Race relations, sociology of sport and the new politics of race and racism

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This paper provides a review of some of the main currents of sociological thought which have informed a body of research in the area of sport and racism. It considers some of the main popular arguments about sport in discussions of race relations, black identity, and black feminism and argues against the notion of any one body of thought being viewed as a form of universalism. The examples that people use may change but the underlying processes and social and political problems reflect not just traditions of social thought but also many voices of anger and frustration in a world that is left wanting on so many fronts. The paper is critical of European intellectual constructions of racism which have often been applied in a devastating manner in the field of sport and leisure.

Popular opinions and sociological arguments

If popular arguments about racism and racial differences have contributed to a number of racist beliefs about different people's sporting abilities, so too have a number of popular arguments contributed to particular explanations of race relations within the sociology of sport. Common arguments have often suggested that sport itself: (i) is inherently conservative and helps to consolidate patriotism, nationalism and racism; (ii) has some inherent property that makes it a possible instrument of integration and harmonious race relations; (iii) as a form of cultural politics, has been central to the process of colonialism and imperialism in different parts of the world; (iv) has contributed to unique political struggles which have involved black and ethnic political mobilization and the struggle for equality for black peoples and other ethnic minority groups; (v) has produced stereotypes, prejudices and myths about ethnic minority groups which have contributed to both discrimination against and an under-representation of ethnic minority peoples within certain sports; and (vi) is a vehicle for displays of prowess, masculinity and forms of identity, many of which are racist in orientation.

To such popular arguments might be added a number of sociological and political arguments which have been rooted within particular traditions of social, cultural and political thought. Such explanations have contributed to a broader understanding of sport and racism in at least three ways. They have: (i) researched racism and the politics of exclusion from sport; (ii) highlighted how institutional racism occurs through sport and (iii) deconstructed the theory and practice of many mythical equal opportunity policies which have operated for and against many black (the term used in this

particular special issue) sporting men and women. What follows is but a short review of selected bodies of thought which have intervened in the sociology of sport arena.

An emerging sociology of race relations

As a field of social scientific inquiry and research much of the early sociology of race relations originated in the work of American social theorists (Wieviorka, 1995). Between 1920 and 1960 American studies of race concentrated upon the analysis of the social and economic inequalities suffered by blacks, their cultural and psychological make up, family relations and political isolation. Following the work of Park, the dominant assumption seemed to be that race relations were types of social relations between different peoples (Park, 1950). In this early classical tradition one of the main features of such relations was a consciousness of racial difference. Functionalist theories assumed that an eventual assimilation of racially defined minorities into the stratification system of the majority host society would occur over time. Any conflict that might have emerged from insider and outsider relations was viewed as but a latent function which would lead ultimately to social equilibrium. Racial prejudice and discrimination were seen as temporal phenomenon during a period of readjustment. Ethnic minority groups were encouraged to abandon their own culture and way of life for that of the host culture. In the work of Park a cycle of assimilation consisted of four stages, namely contact, conflict, accommodation and assimilation.

In 1940s Britain the emerging field of, what was called at the time, 'race studies' was dominated by two main themes. The first of these was the issue of coloured immigrants and the racist reaction to them by white Britons. Most studies of this period concentrated on the interaction between specific groups of coloured immigrants and whites in local situations (Solomos, 1989). A second theme was the role played by colonial history and imperialism in determining popular conceptions of colour and race. By 1948 early Marxist theories of race had proposed that racism was but a ruling class ideology which developed under capitalism in order to divide – and hence control – Black and White workers who shared a common and fundamental class identity (Cox, 1948).

By 1948 apartheid had also emerged in South Africa. In much the same way early Marxist accounts of South African race relations tended to argue that concepts such as race and class had a greater salience *vis-à-vis* other structural principles. In the South African context race was viewed as class and class as race. Such arguments were criticized as being historically inaccurate, generalist, deterministic, and irredeemably functionalist.

