

**Chapter title:** ‘Something has got to be done about this’: Transforming Sport, Selves, and Scholarship

**Author name(s):** Thomas F. Carter, Mark Doidge, and Daniel Burdsey

School of Sport and Service Management  
University of Brighton  
1 Denton Road  
Eastbourne, BN 20 7SR

**Author ORCID(s):**

Carter: 0000-0002-5752-4396

Doidge: 0000-0002-6858-3914

Burdsey: 0000-0001-5803-8915

**Abstract:**

In this chapter we assert the need for a transformative approach to conducting research on sport. The transformative approach, which we call Critical Proactivism, insists upon the scholar taking an active political stance in conducting research with an explicit purpose for attempting to transform sport and the ways knowledge is produced about sport. We argue in this chapter, and introduce the various ways the contributors to this volume demonstrate, that it is not enough to call for change within sport, but efforts to transform the very power relations and institutional structures of sport.

The sentiment expressed in this chapter's title is one that each of us has felt at various times throughout our careers. While the expression of this reaction may not have been phrased or articulated in that exact manner, each of us, in our way, has sought to do something about a particular problem or situation we encountered in society and sport. Each of us sought not just to change sport but to transform it. We were not the first to feel and express these sentiments and we certainly will not be the last. Yet while many across the spectrum who study sport have felt some aspect of this perspective, at Brighton this sentiment has historically been, and remains, at the *core* of what our scholarship has been about.

Our colleagues Alan Tomlinson and John Sugden reacted to Andrew Jennings keynote address at the 1994 NASSS conference in Savannah, Georgia, by sitting down and deciding that they needed to critically engage FIFA (Sugden and Tomlinson 2017: xx-xxii). This resulted in a twenty-year odyssey with many publications; but what also emerged was an ethos that was subsequently shared by other academics and doctoral students who came to the University of Brighton. They advocated a particular critical, ethical and methodological standpoint towards research rather than a theoretical or disciplinary one. That was what attracted our erstwhile colleagues who have moved on to other pastures and it was what brought the three of us to Brighton. Daniel Burdsey was already engaged in antiracism campaigns in English football before he came to Brighton. Mark Doidge was heavily involved with football supporters' political networks of football supporters across Europe when he arrived. Thomas Carter has always been uneasy with the ready answers that underpin much of the sports world, including much of the scholarship on sport. In short, he was in search of different answers to questions that supposedly had been resolved and his three decades of fieldwork in Cuba reflect that commitment. We all came to Brighton

because it was an environment where unqualified and unquestioned answers were not accepted readily.

While many colleagues have moved on to other ventures around the world, the ethos remains here at Brighton. Doidge and Carter both felt that same need after independent visits to ‘The Jungle’, the refugee camp in Calais, France: ‘something needed to be done’. Doidge acted. His recent efforts on how sport, especially football, can be used to address refugee and migrant issues whilst providing succour to refugees are recent developments of his work (this volume). This resulted from his voluntarism with refugee and migrant groups in Brighton as well as acting as Anti-Discrimination Director of Football Supporters Europe. While Carter did not act on that particular feeling derived from his volunteer work in ‘The Jungle’, his previous work on migrant labour led him to engaging and consulting with international NGOs on child labour embedded in the global political economy of sport. His new work on child labour (this volume) stems from a similar strong sense of an unjustifiable wrong that needs correcting. Burdsey’s longitudinal ethnography of race and racialisation at the English seaside resulted in a monograph (Burdsey 2016), but equally importantly he felt compelled to continue working with marginalised communities in coastal locations and he now chairs the steering group of a refugee and migrant support organisation. Channon’s establishment of *Love Fighting, Hate Violence*, an NGO that promotes anti-violence education through the seemingly contradictory use of mixed martial arts is another example of the ethos that brought a scholar to the University of Brighton. While the faces may change, the ethos underpinning those of us who work at, have worked at, or worked with those of us here at the University of Brighton over the past twenty years remains.

This project and book stem from our common, long-standing recognition that sport does not need to merely change. Sport already is changing. Those changes, however, are internal to the overall structures that govern, control, and shape the knowledges, structures and practices of sport. Those changes do not necessarily address the overarching inequalities, inequities and wrongs embedded in these aspects of sport. Plenty of our colleagues around the world call for changes to be made to sport, call for social justice, or acknowledge that power relations are exploitative (see, for example, Cooky 2017; Field 2015; Field & Kidd 2011; Long, Fletcher, & Watson 2017; Roche 2017). Yet none of these contributions take the further step explicitly advocating for the transformation of sport. They push for change within sport, for social justice and/or public engagement to become a crucial value of many within sporting practices, and the need to shift power relations amongst sport participants. But what is not evident is any undertaking that expressly challenges the ways in which knowledge about sport is produced by institutions and scholars alike. No call for a reorganisation of sporting governance is made nor is there sustained pushes for a revaluation of sporting practices. Some of these changes appear to be occurring organically with the shift from team sports as a principal means to participate in sporting activity to more individualized practices that place less emphasis on group success and competition and put more on experiences and individualistic skill (as a 2016-17 Economic and Social Research Council seminar series hosted by Brighton and two other British universities seems to indicate). The rise of 'lifestyle sport' particularly among younger generations of physical active people are shaping the evolving structures of sport but those changes are not yet transforming sport (Wheaton 2013). Change is happening, but transformation is not so likely. Transformation is a different, albeit related, process.

Transformation requires personal and structural intervention and engagement in the processes of change. Transformation necessitates a degree of reflection and, as Baxter argues (this volume), diffraction. Thus to engage in any sort of transformative act is to undertake a self-aware political act. It also means that we are not just talking about the transformation of sport in this volume but about the transformation of the *scholarship* about sport. When we initiated this project we tasked our contributors to reflect upon the researcher's position in knowledge production, including the research encounter and especially in relation to the researcher's relationship with the dominant institutional regimes of power. In short, to what degree can any researcher get close enough to an organization to critically understand without uncritically reproducing the hegemonic power relations?

