Sport in Society: Cultures, Commerce, Media, Politics

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Introduction

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Introduction

It appears that rarely before has there been a more opportune time to consider the full extent of the interplay of race, ethnicity and sport in the modern world. Such issues associated with sport and ethnic/nationalist rapprochement since the end of the Sri Lankan Civil War, ethnic/nationalist conflict in Tibet in the lead-up to the Beijing Games, the IOC’s apparent impotency over human rights and the question of Pacific Islanders having their own team at the 2011 Rugby World Cup foreground questions of ethnic identity and the critical role of sport in this regard. And if the proliferation of books, conference papers and peer-reviewed articles on sport, race and ethnicity is taken as a reasonable proxy, then we can safely say that there has also been a concomitant sea change in the academy’s view of, and approach to, the interplay between sport, race and ethnicity. In Sport in Society alone, we estimated that around 24 papers were published on various aspects of this nexus in the past two years, and there was a special issue on indigenous studies and race relations in Australian sport in September 2012. Meanwhile, a cursory glance at any of the catalogues of academic publishers reveals a plethora of texts in and around this subject matter. It was with some anticipation in the academic and sports worlds, then, that the fourth international conference on sport, race and ethnicity was held at the Belfast campus of the University of Ulster, Northern Ireland, in June 2012, generously supported by the Sport and Exercise Sciences Research Institute at the University of Ulster and the Irish Football Association.

Belfast was an intriguing destination for the study of sport and identity. For most of the latter part of the twentieth century, it was an international byword for ethnic division, conflict and violence. Amid this turmoil, lasting almost three decades, sport continued to exist, albeit in abnormal circumstances. It came to reflect, exacerbate and occasionally promote division between the majority Protestant and Unionist population of Northern Ireland and the minority Catholic and Nationalist people, many of whom wish to see the reunification of Northern Ireland with its neighbour, the Republic of Ireland. Thus, a key theme of the conference was the role of sport in the creation and promotion of ethnic identities and, from that, the role of sport in accentuating, ameliorating or marking out the degree of ethnic diversity increasingly evident across the world. Conference themes were wide-ranging in depth and breadth, and included diasporic discourses and contexts (in Ireland, France, Asia, South Africa, Pasifika and Māori regions, the USA, Europe and Australia), women’s experiences, community sport, racism and human rights, football, critiques of whiteness, indigenous experiences and contexts, ethnic communities and identities, and sport-for-development critiques. From this, the editors considered a range of papers for inclusion in this collection, and authors were invited subsequently to submit their work for review. We would like to thank all of the peer reviewers who gave most generously of their time and expertise, some within a limited timescale that was not of their choosing and for which we appreciate their willingness to work within these constraints. They have contributed significantly to the erudite contributions in this collection as all of the authors will no doubt attest.
Readers will find here a stimulating array of papers that capture varied aspects of the sport, race and ethnicity nexus around the world. The journey takes us as far afield as Australia, New Zealand, Canada, Ghana and the USA and, in so doing, we draw on a range of disciplinary approaches that converge or diverge by degrees. Such diversity is to be welcomed in an academic field characterized less by uniformity and more by the potential richness of people’s experiences of sport, race and ethnicity within various cultural contexts. Included here are papers from a range of disciplines and approaches including sociology, politics, sports feminisms, critical race theory, a strengths perspective, Kaupapa Māori Theory, history and sports development. The following are the key questions that have provoked the writers in this collection:

(1) What has been the construction of cultural knowledge in the sport-for-development and peace (SDP) sector within the popular magazine Sports Illustrated, and what are the political implications thereof? (Simon Darnell)

(2) How have local ethnic identities in Accra and the international sport of boxing commingled to generate myths in the origins and development of boxing in the Gold Coast and Ghana? (Jan Dunzendorfer)

(3) What is the role of the Australian state in the provision of government-funded programmes of sport to indigenous communities? And, to what extent does ‘white guilt’ permeate these? (Tony Rossi and Steven Rynne)

(4) What are the potential strengths linked to Aboriginal people’s cultural practices in Canada? (Vicky Paraschak and Kirsty Thompson)

