

Sport and Social Theory

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Abstract and Keywords

This chapter provides an overview of how major social theories, both classical and contemporary, can help organize and enrich the historical study of sport. Classical frameworks discussed include the functionalism associated with Émile Durkheim, Max Weber's rationalization, and the economic and capitalist critiques that originated with Karl Marx. More contemporary bodies of work include symbolic interactionism, dramaturgical and semiotic approaches, feminist and critical race theories, and the grand syntheses of Pierre Bourdieu. Throughout, it is argued that these theoretical resources reveal the socially constructed and historically contingent nature of modern sporting forms, establish the importance of situating sport in its broader social contexts, and highlight the role and significance of sport in contemporary life. The chapter concludes by suggesting that closer theoretical engagement not only improves the quality of sport history but can help bring the study of sport more to the center of all social research and cultural critique.

Keywords: social theory, sport theory, critical theories, functionalism, symbolic interactionism, social construction, dramaturgy

WITH a few notable exceptions and setting aside a passing comment here or there, neither classical nor contemporary social theorists have had a great deal to say about sport. Nevertheless, social theory has a great deal to offer the systematic academic study of sport, historically oriented and otherwise. The purpose of this chapter is to provide a brief, schematic overview of some of the conceptual resources available in classical and contemporary social theory for sport history and scholarship.

The chapter begins by identifying key concepts and orienting frameworks from the traditional sociological canon, drawing in particular from the classic theoretical trinity of Karl Marx, Max Weber, and Émile Durkheim, as well as the symbolic interactionist school represented by Georg Simmel, George Herbert Mead, and Erving Goffman. All of these works have relevance and utility for sport scholarship. An explicit, self-conscious engagement with the general social theoretical orientation that unifies them can help readers better understand both the historical origins and development of sport, as well as its particular status and function in the modern world. Three distinctive overarching character-

istics are highlighted: a constructivist orientation, a contextualizing impulse, and the need for a critical/systemic perspective. The final section draws out some of these broader characteristics and their analytical implications by summarizing the contributions of certain social theorists who have been most specific, systematic, and self-conscious about situating sport in the context of broad theoretical interests and questions—Norbert Elias, Pierre Bourdieu, and C. L. R James among them.

This general approach and admittedly idiosyncratic collection of thinkers is not meant to be systematic or comprehensive. It is not, for example, intended to survey that vast and impressive body of theoretical work on sport that has been engaged in the last fifteen or twenty years. Nor is this a chapter about how various social theories and theorists have been appropriated, deployed, and reworked in the context of sport research and writing over the years. Rather, it is a basic, conceptual overview of the value and utility of a social-theoretical framing approach to sport history. It is, in short, intended to be conceptual rather than genealogical, illustrative of the fundamental, multifaceted relationships between sport and society in modern history.

(p. 16) Theoretical Resources in the Sociological Canon

Classical social theory is, for sociologists at least, still delineated and defined by the research and writing of three founding scholars, the so-called holy trinity of Marx, Weber, and Durkheim. Each of these theorists and their followers have their own orientation to history. Each has produced his own set of terms and organizing concepts for analyzing social life, and each has inspired particular lines of research and thought. At the risk of oversimplification, the core insights and contributions of each can be captured by a central organizing term: capitalism for Marx, rationality and/or rationalization for Weber, and social solidarity for Durkheim.

Marx's description of capitalism and all the analytic concepts that go along with it (labor, value, profit, class, exploitation, stratification, alienation, ideology, and false consciousness, just to name a few) are, of course, well-known analytic tools all across the academy. They have been used to explain the historical emergence of modernity; the development of its complex, stratified, and unequal societies; and a diverse array of human experiences therein. Sport scholarship has been no different. When the field took shape in the 1960s and 1970s, the theoretical resources inspired by and developed in the Marxist tradition were prominent and influential. Studies of the emergence of a market-based, for-profit system of sport provision and consumption (both participatory and spectator forms) were most apparent, along with works that analyzed the exploitation of professional (and other) athletes and their "labor" by the owners, administrators, and leaders of the sporting world. Most famously, the idea of sport as some kind of opiate of the masses—an institutionalized, cultural practice functioning to distract spectators and consumers from see-

ing the systemic sources of their own stratification—traces its lineage from Marx's notions of ideology, consent, and control.