In addressing our concerns of familiarity, incorporation and co-optation, we further asked that contributors reflect upon accountability within sport scholarship in terms of both holding institutions of power to account and holding ourselves to account over our own responsibilities in producing knowledge that may or may not transform sport. Underpinning our query is our concern over the degree to which we as scholars should become the watchdog or 'fifth estate' over sport or, more broadly, what the political role of scholars should be or become. We raise these concerns because we recognize that by acting as advocates actively pushing for radical changes to sport we also are arguing for transforming the purpose and role of scholarship.

Consequently, we also asked our contributors to consider various forms of intervention and *whether, when, and how* scholars should intervene. In this respect, we drew upon Ian McDonald's distinction between moralistic versus radical social research in *Power Games*

(2002: 100-116), which has either directly or indirectly informed many of the chapters found in this volume. We are not alone in finding inspiration from McDonald's chapter as Donnelly and Atkinson (2015: 364-365) also make explicit use of this distinction to inform their review and call for greater public sociology of sport (see also Cooky 2017). Several of our contributors (Agergaard, Boykoff, Doidge, Randhawa & Burdsey) directly make use of McDonald's argument for a radical engagement of sport-related research. Yet the extent to which any individual scholar should intervene with an explicit political agenda is one that we cannot resolve here. Our contributors have different implicit and explicit stances on this question, and we are not convinced that there can be any sort of dogmatic resolution to such a concern anymore than there can be a singular unifying theoretical or disciplinary approach to the study of sport.

Lastly, these concerns led us to ask all of our contributors to critically reflect on how knowledge, ideas, and practices across sport, cultures, sectors, and contexts can be usefully translated to augment or encourage transformation. The politics of transformation is always locally embodied and thus whether we are discussing the governance of a global sport or the development of individuals through physical activity, any change that happens occurs within contexts that require transportation and transmutation into other contexts despite any unifying, universal ideology, such as the notion of a singular interconnected global world. How scholarship engages with such transformative processes and how scholars shape their own work in relation to such processes directly informs the kinds of knowledge that they produce. Thus, any potential transformation must be situated in specific sets of power relations.

## **Power, Activism, and Transformation**

Therein lies the rub and the inspiration of our project. In *Transforming Sport*, we reassert Sugden and Tomlinson's call for a critical sociology of sport, but modify that call by arguing for an explicitly political approach in addressing power relations. Central to the critical investigation of sport is the recognition that power is 'a relationship, a dynamic, and that the relationship involves human agents struggling over resources and outcomes' (Sugden and Tomlinson 2002b: 6). Contrast this to the explication of power espoused in Physical Cultural Studies (PCS) in which power sits symbolically at the centre of a concern to understand various forms of oppression in/through/as physical culture that is deployed towards mapping, programming, seriously advocating or realizing progressive social change (Atkinson 2011). Tellingly, human beings are absent from the conceptualization of power in PCS approaches which remain highly theoretical because 'there is little to no consensus as to what PCS actually is', and, consequently, 'there is no consensus as to what constitutes power' either (Atkinson and Gibson 2017: 24). Nonetheless, at the very end of their summative review of the conceptualizations of power and power relations in PCS, Atkinson and Gibson argue that 'conceptually seeing actual persons as producers of authentic, agentic power in physical cultural practice very well may be the most radical PCS idea of all' (ibid.: 30). That hardly seems radical at all. That belated recognition of human beings as producers of power is exactly what Sugden and Tomlinson were reminding sports scholars of in the first instance.

What is radical, as McDonald asserted in *Power Games*, is a politicized application of critical social research – something that appears to be absent from PCS approaches despite its claims to politicization. Research needs to empower subordinate groups or expose dominant relations of power as a form of political intervention (McDonald 2002: 115) but to do that we

need to ‘climb down from the fence to become effective critical sociologists and activists, while at the same making informed, realistic and pragmatic judgments about participation in progressive political and cultural interventions’ (Sugden 2015a: 609). This approach emanates from a growing frustration with sections of the field that make grand theoretical deliberations, which include calls for interventionist approaches, without taking a hands-on approach. Getting ‘dirty’ means not remaining aloof intellectually or physically. Immersing oneself in engaged research of this nature in no way dissolves the critical or skeptical character of the sociology of sport despite some claims to the contrary (Maguire and Young 2002). Rather, we insist that a radical critical sociology of sport should reconfigure sport by intervening against exploitative relations of power. That means a need for being proactive as well as critical.

Critical Proactivism is the conceptual label chosen for the transformative and impact-orientated action-research paradigm that underpins and frames much of the community engagement and professional practice undertaken by researchers and scholars who are or have been members of the University of Brighton’s leading critical socio-cultural research in sport and leisure over the past two decades. First expressed by John Sugden in numerous meetings with us and other colleagues over the years, this label has evolved to indicate the following interconnected methodological concerns (Sugden 2006, 2010, 2015a, 2015b). Firstly, Critical Proactivism entails the mobilisation of a critical sociological imagination in the identification, interpretation and analysis of the most pressing socio-cultural issues, challenges, and bad practices to be found in the world of sport, leisure and related spheres of physical culture. Secondly, it necessitates a dedicated commitment to the challenges in the field. Critical Proactivism is not quick and dirty fieldwork but protracted engagements with the more powerful and seemingly untouchable of sport. Thirdly, a clear ethical and moral



stance towards exploitative, corrupt, and unethical practices fuels any such work. Thus, Critical Proactivism denotes a politically active researcher who is attempting to not only take note of such inequities found in power relations but attempts to do something about them. This conceptual and methodological framing has been termed ‘the Brighton School’ (Blackshaw and Crabbe 2004: 100; McKay 2007), ‘the Brighton Interpretation’ (McFee, this volume) or ‘the Brighton effect’ (Chawansky, Matthews, & Jarvis 2015). Such labels denote ‘the distinctive contributions of Brighton-based researchers’ (Giulianotti 1999: 184) (though we insist that it is more than us based in Brighton, as this volume shows) that comprise unusually ‘strong interdisciplinary and qualitative leanings, drawing on sociology, social history, gender studies, literary studies, philosophy, postcolonial studies, cultural studies, and political science’ (McKay 2007: 205).