In South African race relations the main critique of early Marxist writings was embodied in pluralism and in particular the work of Van den Berghe (1969). A dominant theme within this work was that social class in the Marxian sense of the relationship to the means of production was not a meaningful reality under apartheid since colour, rather than ownership of

land or capital, was the most important criterion of status. Under apartheid white academic pluralist analyses of South Africa were essentially polarized around several broad themes. As a society it was seen as: (i) divided through the process of apartheid and segmentation into corporate groups, often within different cultures; (ii) having a social structure compartmentalized into analogous, parallel, noncomplementary and distinguishable sets of institutions; (iii) having a motor of development which was seen to be a form of ethnological determinism in which institutions were autonomous in relation to one another and functioning according to their own inner logic; and (iv) a unique social formation polarized into two components: a capitalist economic system which was harmonious, just and functional, and a system of racial, political domination which was viewed as being dysfunctional.

When sport was viewed from this pluralist perspective it was seen to be functionally supportive of and integral to a multi-racial South African society in which a plurality of groups competed within the framework of apartheid. A core part of the pluralist thesis on sport under apartheid was that South Africa was the recipient of more domestic and international pressure than any other nation, at the time, because its case was deemed not just to be unjust and racist but also to be ideological. The political ideology of apartheid mediated sporting participation and provision in South Africa (Jarvie, 1985). The argument, put simply, was that sport, while having a degree of relative autonomy, was best explained in terms of racial segregation and racial discrimination. For pluralist writers on South African sport, sporting freedom and the dismantling of apartheid would be brought about through external pressures being brought to bear on South Africa. Such pressures themselves were viewed as being functional.

Other attempts were made during the 1960s and 1970s to develop a generalized sociological framework for the analysis of race, racism and race relations (Cashmore, 1996). A more sophisticated approach, built upon Weberian premises, was most clearly illustrated in the work of John Rex (Rex, 1983). What Rex called race relations situations involving a particular type of inter-group conflict resulted in racially categorized groups being distinctively located within an overall system of social stratification. In Britain, Rex used this framework to analyse differences in Black and White life-chances and concluded that race and racial discrimination resulted in Blacks being located at the bottom of and outside the main white class structure. Insofar as this created a distinctive form of consciousness and political action, then the process of forging a black underclass was seen to be in the making.

Neo-Marxist and Post-Marxist traditions

A considerable number of Neo-Marxist and Post-Marxist approaches have subsequently been developed. Some have looked to provide less deterministic accounts of the relationship between race, class and capitalism (Robinson, 1981). At least three concerns are flushed out in the work of such writers as William Dubois, C.L.R James, Richard Wright, Angela Davis and many other

black radical writers: (i) that the whole basis of Marxism as a Western construction is a conceptualization of human affairs and human development which has been drawn from the experiences of European peoples and, as such, loses much of its explanatory power when faced with non-western evidence; (ii) that Marxism failed to consider or question the existence of modern slavery or specific forms of exploitation born out of, for example, black poverty in America or black reserve armies of labour in numerous social formations; and (iii) that Marxism paid little attention to the way in which racism mediated the organization of labour. They also argued that racism itself was not considered as an expression of alienation, or the specific contribution to revolutionary or reformist change born out of the struggle of, for example, African peoples (Jarvie and Maguire, 1994).

The 'Black Power' demonstrations by American athletes at the 1968 Mexico Olympic Games were explained in the following terms:

> For years we have participated in the Olympic Games carrying the USA on our backs with our victories and race relations are worse than ever. We are not trying to lose the Olympics for America, what happens is immaterial. But it is time for the black people of the world to stand up as men and women and refuse to be utilised as performance animals in return for a little extra dog food (New York Times, 12 May 1968, p. 3).

