

Walking the streets: the *flâneur* and the sociology of sport

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Introduction

As Jonathan Meades (2012: xv) reminds us, ‘We are surrounded by the greatest of free shows. Places’. For me, the best such entertainment is to be found in cities. It took me a long time to recognise what really interests me. Until that moment of realisation, I had been a dabbler (and probably still am). Although I have only intermittently lived in cities, I increasingly became aware that they have undeniably formed (and informed) a major part of my life. The aimless wandering that eventually led me to this self-awareness is apt since it is in many ways analogous to the walks taken by the *flâneur*, ostensibly lacking direction but punctuated by interesting sights, sounds and smells.

The potential overlap between *flânerie* and ethnographic social research, including psychogeography, has been increasingly recognised. But what precisely is *flânerie*? The conceptualisation of *flânerie* originated in Paris in the first half of the nineteenth century (burton, 1994). Despite the *flâneur*'s status as a cultural icon, however, there has been considerable debate about his or her worth in terms of understanding the world around us and, particularly, urban life. The *flâneur*'s principle activity consists of strolling and looking. Yet the fact that *flâneurs* are curious about the life of the cities helps to explain why, as Tester (1994: 1) argues, ‘the figure and the activity appear regularly in the attempts of social commentators to get some grip on the nature and implications of the conditions of modernity and post-modernity’. One suspects, however, that there remains considerable suspicion in

conventional social scientific circles about the role of the *flâneur* and the validity of his or her activities.

The *flâneur*'s 'discoveries' are undeniably impressionistic rather than realistic (whatever that might mean in a non-positivist world) but that is arguably their greatest strength.

Impressionistic as they are, they represent cities in sociologically interesting ways. They offer alternative visions, not unlike those provided by those writers of fiction who are equally enthralled by the urban life. This chapter examines various ways in which *flânerie* can contribute to our understanding of the social significance of sport and its places. The chapter concludes with three vignettes that take us from Belfast to Seville to Tokyo and focus not only on the venues where certain activities take place but also, at least as significantly, on the surrounding streets, restaurants, bars and shops on days where nothing much appears to be happening in relation to sport except what the *flâneur* sees.

***Flânerie* and sociology of the city**

The origins of urban sociology can be traced to the work of the Chicago School in the 1920s and 1930s, with Robert E. Park as the founder of an ecological approach which likened cities to biological organisms (Short, 1971). Many subsequent studies of cities have been influenced by this approach even though its emphasis on the natural development of the city tends to ignore the importance of economic and political decisions about planning.

The potential overlap between *flânerie* and ethnographic social research has been increasingly recognised (Bairner, 2006a, 2006b). Polley (2010), for example, has commented

on the value of this type of activity for the study and teaching of sport history. But what precisely is *flânerie*? According to Gluck (2003: 53), ‘the *flâneur* has become a generalized symbol of urban experience and cultural modernity in recent scholarly debates’. As Tester (1994: 1) notes, ‘*flânerie*, the activity of strolling and looking which is carried out by the *flâneur*, is a recurring motif in the literature, sociology and art of urban, and most especially of the metropolitan existence’. At one level, as Edmund White (2001: 16) claims, the *flâneur* is ‘that aimless stroller who loses himself in the crowd, who has no destination and goes wherever caprice or curiosity directs his or her steps’. Yet the fact that the *flâneur* is curious about the life of the city helps to explain why, as Tester (1994: 1) argues, ‘the figure and the activity appear regularly in the attempts of social commentators to get some grip on the nature and implications of the conditions of modernity and post-modernity’. Key figures in the history of *flânerie* include such otherwise disparate individuals as Charles Baudelaire, Walt Whitman and Walter Benjamin.

It is the activity of seeing that is crucial, as Benjamin, Louis Wirth and also Georg Simmel recognised, if the city is to be understood. In his quest to understand, the *flâneur* ‘stands apart from the city even as he appears to “fuse” with it; he interprets each of its component parts in isolation in order, subsequently, to attain intellectual understanding of the whole as a complex system of meaning’ (Burton, 1994, p. 1). For this reason, the nineteenth-century *flâneur* might be described as an embryonic urban sociologist insofar as he is willing and able to take up the challenges set out by the likes of Wirth a century later (Reiss, 1964)..

Furthermore, despite evidence of scepticism, it continues to be argued that the *flâneur* reads the city as a text and ‘from a distance’ (Ferguson, 1994: 31). As a consequence, Tester (1994: 18) finds it possible to argue that ‘the *flâneur* and *flânerie* become different and intriguing keys to understanding the social and cultural milieu’. Mazlish (1994: 53) goes even further,

arguing that ‘in the end, the *flâneur*’s vision of life, based on his peripatetic observations, creates reality’.