The notion of Critical Proactivism builds upon and extends the distinctive conceptual and methodological features originally set out in *Power Games* (Sugden and Tomlinson 2002a). Its evolution from the original methodological expressions found in *Power Games* leads and encourages researchers, scholars and activists to engage with impact-orientated, interventionist approaches that focus on contemporary social and political problems/issues identified in different local, national, and international settings. Then, by gazing through the lens of ‘critical left realism’ (Sugden 2010), those key features of sport can be identified and their progressive qualities and capacities pragmatically harnessed. In this way they can help bring reform and amelioration to such socio-political problems in ways that protect human rights, promote social justice and generally contribute to progressive social change. At the same time, scholars and activists have to be mindful and watchful of those individuals and institutions that threaten and/or violate the principles of human rights and social justice. As ‘a response to some fellow liberal and/or left-leaning academics who, content to stay in their

theoretical and methodological comfort zones, were somewhat sneering of my hands-on efforts to engage in peace-building activities in some of the more controversial conflict zones in the world' (Sugden 2015a: 609), Critical Proactivism characterizes much of the approach at Brighton: the desire to get one's hands dirty with frontline work. Thus, Critical Proactivism encourages the adoption of progressive and cumulative models of research monitoring data collection combined with robust evaluation of interventionist research activities and community engagement programmes.

We contend Critical Proactivism enables a critical social scientific approach to sport that actively seeks to transform the object of our inquiry. As Gouldner (1957: 94) argued, 'Marx is no Faustian, concerned solely with understanding society, but a Promethean who sought to influence and change it'. Social science should be critical and applied – indeed we do not see the distinction. This is not just 'public sociology' (Burawoy 2004) for the sake of it, but an active desire to challenge and change the power structures impacting sport. C. Wright Mills' 'sociological imagination' echoes within these chapters. Mills (1959: 104) argued that American sociology had 'lost its reforming push' and had become tools of the 'corporations, army, and state'. Sport studies, broadly speaking, mirrors Mills' critique in our view. The neoliberalisation of the contemporary university is driving many academics to conform to funding calls with specified policy outcomes, or seeking out corporate investment. This reliance on external funding ensures that no academic can be apolitical. One may be politically apathetic, but an apathetic position is as political as a vociferous anarchistic one. We have to be mindful of a 'growing instrumentalism' (Gouldner 1970: 444) that seeks to neuter critical thinking and approaches that challenge the status quo through the predetermination of what constitutes a 'problem' requiring an immediate solution or impact. The current trend of publishing handbooks and readers, aligned with the quick hit approach to

research that seeks to meet the required number of REF<sup>i</sup> outputs, all promote short-termism, individualism, and uncritical research. Would another longitudinal investigative study such as Sugden and Tomlinson's (1998; 2004; 2017) be undertaken in the current climate? It certainly would not be funded. It is hard to see any research council commissioning such a project.

We certainly acknowledge that increasing managerialism passed off as professional criteria within higher education informs our ways of working. Crucially, power relations within these institutions structure research conducted within them. Not all academics, particularly women, minority ethnic, and less able-bodied individuals, have the same opportunities to resist and follow this critical approach. Yet, it is precisely because of these inequalities, and the lack of critical challenges from hegemonic white male academics that this approach is most needed, as colleagues, Belinda Wheaton, Jayne Caudwell, Gill Lines, and Megan Chawansky among others, rightfully and consistently reminded us and each other whilst they were at Brighton. As such, we as editors are acutely aware of our own positions as scholars: three moderately-aged white men based in England. While our own personal characteristics do not indicate the events of our lives that shape us, as long as we continue to reflect upon our own pathways and acknowledge those events, we do acknowledge that we write from a privileged position, one that is inextricably bound up in power relations.

### **Scholarship, Sport and Transformation**

For the contributors within this volume, all of whom have a connection with the University of Brighton, a critical sociology of sport should try to elicit some form of transformation. We all

know that to generate transformation you have to engage with history, especially your own history, to understand where you are at in the present moment. Several scholars in this volume explicitly do exactly that, taking a critical cognizant look at their own work. Mitra and Chawansky produce a dialogic account of their own views, not just of their work within the international development field, but of their own interpersonal relations, of how those views shaped their knowledge, and how, in working together, their knowledges transformed their very selves and the ways they went about their own work. Sugden's autobiographical account of his earliest work within the Sport for Development and Peace field, before such a thing truly existed, left him with both an epiphany and a clear goal for how sport could be used to transform the world while simultaneously changing sport. Randhawa and Burdsey's contribution similarly examines both their own transformations as activists and scholars and how their work in eradicating racism in British football has, to a greater or lesser extent, effectively transformed the practices of the English governing body of football. Doidge's chapter illuminates how a sociological perspective on football can transform both the sociologist and the people with whom that scholar engages. All of these contributions place their journeys and their personal histories at the core of how transforming sport for other purposes can be an enlightening and valuable endeavour.

