

Learning from history and acting politically: the threats and opportunities facing the sociology of sport community

My first task as incoming editor was to attend a meeting with Caroline Moors and Abi Hilditch of Sage. I was in London speaking (about cricket) at the British Academy conference, ‘The Anglosphere and its Others: The “English-speaking Peoples” in a Changing World Order’, and we arranged to meet during a lunch break. We discussed ensuring a rapid and efficient publishing process, ethical-legal publishing issues and performance metrics. Journal affairs seemed a sharp contrast to the presentations about UK international relations in a post-Brexit world, yet a number of parallels became apparent that made what had simply been a matter of convenience a rather more prescient meeting. Three in particular stand out.

The first was the importance of contextualizing contemporary events within the broader flow of historical processes, for the vision of a coherent future Anglosphere has experienced increasing popularity following the UK’s decision to withdraw from the European Union. This meeting signalled that I would follow Andre Wohl, Kurt Weiss, Klaus Heinemann, Jim McKay, Alan Tomlinson, Janet Harris (albeit briefly), Peter Donnelly, John Sugden and, of course, Lawrence Wenner, to become just the tenth editor of the IRSS in its 53rd year. As I considered my introductory editorial, I wondered what my predecessors had said. While some of their concerns are similar to the issues I anticipate, the socio-historical context in which I take up this role means that certain aspects of my tenure will be unique.

A second parallel related to the global or international focus of the conference. The Anglosphere is variously defined, but mainly expressed in either linguistic terms (the ‘English speaking peoples’) or geopolitically. For instance James Bennett (2002), one of the Anglosphere’s greatest advocates, argues that the US and UK constitute the ‘densest nodes’,

while Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Ireland and South Africa are ‘powerful and populous outliers’, and the English speaking populations of the Caribbean, Oceania, Africa and India are ‘the Anglosphere’s frontiers’. While the Anglosphere is alive and well in certain military, economic and intelligence alliances, it is perhaps even more evident in the sociology of sport. The roll call of IRSS editors speaks to this, as does the distinct East-West European shift in both the journal’s and ISSA’s centre of balance over the last half century. Tellingly while the IRSS initially had a Polish, then a (West) German publisher (Weis 1984) it moved to its current, London-based, publisher in 1997 (McKay, 1997), and much of the production process is now out-sourced to that ‘Anglosphere frontier’, New Delhi.

It should be noted that while Peter Donnelly (2004), the IRSS’s first Canadian editor, expressed both his concerns and sense of powerlessness in relation to the politics of language in his introductory editorial, the linguistic hegemony has, if anything, consolidated since then. English is the primary language of 102 of the 120 top ranking sociology journals and all of the top 20, while approximately three-quarters of this 102 are published in the US (Jacobs, 2016). Despite being an avowedly international journal and organization the IRSS and ISSA (and its forerunner the ICSS) are shaped by similar social processes. For example, the initial executive and editorial boards were strictly one member per country (Wohl’s editorial board initially consisted of Albonico (Switzerland), Dumazedier (France), Erbach (GDR), Heinila (Finland), Lüschen (FRG), McIntosh (UK), Novikov (USSR), Randol (Cuba), Stone (USA) and Takenoshita (Japan)), but today the UK contributes almost 25% of editorial board members and, together, the US, New Zealand, Australia and Canada constitute a further 50%. While there are clear pragmatic reasons for this – these nations also provide the most members to ISSA; English submissions need input from English reviewers – international representation has been and continues to be part achievement, part aspiration (Wenner, 2017). My predecessor was right to take pride in this being the ‘oldest and most international journal and

organization in the field' (Wenner, 2012: 3) and it is no mean feat to have members, as ISSA typically has, from 35-40 different nation-states at any one time. The imperative to retain or expand this representation should be at the forefront of our endeavours and to this end one of my first acts is to enhance the editorial board with 14 new members from 14 nation-states, bringing the number of nations represented on the board to 25.

The third parallel between the conference proceedings and journal affairs was consideration of developing political and social structures. A prominent contemporary concern is the belief that we are witnessing the emergence of so-called post-truth societies (where emotion and prejudice are more significant to knowledge claims than reason and evidence. See Fuller, 2017). Many consider that Brexit debates were shaped by this emerging trend for factual disregard/disputation. For example, leading Brexiteer Michael Gove famously responded to what seemed to be the consensus of economists over the fiscal benefits of *remaining* in the EU by declaring that Britain had 'had enough of experts'. Moreover, as the Trump-Clinton US presidential election campaign and Trump's tenure in office have shown, contestations of truth frequently take place in the 'virtual' world. These developments are part of broader challenges to traditional domains of expertise and authoritative knowledge (Furedi, 2004).