Recognizing the Marxist roots of sports history and scholarship is not just a matter of tracing an intellectual lineage. Such theoretical engagements can make it easier for sport scholars to identify the assumptions and anticipate the directions, implications, and potential conclusions of work in this tradition or other approaches deriving from it. An example would be research into unequal access to sport as a participatory form in contemporary societies. Much of this work is focused on class and derives directly (if not always self-consciously) from the Marxist emphasis on the inequities generated by market-based, capitalist economies. Studies that attend to other social forms and the inequalities associated with them—probably most notably gender and race—also adopt and adapt many of the general Marxist concepts of inequality and systemic social stratification. Valuable in itself, such theoretical awareness can also help connect sport history and research to intellectual developments and innovations in other, related fields.

Weber, a German sociologist and best known for *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, is obviously indebted to Marx but shifted from a materialist analysis of (p. 17) capitalism to a more cultural critique of the rationalization and bureaucratization of modern life. The focus and result was an emphasis on how different institutional realms of social life (or “spheres”) functioned in society, the ethos they required of their adherents, and the more existential questions of meaning and purpose to which they gave rise. These insights are expressed most famously in his notion of the iron cage. The cultural trap Weber described was not capitalism per se but the world wrought by capitalism, a world marked by incessant complexity, activity, and striving that has become entirely detached from any meaning or moral purpose, most of all the religious ethics that originally gave it purchase.

Weber's ideas and writings about rationalization in the modern world may not be as familiar to sport scholars as Marx's critique of capitalism, but they are actually fairly deeply embedded, even taken for granted, in much of the historical and theoretical work on the evolution of modern sporting systems and their role in society. Steven Overman's *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Sport* is obviously in this vein, but Allen Guttman's classic *From Ritual to Record* may be a better and certainly more influential work within the sport canon itself. At a basic level, Guttman charts an essentially Weberian institutional history of the emergence and development of sport as a distinctive social sphere or set of practices, one in which sport as a social form becomes more and more regulated, rule-oriented, disciplined, and differentiated as time goes on. In addition, Guttman suggests a much broader shift and transformation in sport's meaning, purpose, and function in the modern world from one of communal rites to physical excellence and record-setting for its own, spectacular if essentially unjustifiable, purpose. Such Weberian framings have also given rise to the larger, more general concept of sportization. Here it is worth noting that Weber's critique of meaning and purpose in modern life—or the lack thereof—yields perhaps the single most famous sport reference in all of classical social theory: “the pursuit of wealth, stripped of its religious and ethical meaning, tends to become as-

sociated with purely mundane passions, which often actually give it the character of sport.”

Like Weber, the French sociologist Durkheim can and should be understood to begin from Marx’s critique of capitalism. However, Durkheim’s interest and analysis was less on the inequalities produced by modern economies and more on how the increasingly complex division of labor that they required challenge and change traditional forms of social solidarity and moral order. Durkheimian notions of solidarity, morality, and order may be less well known or frequently referenced among contemporary sport scholars, but they actually resonate quite well with those interested in the broad mobilization and collective impacts of sport spectatorship and consumption in terms of community-building and collective identification. Indeed, the concept of collective effervescence put forward in Durkheim’s masterwork *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* inevitably leads first-year sociology graduate students to speculate about mass sporting practices. Such ideas about the role of sport in creating, perpetuating, as well as contesting social solidarity is exemplified in the work of sport specialists such as John MacAloon or Susan Brownell on Olympic rituals, symbols, and ceremonies, both of whom trace their (p. 18) Durkheimian roots through the leading midcentury American anthropologist Victor Turner’s work on ritual and community.

