
Chapter 1

A Sociological Perspective of Sport

The study of sport can take us to the very heart of critical issues in the study of culture and society.

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Much evidence affirms that Americans are devoted to sport. Today, the average person is inundated by sports. This deluge is due, in part, to the enormous increase in youth, high school, and intercollegiate athletics, enlarged physical recreation programs, and the massive growth of professional sports during the past 30 years; it is also the result of expanded mass media coverage of sports events, especially on television. As its meanings and practices have changed in the transformation from casual, informal play forms to commodity-governed spectacles shaped by marketplace rationality, sport has aroused increasing interest as a social phenomenon.

In the 1970s and 1980s, sport emerged as an active domain of study and research in the social sciences. Sociology, the perspective of this book, is one of those social sciences, and the sociology of sport promises to be a dynamic field of study in the century ahead.

A number of good books describe the current social conditions and demographics of sport involvement, but most make no attempt to

pursue relationships between sport, political economy, ideological power, and domination. Because the words *ideology* (*ideological*) and *power* are used frequently throughout this volume, now is an appropriate time to describe what I mean by these two words. There are numerous variations of the definition of *ideology*, but the concept generally implies a system of interdependent ideas that explain and justify particular political, economic, moral, and social conditions and interests, making them seem right or natural. If something is *ideological*, then, it relates to or is concerned with this system of ideas. By *power*, I subscribe to social theorist Michael Parenti's description, which is that power means "the ability to get what one wants, either by having one's interests prevail in conflict with others or by preventing others from raising their demands."¹

My approach to studying sport from a sociological perspective assumes that an analysis of sport must be based on an understanding of its societal moorings. To do this, sport is seen as more than merely a place of personal achievement and entertainment; it is viewed as a social, cultural, and structural phenomenon. Sociology provides the appropriate intellectual framework for this type of analysis of sport.

The Sociological Perspective

Sociology is dedicated to the study of human society, to observing and analyzing human social activities wherever and whenever they occur. Such study can take both global and personal forms; at one extreme, you can find sociologists investigating international relations among governments and at the other, sociologists studying divorce patterns of couples belonging to different churches. Fertile ground exists for sociological analysis wherever you find social organizations and people interacting with each other. Moreover, there is no precise dividing line between sociology and the other social sciences (economics, political science, anthropology, etc.); indeed, there is a great deal of interdependence among all of them.

Sociology, then, is first and foremost a study of social organization and behavior, based on social theory and empirical research, as opposed to hunch, tradition, and blind faith. A sociological perspective requires taking a particular orientation, which has been expressed in various metaphors, toward human social organization and actions. One suggests a "recalibration" of one's way of thinking about social life, another proposes "using a different lens for viewing," another advises that one must assume a "social consciousness," and finally there is the notion that one must take on what one sociologist called a "sociological imagination." The assumption in all these is that a sociological perspective requires a unique framework, or

special mind-set, for trying to understand society. Several of the most important foundations of this perspective are described in the remainder of this section.

The Social Construction of Reality

One of the core insights of sociology is that society is socially constructed. It follows, then, that all meanings about human social life are *socially constructed*. Meanings are interpretations about situations, ideas, objects, or events with reference to how one should respond. Thus, meanings are rooted in the collective responses—in behaviors—that become mobilized around situations, ideas, objects, or events, and this fundamentally shapes the world in which we live.

Social reality, then, is socially constructed; that is, humans actively contribute to the creation of meaning. As Max Weber, one of the founders of sociology, said, "Human beings live in webs of meaning they themselves have spun." So, we cannot approach the study of human society as we do the study of objects or events in the natural world. Natural laws can be defined precisely, and they hold true with no variation throughout the world; they do not change with time or by human negotiation. But such is not the case for human social behavior, which varies from group to group (e.g., poor and wealthy), from culture to culture (e.g., language, customs, attitudes, values), and across time (e.g., colonial and contemporary lifestyles). Societies only exist insofar as they are created and re-created in human actions. This being the case, definitions, explanations, and meanings are open to reinterpretation and change.