(5) How do Māori athletes weave their Māori identity publicly and privately in a global sporting context? (Bevan Eruei and Farah Rangikoepa Palmer)

(6) What has been the visual US newspaper coverage of interscholastic female athletes, particularly in relation to the race–gender nexus? (Jodi Rightler-McDaniels)

Darnell employs, in an original fashion, the theoretical tradition of Edward Said to investigate the construction of cultural knowledge of SDP within the popular magazine Sports Illustrated. He suggests that popular representations of sport in SDP can serve to secure the innocence and benevolence of global sport for Western audiences while insulating them from, and therefore solidifying, the political economy of unequal development. As a result, SDP remains amenable to the politics of Empire in the new millennium. Darnell also judiciously acknowledges potential limitations, each research article not being without its necessary limitations, of course. Specifically, he identifies the potential criticism that analysis of one article cannot justify the development of a discourse with the strength and coherence of Orientalism, the whole point of Orientalism being that it is an omnipresent discourse. That aside, his contribution certainly serves to extend the scope of studies of sport and Orientalism at the theoretical level.

Dunzendorfer focuses on the myth of the origin of boxing in Gold Coast/Ghana. Located in the old centre of Accra, this myth is bound to the ethically marked particularity of the local martial art of asafo atwele. While this local martial tradition and indigenous concepts of manliness might have enabled the ‘easy’ adaptation of boxing in Accra, Dunzendorfer argues that pre-eminence attributed to this ignores wider manifold motives behind the sport in Gold Coast/Ghana. Boxing became a means for expressing urban belonging among other things. But related myths supported the localization of the sport and enhanced the political intentions of the local ethnic identity group, the
In the purest traditions of a historian, Dunzendorfer’s main obsession is documentary research, some of his main sources being Gold Coast newspapers. And while not ignoring the fact that an early class of Ga boxers were largely illiterate, his analysis rests, implicitly, on the relevance of the patronage of the educated classes (the middle and upper classes as he puts it) for the development of boxing, not least in terms of the ways in which local populations may have engaged orally (through content being read to them, for instance) and visually (cutting out pictures and so on). The wider issue – the more general aspects of the influence of sport on national cohesion – is a theme which readers themselves may take up further, not least in terms of the creation of an ethnic history for boxing in Accra being part of a broader resistance against Nkrumah’s unitary vision for Ghana (which inflamed sectional political and ethnic angst).

Under the legacy of neoliberalism, Rossi and Rynne argue that it is important to consider how the indigenous people of Australia are to advance, develop and achieve some approximation of parity in terms of health, educational outcomes and economic participation. They explore the relationships between welfare dependency, individualism, responsibility, rights, liberty and the role of the state in the provision of government-funded programmes of sport to indigenous communities. Tackling a thorny issue – the degree to which neoliberal programmes reproduce dominant–subordinate relations through the reproduction of guilt on the part of the former and dependency on the part of the latter – they consider whether surfing programmes can serve to increase rates of participation and are better viewed as progressive investments to bring about changes in physical activity as (albeit a small) part of a broader social policy aimed at reducing the gaps between indigenous and non-indigenous Australians. Given the potential for conceptual slippage in the varied terminology used in sports studies and sports development, readers will notice that Rossi and Rynne use the terms physical activity and leisure only when referred to as such by other researchers. And in the context of potential criticism from libertarian quarters about their concluding argument, the authors also retain an admirable optimistic conviction that schemes for indigenous peoples can be located in a strong and non-dependent culture of liberty, freedom and achievement. It remains to be seen whether the theme of rekindling a spiritual connection to the land and ocean is specific to indigenous Australians or potentially a part of other cultures and sports development programmes. Furthermore, the more specific extent to which Aboriginal peoples may volunteer in Australian sport and life in a more meaningful way is an opportune topic for research agendas in that part of the world.