Certainly some or all of the following questions were central to developing a political economy of black sport: How has wealth been produced from the exploitation of the black athlete ? How have black sporting struggles affected the emancipation of black people? In the land of the free (USA) it was not until 1932 that Tydie Pickett and Louise Stokes became the first African-American women to participate in the Olympic Games. Who profits from the play and display of black athletic talent? How are black people represented within positions of power and influence in the world of sport or leisure? To what extent are terms such as alienation, racial capitalism, imperialism and colonialism useful in explaining the development of black sporting experiences?

Of the black Marxist/black radical writers who have commented upon sport, pride of place belonged to C.L.R James. *Beyond a Boundary* remains a classic statement on the relationship between cricket and Caribbean society during the 1950s and early 1960s (James, 1963). It recognized that an almost fanatical obsession with organized games was not merely an innocent social activity but also a potential signifier of oppression and liberation. It provided a statement about not only an expanded conception of humanity but also the necessity to break-out from the colonial legacy which had affected the development of the West Indies. In placing cricket centre stage, James attempted to transcend the division between high and popular art. The cricketer, in the 1960s, was seen as a modern expression of an individual personality pushing against the limits imposed upon his or her full development by society (class/colonial/nationhood/periphery). Non-white cricket came first to challenge then to overthrow the domination of West Indian cricket by members of the white plantocracy. By the 1980s some writers had

argued that the transformation of West Indian cricket had come full circle from being a symbol of cultural imperialism to being a symbol of Creole nationalism (Burton, 1991).

Black feminism, identity politics and sport

Sojourner Truth's famous question 'Ain't I a woman?' was a question that was asked in the middle of the nineteenth century and yet it remained a pertinent question that might be asked of many feminist writings on sport and leisure. There is simply no black feminist intervention on sport or leisure equivalent to that made by C.L.R. James in *Beyond a Boundary* and yet black feminist thought has yielded a radical critique of both the sociology of sport and white European feminism (Mathewson, 1996; Plowden, 1995). The existence of athletes such as Anna Quirot, Esther Kiplagat, Lydia Cheromei, Derartu Tulu, Merlynne Ottey, Phyllis Watt, Jennifer Stoute and Hassiba Boulmerka could help to open up the history and experiences of black women athletes in Cuba, Kenya, Ethiopia, Jamaica, Great Britain and Algeria. Such case studies would be capable of opening up a broader understanding of both identity politics and the role of sport in black communities.

For example, the case of Hassiba Boulmerka may be illustrative of a much loved Arab, African sporting women forced at a particular moment in her athletic career to leave Algeria for France in order to escape a backlash from Islamicists and Muslim zealots (*The Independent*, 12 August 1991). Winner of the women's 1500 metres final at the World athletic championships in 1991, Boulmerka became the first Algerian, the first Arab and the first African woman to win any gold medal at any World athletic championships. On her return to Algeria the then President Chadli Benjedid greeted her as a national heroine. But Muslim zealots denounced her from the pulpit for baring her most intimate parts (her legs) before millions of television viewers. Furthermore, President Benjedid was himself publicly denounced for embracing a woman in public. The row underscored the clash between modernity and Islamic traditionalism, the fastest growing social and political force in Algeria. This clash was all the more surprising given Algeria's position in the Arab world as the torchbearer of modernism, socialism, and struggle for independence from colonial rule.

Women were emancipated early in Algeria's national struggle. They were obliged to carry out many tasks their husbands were unable to fulfil because they were dead, imprisoned or fighting against France. Since then, however, the progress made by Algerian women has been under threat. There have been only two women ministers in the government and parliament has refused to pass a law to end the traditional practice of men voting by proxy for their womenfolk. Women make up less than a fifth of the paid workforce (800 000 in a population of 25 million). Hassiba Boulmerka moved to France and the Islamicists lost an opportunity to promote national unity in Algeria. If ever there was a modern popular figure in Algeria – one who had taken on the world and won – it was Hassiba Boulmerka.

