

Book Review

Out of Left Field: Social Inequality and Sports

by Gamel Abdel-Shehid and Nathan Kalman-Lamb. Halifax and Winnipeg: Fernwood Publishing, 2011. \$19.95 CAN, paper. ISBN: 978-1-55266-439-1. Pages: 1-135.

Reviewed by Christine Pich¹

Out of Left Field provides an engaging and clearly written text with the double aim of introducing a sociological perspective towards understanding high-performance sports and emphasizing the usefulness of critical theory in doing so. Being an introductory text, critical theory is defined in a straightforward manner as encompassing “a basic assumption: the world we live in is fundamentally unequal” (6), with inequality conceptualized as the enjoyment of privileges for certain groups of people “at the expense of others who are marginalized and whose marginalization those privileges rely” (2). The central argument of the book - that “in a capitalist society [...] sport as spectacle serves to further the interests of capital” (9) - is made with respect to a Marxist theoretical approach where it emphasizes the centrality of economic inequality and situates social inequalities in broader historical processes of capitalism and colonialism. However, it further challenges the reader to consider the continuous production and reproduction of interconnected forms of inequality (e.g., ‘race’, gender, sexuality), and how these are not homogenous sites of oppression. In drawing upon primary and secondary scholarly literature, the authors discuss an array of theoretical ideas including those of Michel Foucault, Benedict Andersen, and bell hooks, and develop their argument by tying their discussion back to the necessity of considering economic factors, such as commercialization and profit motives, towards understanding high-performance sports.

The book is organized into three main parts with the first looking at the nature of sports, the second considering the influence of inequalities upon identity in sports, and the third exploring sports’ impact on broader societal views and beliefs. As noted, the focus is specifically on ‘high-performance sport’, which is defined as “elite, often professional

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sport" (5), with examples including team-based sports, individual athletes, and periodic large-scale events such as the Olympics. The rationale for this selection is based upon the strong influence that this level of sports has upon sports more generally, as it constitutes an aspirational model through which sports are constructed and played. Each chapter addresses a different sociological aspect of understanding sport, with a fairly comprehensive scope that covers areas such as normative masculinity, film, imperialism, and spectacle.

In connection with its stated aims, a particular strength of the book is its overall organization, as it is formatted in a way to clearly introduce core ideas from various critical theoretical approaches and identify social problems related to sports. The authors are cognizant of not taking academic ideas for granted. Rather they succinctly define the meaning of key concerns (such as the importance of social context in reading theoretical literature) and concepts (e.g., feminism, ideology, modernity). All key terms are bolded within the text, with a glossary of these terms being included at the end of the book. The chapters are also clearly designated and discussed, with each chapter engaging with a few core ideas from a short list of selected authors. In considering the introductory format of this book, however, one key tension was that in arguing for a structural approach, the authors could have been more explicit in acknowledging other frameworks (e.g., post-structuralism) and debates (e.g., structure and agency) as a way to clearly present these ideas to the reader and to strengthen their own argument around the important impacts of broader societal forces.

The book contributes to sociological literature in two central ways. First, the authors acknowledge that Marxist discussion towards sports has been quite critical – for instance, by dismissing it as a spectacle – and while the authors encourage such critical analysis, they also argue that sports has the potential to be a site of transformation where it could encompass leisure, pleasure, and social cohesion. That is to say, they argue that sports are not in themselves the problem; what is of concern is how sports are undertaken and the purposes they serve in capitalist societies. Second, by engaging with an array of literature the authors add multi-dimensionality to their discussion by considering not only how various identity-based inequalities interact with economic inequalities, but also by emphasizing the significance of what non-Western and multinational perspectives may reveal. For example, in drawing upon the work of Eduardo Galeano, who wrote about sports in the context of imperialism in Latin America, the authors highlight how people may

turn to sports to find pleasure and resistance in otherwise repressive environments.

While the intention of the book is to provide a foundational level text, some points nevertheless require a slightly more nuanced analysis. For instance, in arguing for the usefulness of a Marxist lens towards understanding the exploitation and commodification of the labour of professional athletes, they present the example of team owners in the National Basketball Association (NBA) extracting surplus value from the labour of their players, even if the player is getting paid multi-millions of dollars per year. To be sure, the authors do make many convincing points, including how the players are working for the benefit of the owners, how many athletes are not paid such high amounts, and how some athletes have the benefit of a celebrity status that other workers do not. However, there is a lack of sufficient discussion about further qualitative distinctions and theoretical complexities in using similar concepts to understand the labour of high-performance athletes and that of workers who are employed in more traditional fields, such as manufacturing or service. For example, do we require more of a multi-pronged analysis in order to better understand the inequalities experienced not only between athletes and workers, but also between differently positioned athletes? Although the authors acknowledge that economic inequalities have lessened in recent decades for some athletes due to higher salaries, there was a lack of clarity surrounding the theoretical implications of this for a class analysis.

Overall the accessible style and tone of this book, with clearly presented key concepts and theoretical ideas, as well as its engagement with relevant issues from high-performance sports, provides a useful text for introductory level undergraduate courses in sociology, sociology of sport, and sociological theory.