

Book Review: Sport: A Critical Sociology by Richard Giulianotti

In the second edition of **Sport: A Critical Sociology**, Richard Giulianotti brings social theory to bear upon the world of sport, drawing on scholars including Émile Durkheim, Max Weber, Karl Marx, Michel Foucault and Theodor Adorno. As Giulianotti advances a sociology of sport that explores its historical and cultural contexts, underlying social structures, power relations and the identities it engenders, this collection is of interest not only to sport scholars, but also to those working in critical social theory more broadly, writes **Avash Bhandari**.

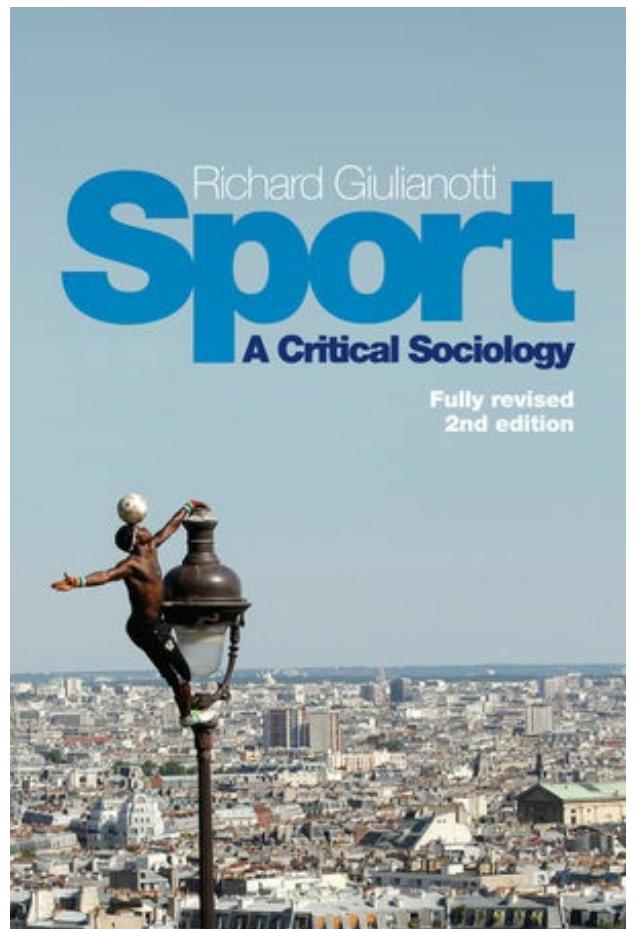
Sport: A Critical Sociology. Richard Giulianotti. Polity. 2015.

For both participants and spectators, sport enjoys a sizeable presence in our social life and everyday interactions. Recent corruption scandals involving FIFA and the biggest names in the administration of world football have once again made it clear that we cannot let sport escape our critical scrutiny. Richard Giulianotti is a well-established name in the burgeoning discipline of sport sociology, with several seminal publications including *Football: A Sociology of the Global Game* (1999) and an edited volume *Sport and Modern Social Theorists* (2004).

The fully revised second edition of *Sport: A Critical Sociology* will be useful to anyone seeking a nuanced and theoretically grounded understanding of the complex phenomena of sport, incorporating the latest literature in the field since its first publication in 2004. Asking us to venture beyond a conventional definition of sport, Giulianotti suggests that sport can be defined sociologically by five key properties: it is structured, goal-oriented, competitive, ludic and culturally situated. Therefore, a sociological understanding of sport is sensitive to its historical and cultural contexts, underlying social structures and power relations, as well as to the various identities that sporting allegiances engender. Moreover, the understanding of modern sport cannot be separated from the chequered history of modernity itself.

In twelve incisive chapters, Giulianotti explores social theories ranging from Durkheimian functionalism and Marxism to Foucauldian post-structuralism and the postmodern. The author analyses the work of the founding fathers of sociology – Émile Durkheim, Karl Marx and Max Weber – in relation to sport in the opening three chapters. He also takes into account the theories of latter-day sociologists working in the tradition of these figures, including Talcott Parsons, Theodor Adorno and George Ritzer. Marxist and neo-Marxist ideas of alienation and commodification are used intelligently to analyse capitalism, class domination and the exploitation of athletes and spectators in modern sport.