Several other important lines of research and thought in sport history and scholarship chart a direct lineage to Durkheim as well. One of Durkheim’s immediate followers, Roger Caillois, produced the first serious, sociological response to Johan Huizinga’s foundational *Homo Ludens*. In contrast to Huizinga’s philosophical treatise, Caillois’s interest was in the socially differentiated meaning, status, and function of sport, play, and leisure in the modern world. Additionally, there is the notion of *habitus*, perhaps the most well-known and influential theoretical concept to come out of studies of sport, athletics, and the body. While this is obviously not the place for an extensive discussion of this formative notion, made famous by Bourdieu, it should be noted that the term itself was originally introduced by Marcel Mauss, Durkheim’s nephew, student, and collaborator. Mauss introduced the notion of techniques or “habits” of the body as a way to call attention to the distinctive ways in which people from different nations used their bodies in walking, swimming, or marching. He sought to make a larger argument about the power of the collective in shaping individual activity and behavior.

This brings us, in many ways, to symbolic interactionism. One of the conceits of many sociological theorists and thinkers is that all of social theory and sociological conceptualization can be traced back to the Marx-Weber-Durkheim triad. This yields certain blind spots and misunderstandings, chief among them an absence of attention to social interaction (particularly at the face-to-face or “micro” level) and the minimization of the symbolic significance and cultural meaning endowed in and reproduced through all human interactions and relationships. In sociological theory at least, this orientation is typically called “symbolic interactionism” and can be traced from the work of Simmel in Germany and

Mead in the United States to that of the mid-twentieth-century iconoclast Canadian American Goffman.

With their emphasis on culture, symbols, and representations, as well as the making of meanings in and through institutions and social interactions, the ideas that social theorists typically associate with symbolic interactionism often appear in sport scholarship under the headings of communication and consumption, mass media, or cultural studies. However, these foundations and connections are not always explicit or self-conscious. A better exemplar would be Gary Alan Fine's ethnographic study of little league baseball. With his attention to peer group interaction and how it produces a subculture of its own, Fine's work highlights both the interactive and the symbolic dimensions of this tradition. It should also be noted that the earliest and most probing social theoretical treatments of "play" in social interaction and human life can be found in symbolic interactionism. In scattered but extensive discussions, Simmel, Mead, and Goffman's formulations all help shape how sport scholars can think about the larger cultural meaning, status, and function of sport and its experiential significance with respect to how people actually engage and understand ostensibly playful forms of social activity and interaction.

(p. 19) Distinctive Characteristics of a Social Theory Orientation

As useful as each of these different thinkers and schools of theory may be, what is arguably more important are the overarching but taken-for-granted insights and assumptions they hold in common. There are at least three larger, more general characteristics of what might be called the social theoretical worldview or "sociological imagination" that merit attention: its constructivist orientation, its contextualizing impulse, and the need for a critical perspective.

The constructivist orientation shared by social theorists, whatever their other intellectual interests and analytic proclivities, is that nothing about social life and human history is given, universal, or invariable. In other words, almost everything we know and think, not to mention all the ways we organize and interact, are social constructions. They are the product of social actions and historical forces that are not always visible and usually well beyond the comprehension and control of individual actors. This perspective and orientation may be obvious for some. Many historians speak of a historical imagination as well. But recognizing sport as a social construction, as something that has been produced by human activity, reminds that the basic facts, institutions, and practices of the sporting world were not given or inevitable but have a history of their own. They can and do change over time. Extending from this, classic social theory suggests sport history is thoroughly bound up with the history of modernity itself. This emphasis on the human-made structure and function of sport also, almost invariably, raises historical questions about how the sports world became the way it is. What forces or actors were the historical drivers? Whose interests has it served; who benefited as well as who did not? In other

words, this constructivist orientation leads into both the critical and the contextualizing impulses that also define a social theoretical orientation to history and social life.