What will be the fate of the sociology of sport in this changing world order? The sociology of sport has always been intricately tied to global politics. The role of UNESCO in the establishment of ISSA speaks to this (Malcolm, 2012), and indeed in the mid-1980s Weis (1984: 1) explicitly claimed a place for the journal as 'a politically conciliatory factor' in the Cold War. Janet Harris' editorship was cut short by a financial crisis which changed the funding landscape for Californian higher education (Donnelly, 2004). But contemporary political issues – and the politics of knowledge – assume centre-stage particularly when we consider journal visibility and marketing. For instance, the IRSS 2017 Publisher's Report

highlighted the altmetrics for Heinemann and Puig's (1991) 'Sport in vampire society' which garnered an impressive 134 tweets from 19 countries and an overall score of 110. A little further digging, however, revealed that this visibility stemmed primarily from the article's citation by social media campaign group, *@realpeerreview*. While the founders of the IRSS were largely concerned to establish their legitimacy within the wider sociological (or physical educational) community (Malcolm, 2014), as John Sugden (2006) noted in his introductory editorial, the future of our subdiscipline significantly depends on our ability to engage more widely and successfully undertake public intellectual work. In this I wholeheartedly agree, but I would note that *@realpeerreview*'s intervention offers a salient reminder of the potential *costs* as well as benefits of such engagement. Heinemann and Puig's (1991) thought experiment was simply ridiculed - clearly they had not interviewed 43 vampires - and the more complex issue of the scale of ambition in sociological research was simply lost on the campaigners. The politics of knowledge conjoin with the politics of language to form one of the major challenges confronting the sociology of sport.

In these three aspects – historical development, international relations and changing world order – there is much continuity between my role and that of my predecessors. This, however, tells us only part of the story for further reflection on previous editorials shows just how distinct my role as editor will be. Three changing aspects of the journal - its format, community and status – particularly stand out.

Initially the dozen editorial board members met biannually whereas now we have annual meetings, albeit typically attended by only a minority of members. Briefly under Weis (1984), the journal had associate editors (Eric Dunning, Zbigniew Krawczyk and Klaus Heinemann who would succeed Weis), but today the Editor-in-Chief is supported by just an editorial assistant and six corresponding editors who provide experience and guidance and/or contribute to the global outreach aspirations of the journal. In its eighth year the IRSS moved

from annual to quarterly issue (Wohl, 1976), but under Wenner's editorship the content has further doubled, moving to 6 issues in 2012 and 8 issues in 2015. Discussions are ongoing about whether 1024 pages per year is optimum, because the growing reputation of the journal has meant that while articles are rapidly published via *SAGE OnlineFirst*, they frequently wait a year to appear in print.

Part of that discussion must be to consider the nature of the community which the journal serves and represents. In 1976 the journal's print run was 1200 copies, and expansion to four editions per year meant that about half of all ICSS members 'had possibilities to publish' during the preceding 5-year period (Wohl, 1976: 7). Today the journal has a circulation approaching 9000, about 4000 people registered for table of contents alerts and delivers approximately 180,000 article downloads per year. ISSA membership has not increased to the same extent (the ICSS reached 250 'full and corresponding members' in 1980 (Lüschen, 1980: 316), and ISSA membership has been around 300 in recent years) but the current reach of the journal suggests that these figures do not give a like-for-like comparison. Simply put, the membership figures are indicative of a change in the way people in contemporary societies form and join associations rather than the stifled growth or stagnation of the field. While people once expressed their identity through organizational affiliation, and the journal served to inform sociologists of sport about developments in the field, the IRSS is more centrally a vehicle for disseminating research. Now, in many ways, it is a more prominent and outward facing manifestation of both ISSA and, therefore, the sociology of sport as a whole.