The fourth chapter advances an interdisciplinary cultural studies approach, which Giulianotti believes to be ‘the most influential theoretical and research paradigm within sport studies’ (75). Cultural studies approaches are heavily influenced by Marxist and neo-Marxist theories and pay substantial attention to the struggle between contending social classes and the making of popular culture. For example, Antonio Gramsci’s concept of hegemony helps to trace the colonial legacy of sports such as cricket and football in the former colonies of the British Empire, including



India. Giulianotti argues that sport was instrumental in reinforcing the hegemony of the British ruling class in the colonies by promoting ‘muscular Christian’ ideologies. However, he also tells us how cricket in the West Indies was used to counter colonial domination because ‘when the all-black West Indian team twice annihilated England 5–0 in test match series (1984 and 1985–6), fans celebrated these victories as “blackwashes” over their old colonial masters’ (84). Resistance is another keyword used in cultural studies approaches to sport, and here the focus is on how subordinated groups engage in cultural practices like sport to challenge their domination by hegemonic groups – for instance, football hooliganism in England can be read as youth ‘resistance’ to growing commercialisation in sports. However, Giulianotti warns us against an uncritical over-application of this concept, which could flatten out the specificities of various counter- and sub-cultural practices.



Image Credit: Opening of the 1968 Summer Olympic Games at the Estadio Olímpico Universitario in Mexico City ([Sergio Rodriguez, Wikipedia Public Domain](#))

Themes from cultural studies approaches have been extended to key areas in the sociology of sport, like race and ethnicity, gender and the body. Sport is one important arena where unequal racial relations are played out, reinforced and challenged as well. John Carlos and Tommie Smith’s Unity salute on the medal podium in the 1968 Olympics evinces relations between the US civil rights movement and sport. Racist and ethnic slurs, stereotyping and exclusion along these lines are still major problems in sport. Similarly, modern sport’s role in promoting, constructing and reproducing dominant heterosexual male identity cannot be overstated. In the heyday of the British Empire, during which the sexist character of sport was created and consolidated, ‘those who shirked sport were presented in highly negative terms, as having a weak moral compass, degenerate physique and effeminate character’ (118)

Giulianotti reminds us that even in the early and mid-twentieth century, within the public domain successful female athletes had to conform to conventional gender norms. The latter decades of the twentieth century saw a significant rise in the number of women athletes. However, the sexual objectification of female athletes by the media is still a major problem. On the other hand, heteronormativity in sport events is resisted by ‘lesbians taking an agency-centered approach towards eroticism’ (126) as during Ladies Professional Golf Association (LPGA) tournaments. Finally, the author analyses homophobia and sex-testing controversies with reference to LGBT cultural politics.

The book is also impressive in its application of post-structural, postmodern and globalisation theories. Michel Foucault is discussed at length to explain the disciplining and regimentation of the body by the knowledge-power

complex with regards to pertinent issues such as pain, injury and doping. The association of postmodern identities with consumption and leisure, instead of production and work, is apt in the context of sport consumption and the identities that such consumption creates. While appraising the relevance of postmodern approaches, the author is rightly critical of their inability to meaningfully respond to social divisions, inequalities and injustices within sport. Furthermore, the politics of global sport reflect the wider inequalities prevalent in global politics in that sport is dominated by a few major players, including corporations, international bodies and global civil society.

For Julianotti, critical sociology has three properties: it should correct errors and misunderstandings; expose inequalities in power relations and social arrangements; and explore alternative social arrangements premised on democracy, inclusion and social justice. He is faithful to his understanding of critical sociology, while presenting a critical sociological analysis of sport. One weakness is that the brevity of some chapters limits the comprehensiveness of the account: for example, the chapter on Norbert Elias's difficult concept of figuration gets rather short shrift in Chapter Nine. Nevertheless, the book is useful not only to those interested in the sociology of sport, but also to students of critical social theory more generally.

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Note: This review gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Review of Books blog, or of the London School of Economics.

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