “excellence”—thus rejecting, for example, the idea that one should specialize in a single sport. This model has proved remarkably stable—at least, that is, until it was brutally challenged with the arrival, in 2006, of the billionaire Arnaud Lagardère, who acquired the concession of the Croix Catelan sports complex from the Paris city hall.

Faure and Suaud next describe “availability of tennis within local spaces” through an analysis of four clubs in greater Nantes, each associated with different definitions of tennis—and which, most importantly, are relative to one another. The definitions range from tennis as a “social game” to tennis as a “sports game,” bringing together actors whose social and sports trajectories are themselves differentiated. Another questionnaire-based study of young judokas in Nantes shows, in turn, the athletic and social resources that must be acquired in the sports universe if one is to be deemed “legitimate.” Yet, the authors insist, while the “choice” of a sport often entails a degree of social reproduction, it is never purely and simply passive imitation; it implies, rather, a “two-faced construction effort,” including both “self-construction and the construction of an ‘already there’ social reality” (p. 159), which can, for this reason, lead agents to play with established sports norms—and even to overturn them.

Distinct National Cultures of Sporting Excellence

Through a comparison⁹ of France, Germany, Denmark, England, and Switzerland, drawing notably on various studies conducted over the nineties among high level athletes,¹⁰ it

⁹ The authors do begin by considering the limits—and particularly the artificial constructions—that such an exercise necessarily implies, thus calling into question the numerous international classifications upon which sports is literally founded. On this crucial but rarely interrogated fact, see the special issue on “Classements Sportifs” (Sports Classifications) in *Actes de la recherche en science sociale*, n°209, 2015.

becomes apparent that the definition of excellence in sports as well as access to and the conditions of practice and (re)conversion differ significantly between countries as well as between various types of sport. First, the authors analyze the distinct ways in which sports is structured in each of these countries, confirming, in each instance, that the “autonomy of a sports space in which the mastery of bodily practices is an end in itself is not immediately given; it must be conquered, [and] it is never completely achieved, [but is] the result of constant struggles between social, political, and/or religious groups seeking to inculcate sports with their values and vision of the world” (p. 209) and impressing a distinct and lasting coding onto the various types of sports in each of the spaces considered.

The specific configuration that prevails over the social organization of sports in each of these countries confirms the broader hypothesis advanced by Richard Holt, that the existence of a plurality of forms of national feeling finds a privileged mode of expression in sports due to its great flexibility. Thus while in France the centralized state plays a decisive role in introducing gymnastics into the military and school system in a climate marked by revanchist and anti-German patriotism following the 1870 defeat, before the aristocracy and then the bourgeoisie appropriated sports precisely in opposition to the state, in England, it was, to the contrary, the middle classes that played a decisive role by integrating sports into the lifestyle of the Victorian gentleman, thus reconciling the bourgeois and aristocratic values that were disseminated notably in what are infelicitously known as “public schools.”

In Germany, however, the rise of sports is connected to tensions between the bourgeoisie’s various factions and was largely exploited by its “intellectual” fringe, which integrated sports into a distinct form of cultural nationalism that is captured by the not easily translatable term of *Bildung*. Finally, in Denmark, it was primarily the rejection of militarized gymnastics, associated with the country’s German neighbor, and the importance of a progressive peasantry in the assertion of a robust tradition of local democracy that explains the specific ways in which sports was organized there. These initial codings have in fact resulted in specific organizational models for sports at the institutional as well as symbolic level, with configurations that are now very distinct, notably as they related to the respective role of the state, the “sports movement” (in other words, the federations and clubs), and the “market,” as well as divergent definitions of what constitutes a “good” athlete,¹¹ which strongly influences the lives of “champions” in each of the national contexts considered.