These chapters articulate what all the contributors feel: that a moral and ethical stance is required regarding sporting knowledges, structures and practices. In doing so they are directly proactive in their attempts to transform sport. Channon and Matthews outline their *Love Fighting Hate Violence* (LFHV) project: an anti-violence initiative aimed at inspiring reflection and generating pedagogical interventions within martial arts and combat sports. Their goal is to harness the potential of these activities to educate people about violence, specifically with respect to understanding the principles of consent and violation through

what amounts to a violent practice. Their chapter provides a theoretical overview of the project's core philosophy before discussing some of the practical materials already developed for use within LFHV to illustrate the ways in which their interventions have begun. While Channon and Matthews place their intervention in social power relations, Agergaard directly engages power relations of inclusion and representation between the state and minority and migrant populations. In her chapter, she engages the policies and programmes that attempt to promote integration into Danish sports clubs that are hampered by systematic blindness, methodological nationalism, and the territorial limitations of Danish politicians, sportspersons, and scholars alike. She argues that a transformation in approach and perspective is crucial for any such programme to have a chance at success.

Channon and Matthews' and Agergaard's respective interventions are direct attempts to transform how sport is thought about. Their chapters, along with Carter's contribution, ask core questions not just of sport but how we should conceive of human beings themselves. All of the authors in this book are calling for some form of transformation. In some cases, it is not sport itself that is the target of their argument but our own scholarship on sport that requires transformation. The questions we ask, the ways we go about investigating sport, and the kinds of knowledge we produce all require an utter restructuring and reconceptualization. Carter asks the poignant question about how can we knowingly celebrate alongside others the glories of elite sport when those spectacular performances rely on deliberate exclusion of impoverished children from universal notions of humanity. For him, the absence of scholarly critique, much less engagement, with these particular power relations is something that requires a great deal of redress.

The question of distinguishing between the roles of activists, public intellectuals, and scholar-activists is a central concern of this book. McDonald originally envisioned academics and political activists as two separate spheres of activity in which ‘critical social research is concerned with the production of knowledge, while political activism is concerned with securing practical changes’ in which academics could and should ‘get involved in political activism, but as activists’ (2002: 108). However, the contexts in which research and activism are now practiced are such that we strongly feel that this separation of roles is not only untenable but also undesirable, as Carter’s chapter insinuates. Thus, while we embrace much of what McDonald asserted, we, and the contributors to this volume, cannot accept such a distinction between academic and activist roles. Several authors explicitly connect their research with activism in their own praxis. Powis inserts himself in the disconnect between disability sport stakeholders and the Disability Rights Movement by adopting an advocating standpoint that values disabled peoples’ experiences and by conducting research that is of social and political value. His chapter examines the transformative potential of disability sport research and its role in reframing dominant discourses relating to disability identity and engendering broader social change by explicitly moving away from the emancipatory and participatory frameworks posited by disability studies scholars since these do nothing to transform existing power relations. Instead, ‘advocacy’ and ‘voice’ underpin his approach problematizing the ways in which the knowledge of disability is produced.

Talbot similarly inserted himself right in the middle of the struggle between the residents of Vila Autódromo and Mayor’s Office of Rio de Janeiro. Working with residents and the advocates of RioOnWatch, an independent, on-line advocacy group that produces media reports for journalists and other media professionals that attempt to shift national and

international media narratives about the city's favelas, Talbot explores the ways in which the production of knowledge around mega-events plays out in host cities.

Boykoff's work over the last decade has entailed researching and being involved with anti-Olympic activism. In his contribution to this volume, he draws on his own broad oeuvre covering anti-Olympic activists' activities. Acknowledging the critical investigative stance that Sugden and Tomlinson espoused in *Power Games* and their inspiration, C. Wright Mills, Boykoff also notes how the very environment in which we, as scholars, work is also changing. Boykoff and others are transforming the academic milieu through explicitly engaged political positions. Powis, Talbot, and Boykoff are not the only ones, nor are they first to conduct their intellectual endeavours in this manner, but increasingly there are more and more scholars who are taking up such a stance and it is one with which we wholeheartedly concur. The stances undertaken by scholars in this manner are embodied examples of what singular human agents might accomplish in transforming their worlds. The importance of human agency is the central point of McFee's chapter.

What, according to McFee (this volume), has been identified in some circles as 'The Brighton Interpretation' is less a consciously formed group effort dedicated to a singular target and is more repeated instances of individually dedicated academics determined to intervene in some small way in the larger edifice of sport. These individual efforts create a cumulative effect larger than any one public intellectual or scholar activist, thus underlining McFee's point that singular human agents are the crucial element in the production of knowledge about sport, the creation of its overarching structures, and how sport itself is practiced. Just how scholars should address their own approach is the point that Baxter makes in her chapter. She points

out that reflection, and thus self-reflection, is an introspective approach, more concerned with the researcher than the researched. Drawing on her work amongst female rugby union players, boxers and others, she suggests that a diffractive methodology is more pertinent to transforming how we produce knowledge of and about our subjects. To employ a diffractive methodology rather than a reflective one, Baxter argues, shifts the kinds of knowledge being produced because the active intellectual position of the researcher has an outward focus rather inward. The change in focus is one that encourages active engagement with one's surroundings and with Others.

The material aspects of sport are resolutely diminished in most existing social science of sport. The emphatic focus on the meaning, the symbolism and the immaterial when sport relies on the material realities of physicality means we as scholars are not asking the right questions: bodies, equipment, and the material world are the basis for any symbolism, whether those symbols are social categories (humanity, disability, gender, race, and the like) or commodity fetishes (media broadcasts, and sporting goods and equipment). Diffractive methodologies, Baxter suggests, incorporate the materiality of the body as well as its meanings in which the body's substances position and shape the meanings of women's own bodies allowing them to challenge what can be considered to feminine ontologies.