All subjugated knowledges, such as Black women's sporting history and biography, develop in cultural contexts. Dominant groups often aim to replace subjugated knowledge with their own specialized thought because they realize that gaining control over this dimension of subordinate groups' lives simplifies control (Hill-Collins, 1990).While efforts to influence this dimension of oppressed groups' experiences can be partially successful, this level is more difficult to control than dominant groups would have us believe. For example, adhering to externally derived standards of beauty leads many African-American women to dislike their skin colour or hair texture. Similarly, internalizing Eurocentric gender ideology leads some Black men to abuse Black women. These examples may be seen as a successful infusion of a dominant group's specialized thought into the everyday cultural context of African Americans. But the long-standing existence of a Black women's blues tradition and the voices of contemporary African-American women writers all attest to the difficulty of eliminating cultural contexts as fundamental sites of resistance.

Certainly a resurgence of black feminist writings on sport would help to challenge Eurocentric, masculinist and feminist thought which has at times pervaded the sociology of sport. Empowerment in sport has often meant black woman rejecting existing personal, cultural and institutional structures which have historically supported racism. The practice of black feminist thought during the late 1980s and early 1990s necessitated an understanding between personal sporting biography and the history of sporting relations in various countries. Many of the personal troubles which black sportswomen in Britain, America and Africa experienced were in fact related to broader structural dynamics and meanings such as those that have been articulated through racism. Angela Davis was more forceful on this issue when she argued that there is something in the nature of racism's role in society that permits those who have come through the ranks of struggles against racism to have a clearer comprehension of the totality of oppression (Davis, 1989). The analogy is that white women must learn to acknowledge this as a potential starting point for understanding not only black women's experiences of sport and leisure but also oppression in general.

Established-outsider relations

One of the most sophisticated approaches to the study of race relations is to be found in work emanating from the sociology of Norbert Elias (Elias and Scotson, 1965). At least two key principles dominated the sociological thought of Norbert Elias. First, he was concerned to understand the process of 'civilisation' which he defined as a process whereby external restraints on behaviour are replaced by internal moral regulation. Second, he criticized functionalism and structuralism for their tendency to reify social processes, and argued instead for a figurational or processual approach to sociology, that is a conceptualization and testing of the constant and endless processual flux of all social relationships. With specific reference to the field of race relations it is the notion of established and outsider relations which is most

pertinent to the discussion at hand (Elias and Scotson, 1965). Drawing on Elias, Mennell raises the issue of the very terms race or ethnic relations perhaps being symptomatic of an action in ideological avoidance (Mennell, 1992). Their use serves to single out for attention peripheral aspects of these specific relations and fails to recognize or avoid that which is central to an adequate understanding of race relations. That is, that such race relations are simply established-outsider relations of a particular type which are, in part, characterized by differential power chances and the exclusion of a less powerful group from positions with a higher power potential.

Racial, gender and class bonds of interdependence may in fact be relatively determining, yet the degree of determination is flexible and specific to any particular form of development. The complex interaction of race and class dynamics in South Africa has often concealed other multifaceted forms of bonding not least of which have been religious and national lines of inter-dependence between different groups of people. The notion of established-outsider theory of race relations shows how the relations between different racial groups can be studied in the same way as relations between many other groups with unequal power chances. Thus, the main weight of any explanation of racial inequality, like any other social inequality, must rest on how groups come to impinge upon each other. Elias's theory of established-outsider relations has recently been utilized, for example, in laying the foundation of a figurational-processual sociological understanding of the part played by sport in the development of race relations in the United States of America (Dunning, 1996). Such an analysis has involved (i) the con-ceptualization of race relations as involving fundamentally a question of power and (ii) an exploration of the social conditions under which sporting prowess can become an embodied power resource, part of a habitus which has been used to offset disadvantages of racial inequality.