To use an example of how meanings are socially constructed, we can take a sport slogan familiar to most: "Winning isn't everything, it's the only thing." Is this a universal truth, a law of nature? Of course not. It is a socially constructed piece of lore around which some very specific meanings about the quest for victory in sport have been formed. But take another example: "It's not whether you win or lose, but how you play the game." This, too, is a socially constructed description of sports competition that implies particular social attitudes and behaviors toward sports activities.

These two slogans convey two very different views about the meaning of winning in sport. At different times and in different places, each has been the leading view of one group or another. Yet which is the "correct" view? Before an answer to this question is attempted, a closer look at the consequences of meanings is needed.

The principal significance of meanings is that they shape how people behave. That is, they are real in their consequences. If someone walked by you holding a pole with a sheet of white cloth attached, you probably would not react, but if the cloth were red, white, and blue



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Baseball has been known as “the national pastime” for over 100 years. This is a cultural practice deeply embedded in American cultural life. Indeed, it is often contended that many American cultural values are manifested in and through baseball.

with the stars and stripes, you would probably stand up. Why the different behavior? Because of the *meaning* of the American flag to many Americans.

The meanings in the two sports slogans I cited suggest a number of social attitudes, perceptions, and behaviors toward winning in sports. In the context of this discussion, the “correctness” of one or the other is moot. What the slogans demonstrate is that meanings (in this case winning in sports) are socially constructed, and certain norms, values, and behaviors will become mobilized around the meaning that an idea, object, or event has come to have.

Another sport example of the social construction of meaning is the word *excellence*. For the ancient Greeks—the people who gave us the

original Olympic Games—sporting excellence meant to be an all-round athlete, to be good in a variety of sports. The truly excellent athlete was the panathlete. From the time organized sports became a part of popular culture in the United States in the latter 19th century until about 40 years ago, the athlete who was considered the epitome of “excellence” was the three-sport athlete, the all-round athlete. It is only in the past quarter of a century or so that specialization has become the basis for excellence. Only quite recently has the specialist, with a single-minded devotion to being good at one sport, been viewed as the athlete truly pursuing excellence. The changed meaning of the word *excellence* has resulted in an increased number of young athletes specializing in one sport. Thus is demonstrated again the social construction of meaning in sport, how it can change over time, and how it can shape attitudes and behaviors.

The Influence of Social Structure

Another core insight of the sociological perspective is the notion that *social structural forces* beyond an individual’s conscious control have a profound effect on human behavior. The term *social structure* refers to the patterned relationships that connect different parts of society to one another, including individuals, groups, communities, and even entire societies. For example, the social structure of sport includes not only the relationships among athletes and coaches but also the relationships that connect sports teams, leagues, organizations (such as the National Collegiate Athletic Association and U.S. Olympic Committee), sporting goods firms, sports media, and so forth.

Social structure also refers to the ways in which people are distributed among various social positions, as well as to the distribution of various rewards, such as power, wealth, and prestige. For example, social class status is related to variations in occupation, educational achievement, criminal behavior, and the presence of mental disorders. Sport in the United States is structured so that women and African Americans rarely occupy the prestigious coaching and administration positions and are, therefore, denied the high income and status that accompany those positions.

The term *social structure* is useful in sociology because it focuses attention on various patterns of social relationships and distributions of power, wealth, and prestige that are fundamental to social life. It thus helps us to understand that social structural arrangements shape conduct, independent of the characteristics of individuals. This contrasts sharply with conventional American beliefs about the responsibility for human actions, namely that individual behaviors are merely the product of individual internal motivations.

The tradition of attributing human actions solely to the individual

derives from several sources central to American culture. First, the rugged individualism of the colonial and frontier periods in American history has been glorified through folklore and legend. Second, capitalism, the economic foundation of American society, has as its basic constituents private initiative and private enterprise, both obsessively individualistic. Third, the mass popularity of psychological explanations for human behavior, which tend to focus on individual needs and satisfactions, is a compelling influence in American society. The multiple influences of the individualistic tradition are so potent that it is difficult to displace in the American mind. Indeed, because of powerful societal forces nurturing and promoting this tradition, there tends to be little realization of an alternative vision—a sociological perspective—of human social action.