The outward facing role of the journal means that status has become ever more significant; it speaks to 'our' place within the academic community. We do not have records of previous acceptance rates but the aforementioned comments of Wohl, Weis's (1987) remarks about the inclusion of some weaker articles to enable a broader geographical and

political representation within the journal, and Heinemann's (1988) call for readers to inform colleagues, solicit good papers, and boost library subscriptions, suggest that filling the content of the journal (and ensuring its economic viability) was much less easy than it is now. Indeed, despite a considerable bank of currently accepted but yet to be printed articles, the journal maintains an acceptance rate of about only 20%. While Alan Tomlinson (2000) started his tenure with an issue on mega-events, the IRSS currently has a moratorium on special issues. As Jim McKay (1997: 5) prophesized, publication with Sage has enabled the IRSS to become 'the leading journal in the world' for an international perspective on the sociology of sport. Moreover, we now have 'objective' measures in the form of impact factors (IFs) and rankings tables to gauge the journal's status (or, at least, against which we can compare our qualitative impressions). The IRSS had its highest ever IF in 2015 (1.341), ahead of all comparable titles, and was ranked 42 out of 142 in Sociology and 18 out of 44 in Hospitality, Leisure, Sport and Tourism. It stands at the head of the field despite the structural disadvantages of being located outside the US, and having a global remit. I start my tenure as editor with a journal, 'at perhaps its most stable and influential moment' (Wenner, 2017), and for that I am particularly grateful to previous editors.

But this success comes alongside a number of major challenges. As my predecessor noted, our field has become both more than sociology and more than sport (Wenner, 2017). These developments have been the manifestation of certain status anxieties. The most visible outcome of these anxieties is the development of the 'physical cultural studies' movement, but the degree to which this is indicative of broader concerns can be gauged by the way the subdiscipline embraces the supposed crises in sociology per se. The 'crisis' in sociology entails: challenges to traditional views of expertise to which I have already alluded; neoliberal higher education agendas that have 'turned intellectuals into soulless academics with restricted vision' (Hollands and Stanley, 2009: 3.11) chasing research money, publications,

and promotion (and declining non-monetized activities like reviewing journal articles!); the struggle to maintain methodological expertise as private and public institutions routinely deploy, and arguably to greater effect, ‘our’ staple research tools of interview and survey (Savage and Burrows, 2007); and a fundamental ontological problem as enhanced social fluidity challenges the very nature of the discipline as we move ‘beyond societies’ (Hollands and Stanley, 2009). The *consequences* for sociology have been: a) the loss of a coherent ‘core’ of knowledge; b) fragmentation of the discipline; c) the opening-up of sociology to theories and intellectual practices from other disciplines which, in turn; d) ultimately undermines the sense that sociology offers a distinctive analysis of the social (Hollands and Stanley, 2009; Dunning and Hughes, 2013). Within the sociology of sport we see the draw of ‘funding-rich’ areas such as development, management and health, the decline of quantitative methods, a plethora of studies focusing on localized sporting experiences that makes us ‘multi-vocal’ rather than ‘international’ (Wenner, 2017), and our ‘deferral’ to the expertise of those either outside the sociology of sport or our parent discipline. There are thus serious concerns for both the sociology of sport and sociology as a whole.

But as tangible as such threats are there are significant reasons not to be defeatist. First, notions of crisis are perennial in both sociology (e.g. Gouldner, 1970) and the sociology of sport. This in part stems from the inherently critical nature of the subject which engenders self-reflection and is antithetical to those in power in equal measure. But this, ironically, is also part of our strength and appeal, and one of the key achievements in the development of the sociology of sport has been to put such criticality centre stage. Other ‘virtues’ of sociology are apparent in this ‘crisis’ discourse. In addition to being critical, sociology is remarkably pliable, parasitic almost (Urry, 1981) in its ability to capitalize on new areas of study. In the sociology of sport we have demonstrated this through being ‘more than sport’ and through an embrace of the health agenda in the sports sciences. Sociology is also remarkably flexible and

open (Burton, 2016). This editorial hand-over provides a good illustration for, while I see myself as very much an ‘insider’ - a sociologist of sport first and foremost - Larry explicitly describes himself as an ‘outsider’ and recalls both his surprise and pleasure at being so warmly welcomed into the field (Wenner, 2017). The longevity of sociology (of sport) is evidence that certain values and strengths should be guarded. Sociology (of sport) is and must continue to be critical, dynamic and receptive.