For Jenks (1995: 150), ‘there is a difficult and continuous moral problem facing the *flâneur* in relation to the issue of gender’. Featherstone (1998) questions the assumption that the forms of activity normally associated with *flânerie* have been exclusively male. However, even in those contemporary societies that might be regarded as relatively enlightened in terms of gender relations, men continue to enjoy much easier access to a wider range of public spaces, and hence to the activity of *flânerie*, for a variety of reasons (Skeggs, 1999).

Edmund White (2001: 145) further postulates a close relationship between male homosexuality and *flânerie*, suggesting that ‘to be gay and cruise is perhaps an extension of the *flâneur*’s very essence, or at least its most successful application’. Whilst this argument appears to rely heavily on stereotypical images both of the *flâneur* and of the male homosexual, more convincing is the argument that that the *flâneur* should certainly be a solitary figure. As Ferguson (1994: 27) argues, ‘companionship of any sort is undesirable’. ‘*Flânerie*’, Ferguson continues, ‘requires the city and its crowds, yet the *flâneur* remains aloof from both’ (p. 27).

It is also important that the *flâneur* has sufficient free time to walk and read the city. As White (2001: 39) observes, ‘the *flâneur* is by definition endowed with enormous leisure, someone who can take off a morning or afternoon for undirected ambling, since specific goal or a close rationing of time is antithetical to the true spirit of the *flâneur*’. In addition, it is

vitaly important that the *flâneur* should walk or, if need be, use public transport. With alternative forms of transport in mind, Featherstone (1998) wonders what difference speed makes. The fact is that inside the bus, the train or the tram, people speak and act at normal speed. The city only appears to move faster.

The distinction between *flânerie* and certain unlawful activities such as voyeurism or stalking is certainly narrow. Furthermore, it is important that the *flâneur* is willing to enter the criminal or less salubrious recesses of society, to live ‘outside the bounds and bonds of bourgeois life’ (Mazlish, 1994: 51). Yet, as Ferguson (1994: 28) notes, ‘the *flâneur* remains anonymous, devoid of personality, unremarkable in the crowd’. The *flâneur*, as Tester (1994: 2) describes him, is ‘a man who is only at home existentially when he is not at home physically’. It is the city that provides the ideal environment for such a man and, as Polley (2010: 141) argues, ‘being there gives us at the very least a sense of place, an appreciation’.

Writing in 1995, Chris Jenks (1995: 145) noted that ‘sociology has long since evacuated methodological sites that claimed any correspondential relation with the “seen” phenomenon’. In response, Jenks (1995: 145) sought ‘to reconstitute the analytic force of the *flâneur*’. The *flâneur* offer an alternative vision, one that is, according to Jenks (1995: 149), ‘more optimistic than that founded on “power-knowledge”’. Wearing and Wearing (1996: 241) argue that ‘the fleeting sights experienced by the “*flâneur*” may well be shown... to be flat and unimaginative reflections of a one dimensional way of seeing the world’. But much depends on the individual *flâneur*.

The radicalism of the streets

One of Britain's greatest observers of cities was Ian Nairn, most famous perhaps for his *Nairn's London* (1966). Whilst ostensibly describing the buildings of London and of other cities and towns, Nairn did much more besides. According to Meades (2012: 394), '*Nairn's London* is questionably useful and it does not report. It creates *places* which did not previously exist. It's fiction without characters, or rather the décor of a fiction with just one character. The true subject of *Nairn's London*, the book's protagonist is Nairn and his sensibility, his visual, intellectual, emotional responses to what is around him- and his expression of those responses. It is authoritative precisely because it dispenses with all pretence of impersonal objectivity'. This is what the *flâneur* can achieve and, in so doing, add a creative dimension to the ways in which we understand the social life of cities. The agenda might also be political. As Gros (2014: 177) suggests, 'the urban stroller is subversive. He subverts the crowd, the merchandise and the town, along with their values'.

Virilio (2006: 30) poses the question, 'Can asphalt be a political territory?' The answer is surely an unequivocal yes. From Paris at the end of the eighteenth century to Manchester in the nineteenth century, from Prague in 1968 to Bangkok in 2009, the record of people taking to the streets in protest is endless. It is no accident, therefore, that the famous architect and planner, Le Corbusier, regarded the street as a symbol of disorder and disharmony. According to Solnit (2002: 216), 'public marches mingle the language of the pilgrimage, in which one walks to demonstrate one's commitment, with the strike's picket line, in which one demonstrates the strength of one's group and one's persistence by pacing back and forth, and the festival, in which the boundaries between strangers recede'. As Virilio (2006: 31) asserts,

‘all through history there has been an unspoken, unrecognized revolutionary wandering, the organization of a *first mass transportation* – which is nonetheless revolution itself’.