Sociologist C. Wright Mills provided a good description of the differences between the individual, or psychological, perspective and sociological perspectives. According to Mills, problems that at first glance seem to require solutions at the personal level are actually the consequence of broader political, economic, or social forces. Divorce, for instance, is a very personal matter. Yet the fact that divorce rates vary with social class, ethnic and religious affiliation, and other demographic variables suggests that divorce, despite its personal nature, is greatly affected by social structure.² Mills supplied us with another example with unemployment: "When in a city of 100,000 only one man is unemployed, that is his personal trouble, and for its relief we properly look to the character of the man, his skills, and his immediate opportunities. But when in a nation of 100 million employees, 12 million are unemployed, that is a public issue, and we may not hope to find its solution within the range of opportunities open to any one individual. The very structure of opportunities has collapsed. Both the correct statement of the problem and the range of possible solutions require us to consider the economic and political institutions of the society, and not merely the personal situation and character of a scatter of individuals."³

Certainly, the psychological perspective makes important contributions to our understanding of humans and their patterns of organization and behavior. But the sociological perspective moves the focus beyond the individual, examining the ways the individual is shaped by the social environment.

The Sociological Imagination

A sociological perspective necessitates what Mills called a "sociological imagination." "Having a sociological imagination means standing apart mentally from our place in society and seeing (imagining) the linkage between personal and social events—tracing the connec-

tions between patterns and events in our own lives and those in our society. A sociological imagination involves three kinds of sensitivity: historical, comparative, and critical.

Historical Sensitivity

Mills claimed that "all sociology worthy of the name is 'historical sociology.'" In support of Mills's assertion, sociologist Irving Zeitlin contended that "the social scientist who studies a social structure without studying its history will never truly understand any given state of that structure or the forces operating to change it."⁴ I could readily apply that statement to the present discussion: "The person who studies sport without studying its history will never truly understand any given state of sport or the forces operating to change it."

E.G. Boring, the eminent historian of psychology, provided additional sanction to Mills's notion about the importance of developing a historical sensitivity. According to Boring, attention to history is valuable not to predict the future but to understand the present better.⁵ The shared insight in each of these statements is that a historical sensitivity is essential in sociological analysis because it helps us gain a more informed understanding of present conditions.

Comparative Sensitivity

Mills's call for comparative sensitivity refers to the necessity for learning about and understanding other cultures and societies. Only by doing so do we come to appreciate the diversity of human societies and of the social constructions of the meanings of social organization and behavior. Comparative sensitivity also allows us to break free of ethnocentrism, or our tendency to believe that the modes of social organization and behavior in our society are somehow superior to those of all other cultures. And there is no doubt that such an attitude is firmly entrenched in American society. We have a strong tendency to universalize our own cultural norms and practices.

A comparative sensitivity in the study of sport can help us understand that the popularity and meanings of different sports vary across cultures. For example, the game we know as football is rarely played in other countries, while soccer is immensely popular throughout the world.

Critical Sensitivity

Mills noted that the sociological imagination combines with the task of sociology in contributing to the critique of existing societal formations. In other words, sociology necessarily has a critical quality; it

cannot be a disinterested and remote scholarly pursuit. The sociological imagination looks beyond commonly accepted descriptions of social structures and social processes to demystify and to demythologize. Thus, a critical sensitivity empowers us with a willingness to think and act critically, to problematize conventional definitions of reality, thus ferreting out falsehoods and contradictions when they exist.

Sociology and the Legacy of Karl Marx

Study in sociology, even the sociology of sport, invariably brings references to Karl Marx and Marxism because Marx is one of history's most noted social theorists. His name will occasionally appear in this book, and it seems appropriate to say something about Marx and his ideas because there are several dimensions of his work: his own social theoretical writing, numerous interpreters and revisers of his ideas, and nation-states that purport to follow his ideas.

Unfortunately, it is only the last dimension that most people are familiar with, and discourse about so-called Marxist states tends to be highly politicized. Many Americans have come to think of Marx and Marxism as synonymous with evil because of the link to former and present communist nations that have been portrayed as enemies of the United States. But it is essential to distinguish between Marxism as a body of knowledge providing insights into society, politics, and economics and Marxism as ideology guiding so-called Marxist countries.