A second core characteristic of social theoretical thought is the impulse to contextualize—to situate any group, social practice, or cultural form in the broader social environment within which it took shape and assumed its particular meaning and function. The view that human history and social life are not a series of disconnected, discrete parts but a whole system helps make manifest the historical forces and social structures often forgotten or ignored. In sport studies, for example, this might mean explaining the rise of any particular sporting practice (or sport more generally) as owing not only to qualities of a sport itself but as a result of the rise of leisure time and extra income or even the emergence of cities and mass populations, the building of urban infrastructure, the emergence of mass media, commodification, and consumer society itself. Sport scholars should not see sport, its history, and its impact in the world as a self-contained, isolated institution or set of practices. Instead, the sport scholar must situate sport in the broader social and historical context of which it is part and parcel. This (p. 20) contextualizing orientation reminds us of the necessary, if multifaceted, relationship between sport and society. If we are truly to understand sport, we cannot think about sport as if it were in a vacuum but instead must understand its place and role in society and history more broadly and generally.

The third distinguishing characteristic and contribution of a fully formed social theoretical approach involves a critical orientation. When it comes to critical theory and sociology, many historians and other academicians think of social inequalities and the activist push for social change—the belief that the goal of social writing and research is not just to analyze the world but also to engage the world and bring about change. However, there is a broader and more important analytic point about a critical theoretical orientation that is often lost in this framing. A critical-theoretical perspective also provides a degree of distance and a standard of evaluation that allows social and historical research to go beyond mere descriptive empiricism and dig deeper into both meanings and causes. More specifically, having a more or less fully formed critical orientation to the world provides standards and criteria against which to analyze and evaluate history and an awareness of the mechanisms, processes, and forces that have made the historical world and continue to shape and maintain the social status quo as we know it today.

In its earliest manifestations, critical analytic frameworks were mostly focused on the inequalities and injustices associated with class and economics, especially those generated by market-based, capitalist systems of exchange. Critical theory was, in other words, all about class—economic-based exploitation, oppression, and social stratification. Indeed, throughout much of the twentieth century the phrase “critical theory” was essentially synonymous with Marxism itself, the term having been invented by such German social theorists as Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno (members of the Frankfurt School) who had fled Germany for the United States where Marxist thought was about as popular as fascism. Yet the basic, generic tenets of critical theory—the need for a systemic framework and an independent analytic standpoint—have been expanded and reworked in the

second half of the twentieth century with the rise of feminist theory, queer theory, post-colonial theory, subaltern studies, critical race theory, and intersectional (race-class-gender) analyses. Such analytic orientations have been attuned not only to a wider array of social forms but also stem from broader, more culturally oriented visions of worldview, meaning and purpose, efficiency and rationality. In terms of social differences and inequalities, the shift, both in the sporting world and in terms of the sporting world's role in society, has been from class and economics to other social forms and forces, perhaps most notably gender and race due to the influence of the rise of feminist studies, critical race theory, and cultural studies more generally.

These grand, orienting assumptions about context, critique, and construction can be difficult to grasp or engage in the abstract. They are illustrated and usefully applied by several members of that small but exclusive set of social theorists who have been among the most explicit and self-conscious about sport as social form and historical force. It is an exercise that both illustrates these general social theoretical principles and extends (p. 21) our understandings of the complicated, multifaceted relationships between sport and society and, by extension, the role of sport in history.

Applications, Illustrations, and Extensions

The well-known sport research and writing of Elias is probably most useful in terms of illustrating and operationalizing ideas about social construction and contextualization in sport scholarship. In his historical essays about sporting practices like fox hunting and more abstract orienting essays, Elias offers a very specific argument about the emergence and development of modern social life (the civilizing process, as he calls it) and the place of sport therein. At one level, Elias's work provides a constructivist framework for both recognizing the distinctive characteristics of the institutionalized set of practices and activities we call sport as well as for thinking about how that institution took shape and developed. Even more, Elias provides a broad, sociological context for—and explicit argument about—sport's larger role and function in the modern world. I am referring here particularly to his argument, most famously represented in the collected volume he did with Eric Dunning about sport filling an institutional role and function in the modern, “civilized” world by providing a place for excitement—leisure, recreation, and function marked by physical activity and intensive emotional engagement and release. Elias's emphasis on the experiential and emotional dimensions of sporting practices also undergirds and foreshadows recent work on bodily practices developed by scholars such as Pierre Bourdieu, Michel Foucault, and Judith Butler.