At times, this revolution has been aimed specifically at winning access to space. Thus emerged ‘the great trespasses and walks that changed the face of the English countryside’ (Solnit: 2002, p. 164). Arguably one of the best known of these was the ramblers’ mass trespass on Kinder Scout in England’s Peak District. As Hargreaves (1986: 92) relates, ‘set aside exclusively for the rich to shoot grouse, the area strongly symbolized the relationship between leisure, sport and privileged power’. But here the location was rural and the central objective was to secure access to a particular place. According to Solnit (2002: 173), ‘rural walking has found a moral imperative in the love of nature that has allowed it to defend and open up the countryside’. In keeping with the image of the *flâneur*, on the other hand, ‘urban walking has always been a shadier business, easily turning into soliciting, cruising, promenading, shopping, rioting, protesting, skulking, loitering, and other activities that, however enjoyable, hardly have the high moral tone of nature appreciation’ (Solnit, 2002, pp. 173-4). That said, at least one of these activities – protesting – is also closely identified with higher goals. Indeed, urban protest inevitably combines a desire to access the street with the use of that access for numerous other political objectives.

Such a combination underpinned the arguments and actions of the French situationists, led, amongst others, by Guy Debord, who ‘deployed *détournement*, or hijacking, to monkey wrench accepted behaviour and meaning in bourgeois cities’ (Merrifield, 2002, p. 98). The situationists’ concept of *derive* was essentially ‘the search for an encounter with otherness, spurred on in equal parts by the exploration of class, ethnic and racial difference in the post

war city, and by frequent intoxication' (McDonagh, 2009: 10-11). The lessons of the *dérive*, according to Debord, 'permit the drawing up of the first surveys of the psycho-geographic articulation of the modern city' (cited in McDonagh, 2009, p. 84). In addition, for political or quasi political movements, the street had to be taken over but primarily as a precursor to seizing society or, as in the case of Gay Pride marches and ethnic minority carnival parades, simply as a means of announcing. 'We are here'.

Walking the streets in protest is one way of engaging with strangers although the latter remain onlookers – supportive, perhaps, and enthused by the collective meaning embodied in the walk but also potentially hostile, both ideologically ('I disagree with their cause') and pragmatically ('what right do they have to stop the traffic?'). However, the street also demands more immediate, even intimate, association with strangers – with the 'otherness' that the situationists craved. As de Certeau describes, 'the walking of passers-by offers a series of turns (*tours*) and detours that can be compared to "turns of phrase" or "stylistic figures"'.

Encounters with strangers

According to Jane Jacobs (1992: 56), 'the trust of a city street is formed over time from many, many little public sidewalk contacts'. It is on the city street that we are most likely to come into physical contact with strangers. As Erving Goffman (1966) noted, 'when individuals come into one another's immediate presence in circumstances where no spoken

communication is called for, they none the less inevitably engage one another in communication of a sort, for in all situations, significance is ascribed to certain matters that are not necessarily connected with particular verbal communications'. Furthermore, traffic relationships in cities, as Hannerz (1980: 106) comments, 'are a pure form of meetings among strangers, a result of the crowding of large numbers of people in a limited space'. Seldom is that more apparent than when we walk.

We brush up against another person and invariably apologise. We try to avoid walking into other people. We laugh when in so doing we move to the left as the oncoming stranger moves to the right and our subsequent movements are choreographed through uncertainty. Unlike roads, pavements or sidewalks have very few signs indicating where we should walk and at what speed. Instead we behave according to time-honoured custom. If we did not walk the streets, we would miss out on a valuable lesson about sharing – in this case, the sharing of public space. The implications of such a loss are serious inasmuch as they might lead to a preference for spaces which we do need not share with strangers, thereby strengthening the case for creating places of exclusion. As Sharon Zukin (2010: 142) describes the process, 'Offering special events in pleasant surroundings, with a low risk of "worrisome encounters," these places set up islands of calm in a turbulent world, re-creating urban life as a civilized ideal'. It is a civilized ideal, however, that necessarily lessens contact with strangers, simply defined as 'people who are not like us', and as a result, ensures that valuable lessons that the streets can teach will be lost.

Although for the most part, there is little reason to fear physical aggression in street encounters with strangers, there is one specific potentially threatening feature of life on the

streets that must be considered. Given that the *flâneur* is traditionally male and his behaviour has often been seen as shady at best and decadent at worst, the question of the 'male gaze' inevitably arises (Mulvey, 2009). This concept has often been used simply to describe the way in which heterosexual men look at and sexually objectify women and, as such, it has become a metaphor for power asymmetry and patriarchal domination. In reality, however, the street is a place where virtually everyone looks at everyone else. For example, the object of the male gaze need not be a heterosexual female. Consider for example the disruption caused by the appearance on the street of a lipstick (or hyper-feminine) lesbian accompanied by her girlfriend (Probyn, 1995).