One area ripe for transformation even as it is undergoing significant changes is the sport-media complex. The internet is radically changing the ways in which sporting products are produced, consumed, and disseminated. Yet a critical engagement with the forces of production and consumption is required to nudge these shifting power relations in ways that might transform the very ways in which sport and media conglomerates are structured and the



practices in which they engage. Doyle's chapter chronicles the continuing power struggles over the characterization of the 96 football supporters who were killed unlawfully in the Hillsborough disaster. By examining these power struggles, the need for an activist approach to media production itself and to hold other media corporations to account for their own cozy relations with other institutions becomes apparent. The use of documentary film as a medium for challenging the powerful and revealing the corrupt serves as one example of how activists and academics working together can transform practices and structures. While Doyle's work shows the transformative shift from the pre-digital era to the contemporary era of sport-media production, McEnnis analyzes how the very baseline of journalistic authority is being transformed in the digital, on-line age. As McEnnis notes in his chapter, the very journalistic practices required to cover sporting events are changing, transforming the ways in which sports reportage is produced. But it is not just the production of media coverage that is changing; it is its consumption as well. Lines considers how the shifting dynamics between media production and consumption are blurring due to technological changes, and these are transforming the very power relations between journalists, sport stars, and the public consumer. In particular Lines questions whether the technological changes might be leading to a shift away from patriarchal values historically espoused in sports coverage to other narratives promoting different gendered values. She further explores the ways in which such research might be done, again implying that a diffractive approach rather than an introspective reflective one may produce some new and useful insights by understanding 'how critical pedagogical interventions by educators and coaches can help trainee sports journalists, young sports participants, and athletes interact more judgementally and analytically' (Lines, this volume).

These changes and their potential for transforming sport make us consider whether similar transformations might also be in store for academic practices in terms of the production, dissemination, and consumption of scholarly knowledges as well. Yet, we also recognize that efforts and engendering transformations are long, difficult struggles that are likely to have, at best, limited success. As Tomlinson notes in his chapter, the possibilities of transformational reform are constrained by an ongoing tension in the mores, norms, and values in the modus operandi of international governing bodies, such as FIFA. Even when apparent opportunities arise due to sustained and emboldened critical voices, these transformative moments are often possibilities. Both Tomlinson and Keech examine international bodies going through a period of intense external questioning as to their own *raison d'etat*. Tomlinson's contribution is only the latest chapter in Sugden and Tomlinson's long running critique of FIFA. FIFA's recent crisis and its seemingly missed opportunity for transformation is one specific outcome of institutional introspection, but certainly not the only response. Keech chronicles how the reinvention of the Commonwealth Games due to changing international relations contexts provided the Commonwealth with a new mission amongst the emergent, shifting power relations found in global politics. Here, introspection has led to a related, yet new-found purpose. In both instances, the structures of sport might be transformed but the extent to which the powers that be willingly engage in self-aware transformations or have them foisted upon them is yet another question that critical proactivists can play a significant part in addressing.

### **Transforming the Field: Public sociology and sport sociology**

A clear anxiety exists in much of the discussion about the field of sociology of sport. It is almost *de rigueur* to state that sociology of sport has the twin conflict of asserting itself within the discipline of sociology whilst at the same time commanding respect from within

sport, dominated as it is by positivist approaches within the natural sciences.<sup>ii</sup> Similarly, these academic anxieties and power relations within the study of sport were one of the principal impetuses for the creation of Physical Cultural Studies (PCS) out of kinesiology (Vertinsky and Weedon 2017). Whether one wishes to include PCS in the broader label of ‘sociology of sport’ or not, it is eminently fair to say that after fifty years the sociology of sport has ‘arrived’. Yet academic anxiety is still whispered even as sport sociology’s vibrancy and relevance was celebrated in the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary issue of the *International Review for the Sociology of Sport* (Pike, Jackson & Wenner 2015b). Despite the longstanding history of the sociology of sport (Dunning 2004; Malcolm 2014), there seems to be a Cassandra complex amongst sport-focused social scientists that periodically foretells its imminent demise, particularly within a neoliberal higher education environment. This is exemplified by Silk *et al*’s (2010: 106) exclamation that ‘the very existence of the sociology of sport is imperiled perhaps more than ever at the present time’. Yet, ‘the sociology of sport is by no means the only sub discipline to have been treated contemptuously by the self-appointed guardians of what is deemed to be worthy of academic attention’ (Bairner 2012: 106). Indeed, such anxiety and doubt is not restricted to sub disciplines: sociology, among other social sciences, has a similar introspective complex (Cole 2001; Twamley et al. 2015) fuelled by the neoliberalization of higher education that demands that research is ‘impactful’ and can be ‘measured’ by quantitative standards, and broader right-wing critiques of the aims and methods of the discipline.

These assessments are implicitly and inherently political. They are invariably undertaken by white men from North America and Britain (like us) who sit from academic seats ‘on high’ in well regarded departments and often prestigious universities. These critiques all outline an approach that claims to be the ‘right way’ of doing sociology of sport; and they assert that

they speak for all of sociology of sport regardless of demographic, geographic, or disciplinary background. Many of these state-of-the-field assessments are written by people central to the discipline's history, and 'these commentaries are not simply culturally neutral, "factual", recordings of history, but also "political" texts' (Malcolm 2014: 4). In this sense that they are necessarily selective; these declarative assertions regarding the state of the field reveal particular interests, biases and motives. While not in and of themselves a bad thing, the unacknowledged position of the authors making such assertions does obscure the power relations of knowledge production that we seek to make more explicit. Clearly, we are positioned similarly in this regard, as we write this in a book advocating a certain set of academic practices and research approaches. Not only are we continuing the trope, we are outlining and advocating a particular 'political' approach. However, we are not asserting that there is only one 'true' way to undertake critical social scientific research in sport. We would contend that a diversity of theoretical, methodological and political approaches is the best way to undertake research. We contend that social scientific research into sport should be multidisciplinary, mixed methods and overarchingly critical. Moreover, and most importantly, we argue that, now, in the current academic, social, and political environments in which sport studies scholars work, it is time to move past description of conditions, or calling for change to actively work towards transforming sport. We are advocating taking an open, explicit political stance.