With notions like “field,” “practice,” and the aforementioned “habitus,” the eminent French sociologist Bourdieu did more than any one scholar or theorist to bring terminology and imagery from the sporting world into social theory and social scientific practice. Bourdieu also has a quite specific and refined vision of the emergence, development, structure, and functioning of sport in the modern world. In fact, his is probably the best

example and realization of a fully formed social theoretical approach to sport in the social theory canon.

Bourdieu's approach to sport is grounded in a Marxist-materialist perspective on processes of social distinction, stratification, and control in modern societies and how sport is implicated therein. His empirical work on sport starts from a Weberian analysis of the emergence of sport as a distinctive institutional arena and focuses mainly on how different sporting practices—and the meaning and significance attributed to such practices—mark and distinguish social groups (Durkheim's solidarity and division of labor), thus reinforcing their power and position in society (or lack thereof). Bourdieu's emphasis is not on mass, nationalist sport but on the way in which different groups or classes participate in different sporting forms—for example, the working classes tend to participate in sports such as boxing or soccer while those in the upper classes tend to play golf or (p. 22) tennis. Drawing on the symbolic interactionist tradition, Bourdieu highlights the more experiential and micro-level processes in and through which various sporting practices cultivate and inculcate distinctive worldviews and orientations.

Although illustrative of all the distinctive characteristics of a social theoretical approach, it is important to realize that Bourdieu and his work tend toward a very specific understanding of the relationships between sport and society, one where sport plays an essentially conservative, reproductive role in social life, reflecting larger historical forces rather than driving them, reinforcing rather than challenging existing societal arrangements. For instance, Bourdieu generally adopted the traditional leftist line that the investment of the working classes in sporting practices, particularly in the consumption of sporting spectacles through spectatorship and fandom, distracts them away from the difficult and fundamentally unjust conditions of their labor and lives. Bourdieu comes to these conclusions for a number of empirical and historical reasons—his understanding of the original form and function of athletic pursuits for boys and young men in elite English public schools, for example, as well as the rigid class structure of French society (his capital empirical case) and its particular sporting scene. Whatever the reasons, these formulations allow relatively little independent space or impact for sport as a social force in its own right.

An important variation on this view of sport as essentially reproductive and reflective can be found in the work of anthropologist Clifford Geertz. Though not always included on the list of social theorists with a particular interest or expertise in sport, Geertz's famous article on cockfighting in Bali as "deep play" adds a crucial dimension to our understanding of the more cultural aspects of sport in its relation to society, especially as a mass form. In this now-classic paper, Geertz describes popular cultural forms and practices such as those associated with the sport as "texts" that social analysts might read over the shoulders of their subjects. Geertz's point is that if social analysts and cultural critics can properly "read"—that is, situate, analyze and contextualize—these texts, we have a powerful window onto the ideas and meanings that constitute the lifeworlds and worldviews of human subjects in specific contexts and communities. Geertz's argument about the impor-

tance and impact of cultural practices went still further and endowed such cultural forms with an important and relatively autonomous role or function in social life.

Geertz explained the meaning and significance of the cockfight in Bali by showing how the betting around the fights mirrored and thus reinforced the social kinship structure of local tribes and communities. People in Bali bet for particular animals and trainers, in other words, in order to demonstrate their communal ties and commitments to kin. On the surface, nothing specific or concrete *changed* in winning and losing. However, at a deeper level, according to Geertz, something important *happened*: social networks were put on display and enacted. In this performance, community and kinship ties were confirmed and re-established. The Balinese may not have wanted or been able to explain their fascination with cocks and cockfighting as a reflection of their social structure, but it provided a dramatic, engaging cultural space for them to experience and live out their communal connections. Thus the cockfight (p. 23) was, in Geertz's memorable formulation, both a model *of* and a model *for* social solidarities and alliances.