Karl Marx died in 1883, long before the Russian Revolution in 1917. So he had nothing to do with the creation of the Soviet Union or any of the other communist countries. Moreover, Marx would never have expected that Russia might experiment with his political-economic ideas because he wrote about industrial, capitalist countries, and Russia during his lifetime was feudalistic and industrially underdeveloped. All great thinkers attract legends and misinterpretations, and often what they said or wrote is distorted by those who impose their own subjective preconceptions on the original ideas. The most prominent figure—after Friedrich Engels—in the enlargement and elaboration of Marx's ideas was V.I. Lenin, the first leader of the Soviet Union, and he greatly distorted much of Marx's work and ideas by creating the foundations of Soviet Union totalitarianism.

Marx cannot be held responsible for contemporary socialist ideas; much of what has transpired in "Marxist" countries in his name would have horrified him. Marx was a critic of oppression, discrimination, and domination. He was the leading social scientist to place power and class relations at the center of an interpretation of the social structure of capitalist societies; he was a critic of the corrupting

quality of power and class society, not the quality of human beings. Fundamentally, he supported the promotion of human liberty, dignity, and equality. Perhaps the most distinctive heritage of Marx's ideas is their ecumenical character of internationalism and the insistence that all people throughout the world are dependent on one another. His vision was a profoundly moral and ethical one, and perhaps this is one reason for its enduring strength.

The best-known former and current communist countries—the Soviet Union, East Germany, and the People's Republic of China—have not been good representatives of Marx's ideas. Indeed, many Marxists have been as critical of these countries as they are of capitalist countries because the governmental policies of these countries have been antithetical to the socialist ideals of a democratic and egalitarian society. Workers in these countries were not freed from oppressive conditions. In fact, wage labor was not abolished, strikes and industrial conflict prevailed, gender and racial domination was not eliminated, and little advancement to the free and full development of all individuals occurred.

Although there have been political organizations in the United States sympathetic to Marx's political-economic writings for more than a century, Marxist ideas have never posed a revolutionary threat to the established social order in America. Marxist ideas have, however, taken root as the major social theoretical critique of capitalist society.

In his book *Sociology: A Brief but Critical Introduction*, British sociologist Anthony Giddens writes: "To declare sympathy with certain of Marx's conceptions does not imply accepting his views, or those of his self-professed followers, in their entirety. . . . But neither do I reject Marx. Marx's writings are of continuing significance to sociology. . . . At the same time, there are conspicuous weaknesses in Marx's work."⁶ This insight informs and guides the references to Karl Marx and his social theories in this book.

The Sociological Perspective of This Book

The subtitle of this book proclaims that it employs a critical perspective. I take a specific social theoretical orientation toward social institutions and cultural practices in American society. This orientation centers on what is called *hegemony* (pronounced \hej-ə-mō-nē\ or \hi-jem-ə-nē\), which refers to dominance and influence. This approach attempts to provide insights into the historical construction of societal dominance and the roles of the political, economic, and cultural patterns in capitalist societies. Although there are varying

interpretations and unresolved issues in hegemony theory, they all force us to think more critically about the operative and underlying roots of modern society, a perspective not generally fostered by mainstream analyses of American culture.

I will use selected aspects of hegemony theory to sensitize you to the role dominant groups play in American government, economic system, mass media, education, and sport in maintaining and promoting their interests. By dominant groups, I mean the powerful and wealthy who own most of the land, capital, and technology and who employ most of the nation's labor. They also translate their enormous economic resources into social and political power by occupying the top elective and appointed governmental positions, regardless of the political party to which they belong. The social structure of dominance in American society also privileges men over women, rich over poor, and whites over people of color. I will emphasize relationships between power, domination, and ideology and social class, gender, and race as they relate to sport.

In doing this, sport is stripped of its presumed innocence and linked to the political, economic, and cultural milieu of which it is a part. I expect this process to challenge the views you hold, perhaps even unknowingly, about sport vis-à-vis American society and culture. I hope that it also provokes you to be more reflective and critical of contemporary sport forms and practices. Being reflective means evaluating your own current knowledge, values, and beliefs on the basis of new information and asking whether they are justified in light of the new information.

Having said that this book employs a theoretical framework, I want to hasten to make two points: First, please do not fear this book as one of those tomes devoted to the dreary weighing of pros and cons about ideas promulgated by social theorists long since dead. My description of social theory is targeted to readers with little background in the subject. I do not go into great detail, nor do I try to explain the protracted debates over various interpretations of hegemony theory. Although this may be unsatisfactory for the professional scholars of sport studies, there are numerous other sources to which they may turn for more in-depth theoretical analyses.