What characterises many of these state-of-the-field assessments is the theoretical frame that is taken (Malcolm 2014). Whatever that theoretical frame -- figurational, neoliberal, Marxist, or other -- to shape one's activity based on a predetermined explanatory framework, for that is what theory essentially is, limits the possibilities of transformation. If one already knows certain kinds of relations because of these explanatory frameworks, then the kinds of

resolutions that can be imagined will also be circumscribed. In contrast, and to reassert our point, *Power Games* (Sugden and Tomlinson 2002a) essentially advocated a specific yet broad methodological approach that was not beholden to any particular paradigm or discipline. What McKay highlighted as the ‘Brighton School’ was actually a group of scholars who shared ‘strong interdisciplinary and qualitative leanings, drawing on sociology, social history, gender studies, literary studies, philosophy, postcolonial studies, cultural studies, and political science’ (2007: 205). What unites us is a critical attitude with social justice at its heart. This approach is can be outlined in this six-point approach: historiography; comparative method; critical sociology; ethnography; investigative research; and gonzo. In practice, these are simultaneous interrelated elements of a research process, orchestrated and conducted from the centre by the researcher’ (Sugden and Tomlinson 2002b: 10). This is outlined in more detail in *Power Games*, but to reiterate, our approach is grounded historically. To return to the sociological imagination, ‘no social study that does not come back to the problems of biography, of history, and of their intersections within a society, has completed its intellectual journey’ (Mills, 1959: 12). Providing the historical comparative, as well as comparative methods, ensures we can turn our critical gaze and learn more about ourselves by learning about the other. Being critical, as outlined earlier, ensures that we locate our own position in the field and also helps to locate the power dynamics. Much of what we advocate and do mirrors ethnographic research.

Ethnography, on the other hand, covers a spectrum of methods irrespective of the discipline in which it is situated. And while ethnography can be used as a form of critical proactivism, it is not the only methodology that might be employed. ‘By its very nature, ethnography challenges forms of “expertise” precisely because “expert knowledges” close down questioning and erase other possibilities. Ethnographic inquiry repeatedly demonstrates that

the “facts” or “data” are not waiting to be discovered and recorded’ (Carter, in press). It is all about getting one’s hands dirty and spending extended periods in the field. Ethnography hones the researcher’s critical gaze, whilst also refines the research questions and enhances interpretation. It also develops the partnerships and networks that build trust and facilitate the co-construction of knowledge between researcher and participants, helping to keep their voice central in the research (Doidge, Powis, Talbot, all this volume). In so doing, the researcher seeks to understand the participants and the meanings they attribute to social events. Such forms of research are inherently political and embedded in power relations. We learn to appreciate the impact of power relations and devise strategies to challenge them.

Fundamentally, the heart of our approach is to engage in work that seeks to understand, critique and attempt to transform the world of sport. We are not placing activism above understanding but rather are insisting that activism is crucial to greater forms of knowledge. Dunning (2004: 8) suggested, as a criticism, that ‘some people in the field are coming increasingly to place the need for action above, rather than together with, the need for understanding’. Yet we argue that simply understanding what is occurring sport is equally insufficient. To paraphrase Marx (1970), the point is not to simply understand the world; the point is to transform it.

Academic knowledge is not grand theorising or abstracted empiricism, but an active engagement in trying to change the world. To do that, one has to engage in power relations and this returns us to the manifesto laid out in *Power Games*. A critical social scientific approach should seek to expose, challenge and attempt to change the relations of power. Our privileged position requires it. The role of the intellectual is to ‘uncover the contest, to

challenge and defeat both an imposed silence and the normalized quiet of unseen power’  
(Said 2001: 6). Within the world of sport:

One of the most important roles of the public intellectual in sport is the capacity to see above and beyond existing debates, to get off the tramlines of discussion, perhaps to rock the boat but certainly provide a level of independence that think-tanks cannot often provide because of funding constraints (Jarvie 2007: 422).

Just as Sugden (2015a) argues, we should get off the fence. We have to choose sides. All of us do, either explicitly or implicitly. So many scholars implicitly choose the side that maintains the status quo, which maintains the existing power relations found within sport. Some resign themselves to this reality as research funding is paramount to one’s academic career. Others actively work to maintain the status quo. Some of us think there is a limit to what an academic can achieve. Others of us are not so willing to accept preconceived limits as to what can be accomplished. We, however, while acknowledging the realities of academic careers and life, do not readily accept those barriers as limitations. We advocate for an active agenda dedicated to transforming sport by engaging with the public. Through such engagements we can bridge the traditional intellectuals of the academy, with the organic intellectuals in the wider public. Bruce Kidd’s long career as athlete, activist, and academic serves as an inspirational example (Booth 2015). Through such engagements we can bridge the perceived gulf between academic intellectuals and organic intellectuals who more openly and readily take up explicit political positions (Bairner 2009; Long et al 2017a).

There is an increasing awareness and interest in engaging in public engagement in sport. For example, the theme for the 2016 NASSS conference was ‘Publicly Engaged Sociology of Sport’ (Cooky 2017). Much of this derives from Michael Burawoy’s impassioned call for ‘public sociology’. He argues that we should ‘wade forth into society, armed with our Sociological expertise’ (Burawoy 2004: 1606). This reflected the anxiety of sociologists over the relevance of their discipline and was about asserting ourselves with policymakers and the public. We can trace a thread to Burawoy (2004) beginning with Mills (1959), though to Becker (1967) and Gouldner (1968; 1970; 1973), whilst including feminist and Civil Rights calls for ‘making the personal political’. These ideas are not new, yet fifty years on we still feel the need to remind ourselves, perhaps because we are still insufficiently confident of our own position, if not right, to intervene (Cooky 2017). This anxiety is replicated within the sub-discipline, as Donnelly *et al* (2014: 11) state:

the work of sociologists of sport, if it is to have a future, should be practical, should be *public*, and should be ready to make a difference. We need to ask ourselves if our research questions, and those of our students, are relevant in terms of problems of the day and of the future.