Geertz's framing of the cockfight as a cultural performance suggests that the social and historical dynamics played out in sporting forms do not just reflect the larger, more general forces of history and society; they actually serve as an experiential platform that consolidates and ensures the reproduction of existing social ties. In fact, according to Geertz, sporting practices and performances like cockfights in Bali are all the more powerful as social forces because their participants are so deeply engaged in them and yet so unwilling or unable to articulate exactly why they are so engaged or what is actually going on. Thus these social effects are achieved even as participants think nothing particularly important or social is going on. Here Geertz connects a Durkheimian interest in social solidarity with the symbolic interactionist focus on interaction and symbolic meaning. Semiotic anthropologist Roland Barthes's famous discussion of the performativity among professional wrestlers offers another, even more self-conscious and strategic variation on this approach.

Whether in Bourdieu's straight social reproduction model or Geertz's more nuanced cultural approach, these different approaches to thinking about the role of sport in social life can make it difficult to envision the irreducible, relatively independent roles that sport can play in people's lives, in society, and in history. In sport studies, one line of research and writing that has pursued the relative independence and causal impact of sport is work that conceives of sport as a "contested terrain." This approach was derived largely in dialogue with the writing of Italian cultural Marxist Antonio Gramsci (though typically through the work of his interpreters, scholars such as Raymond Williams, Stuart Hall, Paul Willis, and the whole Birmingham School of Cultural Studies). Unlike Geertz, this work starts from the assumption that society is not a naturally harmonious, well-integrated place but instead is fraught with inequality, stratification, conflict, and struggle. In contrast to Bourdieu, it sees cultural venues like sport as arenas in and through which these social forces collide and struggle. The social dynamics that are played out, in the contested terrain frame, are not social order and stability but the struggle for order, the quest for control and power—not hegemony but the *struggle for* hegemony. Sport is best

understood as an institutional arena where popular consciousness is constructed and contested, often without the participants being fully aware of the social processes in which they are so clearly implicated. In the sport context, this emphasis brings us to C.L.R. James and his magisterial, autobiographical rumination on cricket in the colonial context, *Beyond a Boundary*.

Formulated as a critique of colonialism, James starts from the presupposition that the modern world has been organized by race, both as a principle for the unequal distribution of resources and power as well as a mode for thinking about culture more generally. Squarely within the critical theoretical tradition, he further insists that these arrangements are neither just nor inevitable—and that the task of the analyst is to identify, understand, explain, and deconstruct the often unseen or misunderstood social processes and cultural beliefs that maintain existing racial (p. 24) formations and inequalities. And, for James, sport, specifically cricket, was a preeminent site for recognition, contestation, and change on a large social scale.

Several things about sport are important and unique as a force for contestation and change in James's vision. One is the disproportionate involvement, access, and success that otherwise marginalized and disempowered groups often have in sport, at least in the Western context. Another is the widespread popularity of sport and the tremendous passion people bring to the practice both as participants and spectators. These characteristics—especially in combination with sport's own dramatic qualities—means that the social dynamics of the sporting world take on meaning and significance far “beyond the boundaries” of the sporting world itself. Much of this impact relies on the consciousness and agency of athletes, many of whom James saw as more socially aware than most American sport scholars would imagine. Almost all of this holds, at least in theory, for a variety of popular cultural forms; however, James was convinced that there was something even more specific and unique about sport (or really cricket) that made it such an important and distinctive social force. It is what I have called the “moral structure” of the game itself—the ideals of meritocracy, competition, fair play, respect for the rules, loyalty, teamwork, and mutual respect embedded in athletic contests themselves. This moral structure of cricket and Western sport more generally was marked for James both by formal rules and structural equality as well as by a deep and intuitive sense of fairness and self-discipline that all participating individuals were required to have and hold to in order to make the competitive system work.