Second, through the perspective of this book, I hope to provide you with a better understanding of the role of sport in American society. But it is not meant to provide justifications for existing sport, exercise, fitness, or any physical activity programs. This does not mean that it is antisport or opposed to exercise and fitness for health and well-being. A major purpose of the book is to make you think about and reflect on the relationship of sport to the larger society in the hopes that you will form a social consciousness (meaning cognitively make

sense of our world, the knowledge we have of how it works, and our place in it) about sport and physical activities that goes beyond the blind transmission of slogans and clichés traditionally advanced about sport.

Value judgments necessarily permeate all aspects of all the sciences, both natural and social, and I make no claim to value neutrality here, nor can any scholar or scientist. I do, however, attempt to portray conditions and situations as accurately as I can based on my study and research. One of the strengths of a social science perspective lies in the richness of its diversity and in the vigor of the debate between different analysts trying to make sense of the social world.

This volume is "critical" in two ways. First, it is critical of the ideas that form the conventional wisdom about sport in American society. In the realm of sport, as in many others, privileged groups use political, economic, and cultural resources to define societal norms and values and to reinforce and sustain their influence. Their interests are legitimated by compatible ideologies disseminated by schools, mass media, and various agencies of social control, and the processes they use tend to suppress or marginalize alternative versions.

The second way this book is critical is through my use of hegemony theory, which is directly linked to social criticism of modern capitalist society. One consequence of employing this perspective is that many myths and distortions that have crept into the social discourse about sports are unmasked.

Benefits of a Critical Social Analysis of Sport

A critical social perspective invites us to step back from thinking about sport as merely a place of personal achievement and entertainment and study sport as a cultural practice embedded in political, economic, and ideological formations. Relevant issues involve how sport is related to social class, race, gender, and the control, production, and distribution of economic and cultural power in the commodified sport industry.

By and large, Americans are not encouraged to critically examine the prevalent attitudes, values, myths, and folklore about sport. This is unfortunate in any social arena because if we do not critically examine cultural practices, such as sport, we cannot see the extent to which they are socially constructed. We will have difficulties not just in separating facts from values but also in recognizing how our viewpoints are influenced by the surrounding political, economic, and cultural context.

Although it is difficult to read and listen to points of view that problematize or criticize our own cherished attitudes, values, and beliefs, as long as we unquestioningly hold our own points of view

absolute while interpreting other views as merely misguided, the most important step has not been taken. That step is having the courage to subject all points of view, including our own, to a critical analysis.

There may be times when you think I am overly critical. This is an understandable reaction, one that has been conditioned, to some extent, by what you have heard about sport and by your own sport experiences: "We've got to pull together to win"; "Be obedient, don't ask questions"; "Do as you are told"; "Be a team player." These sport slogans, and the hierarchical arrangements pervading sport organizations, condition people against critical thought. Moreover, a powerful cheerleader/boosterism mentality is promoted by all sport organizations. Their message to fans and players is to give uncritical support; if you don't, you're not being loyal or you're not a team player. That most of us fail to consider alternatives to contemporary sport organizations and practices is testimony to the effectiveness of our socialization.

I want to assure you that I am sensitive to and supportive of the many features of American society and its sports forms. My critical perspective is not an attack on sports activities themselves nor on those who participate in sport. To expose the abuses, discrimination, and injustices of contemporary sport is not to denigrate sport itself. Indeed, since my childhood I have experienced the joy and excitement of sports. But the inspirations that sport gives us, through our own accomplishments and through the achievements of outstanding athletes, should not deter us from taking a critical stance toward sport. Criticism is actually a form of commitment, a way of saying: "If there are problems here and unwarranted breaches of social justice and human equality, let's identify them and work to transform things to make sport better."