Second, concerns about the intellectual imperialism of other disciplines, and the so-called fragmentation of sociology, seem to offer distinct opportunities to a subdiscipline that has traditionally seen itself as liminal. While it is evident that we have become *more than* sociology in recent years, one could further argue that multidisciplinary is, to evoke a biomedical analogy, written into our DNA. From physical education, psychology and leisure at the emergence of the sociology of sport, to history, geography and anthropology (Malcolm, 2012), and latterly policy and psychology (again), the ‘perspectival purity’ of the area was at ‘best’ short lived and probably always somewhat exaggerated. In this respect the field is well-prepared to embrace the immediate future challenge of cross-disciplinary engagement. Similarly fragmentation, and the decline of a coherent core of knowledge, could/should be reconceived as the *disintegration* of the sociological ‘mainstream’ against which we have invariably, and frequently unfavourably, compared ourselves. The global expansion of internet media, which has so influenced the changing politics of knowledge, has led to a polarization of political positions as a consequence of the propensity to immerse ourselves in information sources which speak to our pre-existing interests and prejudices. Putting any broader social concerns temporarily aside, the consequence of the fragmentation of sociology has been to create greater equality between and thus legitimacy for marginal voices in the discipline. This can only be to the advantage of the sociology of sport.

These opportunities inform the journal's future development. The current standing of the IRSS rests significantly on being responsive and inclusive. This must continue. But it is important for our community also to recognize that being a subdisciplinary journal no longer has the inherent disadvantages it once appeared to. Despite the hierarchy within the journal 'market' being relatively stable, we are seeing a general decline in the dominance of 'generalist' journals as the expansion and efficiency of electronic searches effectively levels the field. Indeed, in Jacob's (2016) study of the most cited papers in sociology, none were in the leading generalists journals (*American Sociological Review*, *American Journal of Sociology*, *Annual Review of Sociology*) and all were in 'specialist', i.e. subdisciplinary, journals.

This obvious opportunity for the IRSS is augmented by a further anomaly. While it would be true also to note that the self-perpetuating character of knowledge status hierarchies which Robert Merton (1968) described as the Matthew Effect applies as much to journals as it does to individual researchers (Jacobs 2016), the move towards the quantification of status through IFs exposes what I can only describe as an underlying flakiness. A journal acquires a 2-year IF of 1.00 if each published article is cited an average of once in an average of one year (articles published at the beginning of the calendar year have longer to accrue citations than those published at the end). While this seems a remarkably limited metric through which assess a journal such as the IRSS which provides 180,000 downloads per year, it also means that the actions of a relatively small number of people can have a disproportionate impact on the status of a particular journal.

What I am therefore saying is that, perhaps more than we generally recognize, we exert considerable agency over the fate of our field. *We* can influence the place of sport within sociology. As editor, therefore, I repeat and revise Heinemann's (1988) call to the community; don't just send good articles for inclusion in the journal, send your *best* articles. Insure also

that you engage with the journal content and cite IRSS articles whenever relevant. The insecurities which lead many sociologists of sport to target journals in other sociological fields are self-defeating and serve to perpetuate what we (mis)interpret to be our relatively low standing.

The most highly cited papers do, of course, have cross-field appeal. That can be in relation to multiple sociological subdisciplines, multiple sport-related subdisciplines, or across nation-state borders. These are the articles that should increasingly populate IRSS contents pages and will further enhance the journal's status. Moreover as article visibility and impact depends less on journal placement so the politics of language and knowledge - how we 'package' our work and engage with our audiences - become s more important. As sociologists, our community should be both sufficiently critically nuanced and linguistically adept to respond. I repeat John Sugden's (2006) call for the use of accessible language.

A final reason for optimism within the existing neoliberal and post-truth turmoil is because fundamental to the achievements of the sociology of sport has, historically, been the generation of a strong sense of identity (Malcolm, 2014). Our permeable and shifting boundaries parallel the amorphous character of the Anglosphere; most sociologists of sport, like 'most English-speaking peoples know, almost without thinking about it, what they share' (Hannan, 2012). We can, therefore, either choose to celebrate and strengthen the shared cultural identity that stems from our history, international formation, and sensitivity towards global political change, or we get swept away as we uncritically accept shifts within higher education, capitulate in the face of contested knowledge claims, and become those soulless academics with restricted vision. I hope, as editor, to be a unifying force within our community and so further strengthen our field.

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