Paraschak and Thompson raise important issues about the effects of inserting concepts of race and ethnicity into social and public policy, including sports development policy. While sport is often promoted as a vehicle towards greater equality (or at least less inequality), the discourse of development tends to portray ‘other’ ethnic groups in terms of deficits in relation to the dominant ethnic group within a specific nation-state. Of course, the dominant ethnic group may not self-identify as a particular ethnic group, such is their dominance, but instead see themselves as embodying the national self-image and ideal. Paraschak and Thompson argue that this further potentially encourages ethnic groups to recognize themselves largely through the language of deficits imposed by the dominant group. Instead, they argue there is much to be gained, both theoretically and from a policy perspective, by focussing on the strengths of Aboriginal and other ethnic groups, so that their ‘development’ is not exclusively seen in the context of dominant normalizations. In the context of Aboriginal strengths in Canada, Paraschak and Thompson identify a holistic approach, emphasis on family and community, ‘two-eyed seeing’ (integrating indigenous and western world views) and self-determination. This strengths perspective is
more empowering than the current Canadian sport and health policies, and therefore offers
greater chances of success.

Erueti and Palmer argue in a similar vein, contesting the imposition of western theories
to understand the sporting and psychical cultures of Māori groups in New Zealand.
Instead, they espouse an integrated use of Kaupapa Māori theory, critical race theory and
narrative inquiry. While dominant depictions of Māori athletes do not necessarily focus on
deficits, they often serve to reinforce narrow stereotypes of Māori people in terms of
‘physicality’ and being naturally ‘gifted’. This discourse of indigenous people being closer
to ‘nature’ has of course a long history in colonizer–colonized power relations. Māori
people often internalized these colonizer depictions of racial or ethnic inferiority. Using
the indigenous epistememes contained within Kaupapa Māori theory, Erueti and Palmer show
how elite Māori athletes rely on the concept of mauri (individual life force) to draw on the
strengths of their family and community, as well as broader Māori culture. The unusual
approach adopted by Erueti and Palmer also has methodological implications for
researching race and ethnicity in sport. The use of indigenous theories and concepts
allowed the Māori elite athletes to narrate their ethnic identity and emotions of belonging
that western theories and methodologies (standard Pākehā research methodologies) might
obscure. Their approach even extended to the ethics of recruiting elite athletes and
ensuring that their mana (integrity, charisma, prestige) was maintained.

Rightler-McDaniels uses framing theory to examine the visual portrayal of young
female basketball players at high school (interscholastic) level in the USA. Her research
operates at the intersection of race and gender, where the sometimes hidden effects of
racial and ethnic stereotypes can often be revealed. Dominant themes in feminist
perspectives on visual depictions of women in sport tend to focus on the sexualization and
under-representation of females, but Rightler-McDaniels’ statistical analysis does not
support this. However, she contends that this may be due to the minority status (in terms of
age) of these female athletes. Her study supports the critical race theory in terms of racism
as an institutional practice in sports photography and journalism. Like Erueti and Palmer’s
study, black female athletes were often portrayed as ‘physically gifted’ (i.e. not requiring
the hard work and dedication implicitly assumed to be the preserve of white athletes).
Also, some body parts, in particular the face, tended to be obscured, cut or hidden in the
case of black female athletes, compared to their white counterparts. Black females were
more likely to be cast as ‘background players’, while white females occupied the
foreground in newspaper photographs. Rightler-McDaniels’ study adds much to our
understanding of the operations of power within visual portrayals that objectify implicit,
often unquestioned, racial ontologies.

Taken together, this collection not only features changes that have taken place at the
level of sports participation, but also poses questions about the levels of ideological and
organizational control maintained by those with a vested interest in sport, including sports
media sources. Sport is a contested racial and ethnic terrain and has broad public
significance in cultures around the world. Certainly, the discussions here serve to
centralize race and ethnicity in that guise, entangled as they usually are in other forms of
subordination. They serve to question the consequences of traditional dominant
ideologies, including colour blindness (see Rossi and Rynne on ‘white guilt’), and they
foreground previously marginalized ethnic voices (see Paraschak and Thompson, for
example) that are typically inadequately represented in conceptions of sports policy and
development. Finally, this collection features the benefits of utilizing less straitjacketed
and sometimes narrow disciplinary approaches to a complex field. It is hoped that it will
make a positive contribution to the continuing evolution of academic research into sport,
race and ethnicity. The editors would like to thank Dr David Hassan and Dr Boria Majumdar, and the team at Routledge, for their support in bringing this collection to fruition.

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