Whilst we can seek to champion our disciplines and sub-disciplines, such actions essentially come down to a specific way of positioning and producing academic knowledge. Ultimately, sport is an important site for political activism. Despite the anxiety over the institutionalisation of sociology of sport, we should not forget the influence that Harry Edwards (1969) had during the 1968 Summer Olympics. Edwards’ efforts make it clear that we should not discount the impact our work can have on challenging the power relations and



their various discriminations and inequalities they produce within sport. By extension, our efforts also can influence the world outside of sport. 'To ignore the capacity of sport to assist with social change is not an option, particularly for students, teachers and researchers of sport, all of whom have the capacity and the platform to act as public intellectuals' (Jarvie 2007: 422).

Sport is not some hermetically sealed entity sitting outside society. Neither is academia. Transforming sport has the potential ability to catalyse larger societal changes. Sport influences and is influenced by the social world around it. Academia exists in the same structural relation to the rest of the world. The potential of each separately or both together lies not in particular political economic forms, for these are unequivocally embedded in uneven power relations in which some will get more than others. The possibility, however remote, that we can address those relations makes it a moral imperative that we at the very least try to transform our worlds, our sport, and our selves. Sport's transformative capacity must not be overstated; it is limited, but then, so are we. Possibilities do exist to provide some resources of hope within a world that is left wanting on many fronts.

### **Notes:**

<sup>1</sup> The REF (Research Excellence Framework) is a periodic assessment exercise in the UK that seeks to evaluate the quality of each institution's research output in order to assign central government funding.

<sup>2</sup> See Atkinson 2011; Bairner 2009, 2012; Bourdieu 1988; Carrington 2013, 2015; Dart 2014; Donnelly 2015; Dunning 2004; Ingham and Donnelly 1990; 1997; Malcolm 2014; Pike, Jackson, and Wenner 2015a; Silk, Bush, and Andrews 2010; Silk and Andrews 2011 and many others.

## References

- Atkinson, M. (2011) 'Physical cultural studies (Redux)', *Sociology of Sport Journal*, 28, 1: 135-144.
- Atkinson, M., & Gibson, K. (2017) 'Power and Power Relations' in Silk, M.L., Andrews, D.L., & Thorpe, H. (eds.). *Routledge Handbook of Physical Cultural Studies*. London: Routledge, pp. 24-31.
- Bairner, A. (2009) 'Sport, intellectuals and public sociology', *International Review for the Sociology of Sport*, 44, 2: 115-130.
- Bairner, A. (2012) 'For a Sociology of Sport', *Sociology of Sport Journal*, 29: 102-117.
- Becker, H. (1967) 'Whose side are we on?', *Social Problems*, 14, 3: 239-247.
- Bourdieu, P. (1988) 'Program for a sociology of sport' *Sociology of Sport Journal*, 5: 153-161.
- Booth, D. (2015) 'Bruce Kidd, Sport History and Social Emancipation' in Field, R. (ed.) *Playing for Change: The Continuing Struggle for Sport and Recreation*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, pp. 407-436.
- Burawoy, M. (2004) 'Public Sociologies: Contradictions, Dilemmas, and Possibilities', *Social Forces*, 82, 4: 1603-1618.
- Burdsey, D. (2016) *Race, Place and the Seaside: Postcards from the Edge* Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Carrington B. (2013) 'The critical sociology of race and sport: The first fifty years', *Annual Review of Sociology* 39: 379-398.
- Carrington, B. (2015) 'Assessing the sociology of sport: On race and diaspora', *International Review for the Sociology of Sport* 50, 4-5: 391-396.
- Carter, T.F. (in press) 'Disciplinary (Per)Mutations of Ethnography', *Cultural Studies ↔ Critical Methodologies*.

- Chawansky, M., Matthews, C.R., & Jarvis, N. (2015) 'The Personal and the Political in Teaching, Research and Activism', *Journal of Sport Science and Physical Education*, 68: 27-31.
- Cole, S. (ed.), *What's Wrong with Sociology?* New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers.
- Cooky, C. (2017) "'We cannot stand idly by": a necessary call for a public sociology of sport', *Sociology of Sport Journal*, 34, 1: 1-11.
- Dart, J. (2014) 'Sports review: A content analysis of the *International Review for the Sociology of Sport*, the *Journal of Sport and Social Issues* and the *Sociology of Sport Journal* across 25 years', *International Review for the Sociology of Sport*, 49, 6: 645-668.
- Donnelly, P. (2015) 'Assessing the sociology of sport: On public sociology and research that makes a difference', *International Review for the Sociology of Sport*, 50, 4-5: 419-423.
- Donnelly, P., & Atkinson, M. (2015) 'Where history meets biography: Towards a public sociology of sport', in Field, R. (ed.) *Playing for Change: The Continuing Struggle for Sport and Recreation*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, pp. 363-388.
- Donnelly, P., Braga, A., & Aisenstein, A. (2014) 'For a public sociology of sport in the Americas: An editorial call on behalf of a socially engaged scholarship on sport and physical education', *Movimento*, 20: 9-20.
- Dunning, E. (2004) 'Sociology of sport in the balance: Critical reflections on some recent and more enduring trends', *Sport in Society*, 7, 1: 1-24
- Edwards, H. (1969) *The Revolt of the Black Athlete* New York: Free Press.
- Field, R. (ed.) (2015) *Playing for Change: The Continuing Struggle for Sport and Recreation*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Field, R. & Kidd, B. (eds.) (2011) *Forty Years of Sport and Social Change, 1968-2008*. New York: Routledge.