In Germany, for example, “participation in sports is merely one element of the broader education of German men” (p. 235), which must in no way sever them from social and professional life. In France, however, the most able athletes are encouraged from early on to turn to a federal—and state-based—system, which provides them with significant resources to ensure that they can devote themselves to training, but which also leads to a degree of seclusion, the full impact of which becomes apparent only at the end of their careers in

¹⁰ In France, this category is defined through regulations—making it very much an example of thinking like a state—but which does not as such have any real equivalent in other countries, like the category of “*cadres*” studied by Luc Boltanski (*Les cadres*, Paris, Métailié, 1982). See Sébastien Fleuriet, *Le sport de haut niveau en France. Sociologie d’une catégorie de pensée*, Grenoble, Presses Universitaires de Grenoble, 2004.

¹¹ While they do not make this connection, the three-part categorization the authors propose recalls, in some respects, the typology of welfare states proposed by Gøsta Esping-Andersen (see Gøsta Esping-Andersen, *The Three Worlds of Welfare Capitalism*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1990). It would no doubt be interesting to pursue this lead by analyzing the specific ways in which social bonds are established and corresponding “spirits of the state,” to use Bourdieu’s term, in various national contexts.

sports.¹² Be this as it may, statements about the autonomy of sports notwithstanding, statistical analyses of the recruitment of high level athletes in various sports demonstrates that, in order to understand how the space of sports is structured, it must be articulated with social space at the national level.

Are National “Models” Being Homogenized?

At the conclusion of their analysis, Faure and Suand thus distinguish between three European models for accessing high level national spaces, which they are careful to define as *modus operandi*—that is, “modes of transforming individuals destined to enter specialized spaces devoted to international competition through challenges of various kinds” (282-283). The first, represented by the French and Danish examples (despite their very different histories), constitutes a “world unto itself,” one that is very hierarchical and in which the state gives athletes a special status and the option of pursuing these activities beyond the timeframe in which they are actually in completion. The second, or German model, makes achievement in sports merely one element of a broader affirmation of excellence, which also extends to educational and professional trajectories. Finally, the third, found in the United Kingdom and Switzerland, also codes sporting careers as individual projects, but in an entrepreneurial rather than a cultural sense. These models have generally been incorporated by the athletes affected by them, as the authors demonstrate with interview excerpts.

In their conclusion, which, significantly, is entitled “*envoi*” (“send-off” or even “kick-off”)¹³ the authors ask whether national models are being crushed due to the combined effects of the “*lex olympica*”—that is, the increasing ability of international authorities, most notably the International Olympic Committee (IOC), to impose their own regulations, as well as dispute settlement procedures, on national governments—and the rising importance of a coding of sports that reduces it entirely to its economic dimension, due to the European Commission and European Court of Justice, which make “respect for ‘free and undistorted competition’ its main standard of values” (p. 342). Competition to control the universal desire for sports seems henceforth to be played out primarily on the international stage, which should encourage scholars—as well as politicians—to become more involved in this area, as the authors all but ask them to do. The latter, in any case, have done their share of the work: this book will quickly become a work of reference for sociologists, as its significance extends well beyond sports, the very exceptionality of which it asks us to reconsider.

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¹² Centers for training young football players are almost extreme examples of “total institutions” that one sees to a lesser extent in “sport-and-study” sections at French high schools and the primacy, despite discourse about a “twofold project” (sport and education), of the former (sports) over the later (studying). See, for example, Julien Bertrand, *La fabrique des footballeurs*, Paris, La Dispute, 2012.

¹³ Its poetic qualities aside, it can be read as an invitation to other scholars to pursue the project that it goes a long way in outlining. It is also a religious allusion—“*envoi*” refers to the final moment of the Catholic mass, known in English as the “dismissal”—and one of the authors, Suard, devoted his early work to studying the religion vocation, referring to it on several occasions. He emphasizes, for instance, the fruitfulness of comparing the study of sports to the latter. The book’s title is itself a reference to a work by the medieval scholar Jean-Claude Schmitt:

La raison des gestes dans l'Occident médiéval (The Reason of Gestures in the Medieval West), Paris, Gallimard, 1990.