Is a critical perspective toward contemporary sport being antisport, even un-American, as some might claim? I would reply by substituting "sport" for "country" in the following quotes. The first is from J. William Fulbright, who was a distinguished U.S. senator from Arkansas: "To criticize one's country is to do it a service and pay it a compliment. It is a service because it may spur the country to do better than it is doing, it is a compliment because it evidences a belief that a country can do better than it is doing. Criticism, in short, is an act of patriotism, a higher form of patriotism. I believe, than the familiar rituals of national adulation."⁷⁷ In a similar vein, one of America's most articulate social analysts, Michael Parenti, has argued: "There is no better way to love one's country, no better way to strive for the fulfillment of its greatness, than to entertain critical ideas and engage in the pursuit of social justice."⁷⁸

Obstacles to a Critical Analysis of Sport

Critical social analysts of sport are confronted by several obstacles. First, they are often confronted with the question, "You're good at criticizing, but what is your plan for change or reform?" The clear implication is that unless the critic has a strategy for social change, merely identifying existing injustices, corruption, and exploitation is worthless. But critical analysis implies a concern for identifying, scrutinizing, and clarifying, and in this way it helps overcome the obstacles barring the way to the attainment of an overall understanding of the phenomena under study. The purpose, then, is to facilitate understanding what is and not present a detailed plan for what ought to be. It is the task of *everyone* who is moved or persuaded by the validity of critical analysis to attempt to do something to change the situation. As sport philosopher William Morgan eloquently put it, "While theory can inform the work of enlightenment, it cannot prescribe the risky decisions of strategic action at the political level. These can only be justified by the participants themselves, who in their practical discourse with one another decide what strategies to follow and what risks to take with what expectations."⁷⁹

A second obstacle to critical analysis of sport is that throughout American society there tends to be a blissful unawareness about the social relations that control sport and other forms of physical activity, a frightening naïveté about the social context and material conditions underlying physical culture. Although sport practices embody specific and identifiable purposes, values, and meanings, they are typically viewed by both participants and spectators as ahistorical and apolitical in nature. This is true largely because most of our written and broadcast information does not confront people with questions about the larger social issues and political and economic consequences of modern sport and physical activity. Instead, we are fed a diet of traditional slogans, clichés, and ritualized trivia about sport. These may all be very comforting, but they do not come to grips with the realities of sport organizations nor the sport culture.

A third obstacle to a critical analysis of sport in American society is that people typically receive little encouragement to become aware of the sociocultural forces and institutions that shape the world of sport. Moreover, sport leaders tend to view themselves as impartial facilitators operating in a value-free and ideological neutral setting. Few of them have seriously thought through their own basic premises, but instead proceed on unexamined assertions, mottoes, and slogans. The assumed unproblematic nature of current sport forms is reflected in a statement extolling a school "sport education" program, whose purpose was said to be to socialize students "to participate in

sport . . . and behave toward sport in ways that serve to preserve, protect, and enhance the sport culture."¹⁰ Contemporary sport culture is not presented as even potentially problematic; instead, it is presented as something to be blindly learned and followed.

A fourth obstacle to a critical social analysis of American sport is that sport and society have traditionally been seen as discrete social institutions, with sport being a realm in which character is built and virtue pursued. Americans tend to cherish the illusion that coaches and athletes are paragons of nobility. The sports world itself encourages the belief that sports are "just fun and games" and has vigorously fought any attempt to change this image.

This separating out of sport from all that is serious in American life has been one of the most persistent barriers to meaningful analysis of the relationship of sport to society. But sport cannot be examined as isolated from the social, economic, political, and cultural context in which it is situated. Sport is a set of social practices and relations that are structured by the culture in which they exist, and any adequate account of sport must be rooted in an understanding of its location within society. The essence of sport is to be found within the nature of its relationship to the broader stream of societal forces of which it is a part. Thus, a real necessity for everyone trying to understand the sociocultural role of sport in American society is to approach sport *relationally*, always asking, "What are the interconnections of sport to other aspects of American society?"

Summary and Preview

Sport and physical recreations are extremely popular in American life, and there is a growing interest among social scientists in the organization and behavior of people involved in sport and in sport's larger social meanings. Connections between sport and political, economic, and cultural systems are of particular interest. One of my purposes in this book is to apply a critical sociological perspective to sport so as to help you better understand its important sociocultural role. In this chapter, I have discussed the characteristics of a critical sociological perspective and have described some of the ramifications for studying sport with a "sociological imagination."

In chapter 2, I identify two social images that have been constructed for examining questions about who governs the social and cultural life of society and what role those who govern play. Linkages are made between these social images and their relationship to sport.

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