- Giulianotti, R. (1999) *Football: A Sociology of the Global Game*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Gouldner, A. (1957) 'Theoretical Requirements for the Applied Social Sciences', *American Sociological Review*, 22, 1: 92-102.
- (1968) 'The sociologist as partisan: sociology and the welfare state', *American Sociologist*, 3, 2: 103-116.
- (1970) *The Coming Crisis of Western Sociology* New York and London: Basic Books.
- (1973) *For Sociology. Renewal and Critique in Sociology Today* London: Allen Lane.
- Ingham, A. & Donnelly, P. (1990) 'Whose knowledge counts?: The production of knowledge and issues of application in the sociology of sport', *Sociology of Sport Journal*, 7, 1: 58-65.
- (1997) 'A sociology of North American sociology of sport: Disunity in unity', *Sociology of Sport Journal*, 14, 4: 362-418.
- Jarvie, G. (2007) 'Sport, Social Change and the Public Intellectual', *International Review for the Sociology of Sport*, 42, 4: 411-424.
- Long, J., Fletcher, T. & Watson, B. (2017a) 'Introducing sport, leisure and social justice' in Long, J., Fletcher, T. & Watson, B (eds.) *op cit*.
- (eds.) (2017b) *Sport, Leisure and Social Justice* Abingdon: Routledge.
- Maguire, J. & Young, K. (2002) Introduction' in Maguire, J, & Young, K. (eds). *Theory, Sport, and Society*. Amsterdam: JAI, pp. 1-22).
- Malcolm, D. (2014) 'The social construction of the sociology of sport: A professional project', *International Review for the Sociology of Sport*, 49, 1: 3-21.
- Marx, K. (1970) *The German Ideology* London: Lawrence and Wishart.
- McDonald I. (2002) 'Critical social research and political intervention: Moralistic versus radical approaches' in: Sugden J. & Tomlinson A. (Eds.) *Power Games. A Critical Sociology of Sport* London: Routledge, pp. 100-116.

- McKay, Jim 2007 “The Sociological Imagination in Practice at Brighton” *Journal of Sport & Social Issues* 31(3): 205-207
- Mills, C.W. (1959) *The Sociological Imagination* Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Pike, E.J., Jackson, S.J., & Wenner, L.A. (2015a) ‘Assessing the sociology of sport: On the trajectory, challenges, and future of the field’, *International Review for the Sociology of Sport*, 50, 4-5: 357-362.
- (eds.) (2015b) *Assessing the Trajectory and Challenges of the Sociology of Sport*. *International Review of the Sociology of Sport*, 50, 4-5.
- Roche, M. (2017) *Mega-Events and Social Change*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Said, E. (2001) ‘The Case for the Intellectual’, *The Age*, May, pp. 5–12.
- Silk, M. & Andrews, D. (2011) ‘Towards a physical cultural studies’, *Sociology of Sport Journal*, 28, 1: 4-35.
- Silk, M., Bush, A. & Andrews, D. (2010) ‘Contingent intellectual amateurism, or, the problem with evidence-based research’, *Journal of Sport & Social Issues*, 34, 1: 105-128.
- Sugden, J. (2006) ‘Teaching and Playing Sport for Conflict Resolution and Co-existence in Israel’, *International Review for the Sociology of Sport*, 41, 2: 221-240.
- (2010) ‘Critical left realism and sport interventions in divided societies’. *International Review for the Sociology of Sport*, 45, 3: 258-272.
- (2015a) ‘Assessing the sociology of sport: On the capacities and limits of using sport to promote social change’, *International Review for the Sociology of Sport* 50, 4-5: 606-611.
- (2015b) ‘Beyond Power Games: Critical Pro-Activism in Sport and Leisure Studies, The Brighton Approach’, *Journal of Sport Science and Physical Education*, 68: 11-12.

- Sugden, J. & Tomlinson, A. (1998) *FIFA and the Contest for World Football* London: Polity Press.
- Sugden, J. & Tomlinson, A. (2002a) *Power Games: A Critical Sociology of Sport* London: Routledge.
- (2002b) 'Critical sociology of sport: Theory and method' in Sugden, J., & Tomlinson, A. (eds.) *Power Games: A Critical Sociology of Sport*. London: Routledge, pp. 3-21.
- (2004) *Badfellas: FIFA Family at War* London: Mainstream Publishing.
- (2017) *Football, Corruption and Lies: Revisiting 'Badfellas', the book FIFA tried to ban* London: Routledge.
- Twamley, K., Doidge, M. & Scott, A. (eds.) (2015) *Sociologists' Tales*. Bristol: Policy Press.
- Vertinsky, P. & Weedon, G. (2017) 'Historicizing Physical Cultural Studies' in Silk, M.L., Andrews, D.L., & Thorpe, H. (eds.). *Routledge Handbook of Physical Cultural Studies*. London: Routledge, pp. 15-23.
- Wheaton, B. (2013) *The Cultural Politics of Lifestyle Sport*. London: Routledge.

---

<sup>i</sup> The REF (Research Excellence Framework) is a periodic assessment exercise in the UK that seeks to evaluate the quality of each institution's research output in order to assign central government funding.

<sup>ii</sup> See Atkinson 2011; Bairner 2009, 2012; Bourdieu 1988; Carrington 2013, 2015; Dart 2014; Donnelly 2015; Dunning 2004; Ingham and Donnelly 1990; 1997; Malcolm 2014; Pike, Jackson, and Wenner 2015a; Silk, Bush, and Andrews 2010; Silk and Andrews 2011 and many others.