A new politics of race and racism: a black critique

Mention must also be made of what came to be termed in the early 1990s as the new politics of 'race' and 'racism'. Underlying the new politics of 'race' and 'racism' is a deep ambivalence amongst certain groups of social and political activists about the traditional categories that have been used to defend racist practices and policy. These identifications, it has been suggested, have been grounded in the superiority of whites, Eurocentric discourses, and the politics of otherness (Gilroy, 1995; Giroux and McLaren, 1994). Within this genre of writing, the relationship between identity and being 'black' is neither fixed nor secure in the sense that people take on different changing identities and points of reference. It is an approach which challenges 'whiteness' as the universal norm. At stake here is the attempt to create a different kind of vocabulary for representing 'racism', 'race' and border relations. Central to this approach is the recognition that central issues such as 'race', 'ethnicity', and 'black' should always appear historically in articulation with other categories and divisions such as class and gender.

Dyson has suggested that, while the physical prowess of the black body has in the 1990s been acknowledged and exploited as a fertile zone of profit within mainstream American athletic society, the symbolic dangers of black sporting excellence also need to be highlighted (Dyson, 1994). Because of its marginalized status within the overall sphere of American sports, black athletic activity, argues Dyson, has often acquired a social significance that transcends the internal dimensions of the game, sport and skill. Black sport becomes an arena for testing the limits of physical endurance and forms of athletic excellence, while at the same time repudiating or symbolizing the American ideals, often mythical, of justice, goodness, truth, and beauty. It also became a way of ritualizing racial achievement against socially or economically imposed barriers to sporting performance (Dyson, 1994). That is to say, American athletes might have all been equal on the starting line but the social, economic, political and emotional struggles that any given athlete had to overcome to reach the starting line were far from equal.

Black sporting activity in America has often acquired the celebrity status of a heroine or hero, as viewed in the careers of people such as Joe Louis, Jackie Robinson, Althea Gibson, Wilma Rudolph, Mohammed Ali, Arthur Ashe, Carl Lewis, Valerie Brisco-Hooks, Evelyn Ashford, Florence Griffiths Joiner and, more recently, the young Tiger Woods. These are Black sporting heroes and heroines who have transcended the narrow boundaries of specific sports activities and gained importance as icons of cultural excellence. Such people have become symbolic figures who embody the celebrity possibilities of success that were often denied other people of colour. They have also captured and catalysed a black cultural fetishism for sport as a means of expressing a particular form of black cultural style and identity (Dyson, 1994). Sport has been viewed as a vehicle for valorizing black power, sporting skills as a means of marking racial self expression and sporting profit as a means of pursuing social and economic mobility.

Concluding remarks

Any theoretical discussion within the post-modernist era is likely to end up in a discursive quagmire, a kind of epistemological equivalent of quicksand or a Scottish bog. Attempts to cling to theoretical or substantive realism or the inter-dependence between the two in the eclectic world of 1990s remains difficult and yet, in conclusion, two observations can be made. The first is that, while anti-historical or non-developmental forms of explanation may supply useful insights into certain social experiences, including those that manifest themselves within racist and anti-pacifist contexts, they are a perilous guide to action. Indeed, not all social or historical problems may be sociological problems but sociology and history *per se* have certainly something to say about, sport, racism, ethnicity, anti-racist movements, black power, black feminism, racial prejudice, anti-semitism and a black perspective.

Finally, the danger of universalism is a very real one. This is not to deny different theories of race relations but to caution against their universality as

a way of explaining different situations throughout the globe. Perhaps a strong distinction needs to be made between the claims of any one explanation of racial tension, racism, or sport and its travelling authority as a blank generic imprimatur. Edward Said is worth listening to when he asks, 'Why is it that Islam and postmodernism or ethnicity and postmodernism are either mutually exclusive or irrelevant?' (Said, 1994). Why should such constituencies update themselves in the name of post-modern epistemology or condition? If the historical and substantive irrelevance of the subject matter to the constituencies of post-modernism is demonstrable why should, for example, Islamic fundamentalists find room for such a theory within their internal structures? Why should any anti-racist or black power movement hitch their interests to an alien body of knowledge and risk solidarity within themselves?

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