This summary framing may resemble Geertz's depiction of culture as a “model of and model for” formation. Yet, where Geertz's conception of modeling was essentially conservative and reproductive—reinforcing things as they were—James's “model” served as an ethical standard to hold up against the status quo. It was a moral ideal that stood outside of the social world as it was and thus revealed and put demands upon those who held it. As sport sociologist Mike Messner, who has applied this model to struggles for gender equity in sport, has summarized: “[T]he game provided a context in which the contradiction of racism and colonial domination were revealed for all to see.”

In a post-civil rights, postcolonial era—where racism, prejudice, and discrimination still appear rampant both in sport and through sport *and* where so much of the scholarship aims to unpack the complicated ways in which sports images, ideologies, and identities function to maintain existing racial hierarchies—it can be easy to be cynical or skeptical about the accuracy and utility of the abstract, universalistic norms and values James believed were inculcated in sport. Indeed, they sound like the self-righteous rhetoric so often trumpeted by conservative or self-congratulatory sports elites, what the Olympic historian John Hoberman once derisively dismissed as the movement’s “universal amorism.” The key point about James’s work is the way in which he endowed sport with an autonomy and relative independence as a social force, drawing analytic attention to the broader social impacts and implications of these struggles and the social contestation and change that can occur through sport, not just in it.

(p. 25) The Use, Value, and Larger Implications of Theoretical Engagement

This overview of some of the basic conceptual resources available for sport history in the social theory canon has been admittedly, even intentionally, schematic and idiosyncratic. In fact, many of the concepts, analytic insights, and broader theoretical orientations outlined here have been elaborated, extended, and applied more extensively, and perhaps more eloquently, in more recent sport research and writing. Once again, the goal here is not to be comprehensive but rather to be conceptual, suggestive of some of the theoretical resources that are useful and valuable for doing sport history.

Such an exercise has a number of potential benefits for the sport historian and social analyst. By referencing or signposting some of these classic concepts and frameworks, one can minimize or even eliminate the need to reinvent the conceptual toolkit with every study, paper, or book project. In addition, a working awareness of the core works and concepts of the social theory cannon can help sport scholars better anticipate the directions, implications, potential problems, and probable conclusions of certain approaches if and when they are applied to sport. These uses are important since denizens of commentators and large secondary literatures have taken shape around each of these well-established bodies of social theory. Further, a more self-conscious and systematic engagement with social theory can also help better situate sport history and research in the context of broader intellectual currents and more general scholarly debates. This latter point is somewhat larger and more substantive than it may first appear.

Throughout, I have argued and tried to show that a more theoretically engaged and informed sport scholarship can contribute to a better, fuller understanding of sport—its emergence and historical development, its relationships with society, and the ways in which it is implicated in the history and evolution of modern social life itself. This “grandiose” framing is obviously intended to contribute to a better, more sophisticated sport scholarship and history, but it has another, arguably more important implication as well. I am thinking here of those historians, social scientists, and cultural critics who nor-

mally do not pay much attention to sport. Indeed, I suggest here by way of conclusion that a more theoretically engaged and informed sport scholarship is essential for bringing sport history and scholarship from the margins of the academy closer to the center of history and its aligned academic fields, disciplines, and departments. A more theoretically sophisticated sport studies will, I believe, cultivate new attention to and awareness of the power, complexity, and impact of sport as a social phenomenon and force among that large contingent of scholars who have not previously seen it as such. What is to be gained from demonstrating and explicating sport's larger social status and historical significance is not just an appreciation of sport but a bigger, broader conception of history (p. 26) and social life, one that more fully attends to the power of play, popular practices, and symbolic meanings in modern life. Sport scholarship is obviously still far from such ambitious interventions and goals; however, there should be little doubt that a more deliberate engagement with social theory is a key part of making this project a reality.

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