The street is also a site for the straight 'female gaze' which is directed both at men and at other women (Goddard, 2000). Think also of the indirect impact of the straight 'male gaze' on gay men's perceptions of their own bodies (Wood, 2004) and on the gaze that is exchanged between gay men themselves. According to one of the most celebrated modern *flâneurs*, Edmund White (2009: 210), 'in New York people check each other out to find out who they are, whereas in other cities there's no reason to bother since no one is ever anyone'. He makes this point in support of his claim that, in New York, everyone, not only gay men, 'cruise'. Whilst he is correct in his analysis of New York, he is wrong to deny that similar patterns of behaviour can be witnessed in other towns and cities. Fewer people may be famous in other locations but everyone becomes 'someone' precisely because of another's gaze.

According to Solnit (2002: 13), 'exploring the world is one of the best ways of exploring the mind, and walking travels both terrains'. She adds, 'while walking, the body and the mind

can work together, so that thinking becomes almost a physical, rhythmic act – so much for the Cartesian mind/body divide’ (p. xv). Cities and towns are particularly important locations in this regard. In the words of Macauley (2000), ‘perhaps even more than walking in the wilderness, sauntering and strolling in the city and its suburbs involves multiple, repeated and deeply imbricated border crossings, including nested neighbourhoods, traffic flows, ethnic enclaves, residential and commercial zones, subcultures, historical sites, scared spaces and outcroppings of the wild in parks, cemeteries and abandoned lots’. Solnit (2002: 171) adds that ‘cities have always offered anonymity, variety, and conjunction, qualities best basked in by walking: one does not have to go into the bakery or the fortune-teller’s, only to know that one might’. For Sorkin (2009: 81), ‘walking is not simply an occasion for observation but an analytical instrument’. This can manifest itself when walking and talking with others. Thus, we return to the educational benefits to be derived from the solitary stroll.

Psychogeography and the pedagogies of the streets

Débord’s idea of psychogeography which he himself did little to develop, offers a dimension to *flânerie* which is both intellectually stimulating but also frequently radical in its ambitions. According to Nicholson (2011: 48), ‘walking was, and remains, psychogeography’s main mode of operation’. There is, of course, a certain degree of cynicism about psychogeography not unlike that which was once directed at the *flâneur*. As Nicholson (2011: 49-50) observes, ‘psychogeography often seems to be a way for clever young men to mooch around cities doing nothing much, claiming that they’re *flâneurs* who are doing something, you know, significant, and often taking Iain Sinclair as their role model’. As Nicholson admits, however, none of this is Sinclair’s fault and, indeed, by using his feet, his ears, his eyes and his erudition, Sinclair is able to combine his experiences of walking ‘with various overlapping

historical traditions; the literary, the bohemian, the criminal, the mystical, the alchemical...’
(Nicholson, 2011; 47).

The learning experience takes two distinct forms. First, we learn about the city through which we are passing from its buildings, its smells, its sounds and from the snatches of conversation that we overhear if people are speaking a language we know. Our observations subsequently impact on how we behave for as Goldbard (2010: 57) reminds us, ‘what we perceive and understand when we look at the world – the stories we tell ourselves to explain what we see – is what shapes our actions’. Secondly (and here it can help if we cannot understand what others are saying), there is the opportunity to daydream or, less whimsically, simply to think. In the latter regard, it is worth bringing to mind Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s (1979: 12) claim that his whole life had been ‘little else than a long reverie divided into chapters by my daily walks’. Underlining the importance of urban walking in this respect, Gregory Dart (2010: 79) comments, ‘daydreaming is inescapable in the metropolis’ – as, it can be argued, is thinking. Morris and Hardman (1997: 328) end their important scientific argument about the physiological benefits of walking with a quote from G.M. Trevelyan (1913: 56) – ‘I have two doctors, my left leg and my right...’. To this might be added the following - ‘I also have two educators, my right leg and my left’. So what can we learn about sporting places through acts of *flânerie*?

Sport and the city (or what the *flâneur* saw)

Although I had already spent hours walking the streets of Edinburgh where I had studied in the early 1970s, I probably began to take *flânerie* seriously (without recognising it as such) in Belfast where I began working in 1978. As Bale and Vertinsky (2004: 1) have shown, ‘the significance of space and place as central dimensions of sport is well recognised by scholars who have addressed questions of sport from philosophical, sociological, geographical and historical perspectives’ (Bale and Vertinsky, 2004: 1). The question is how best to study sporting places.

Being a *flâneur* in the vicinity of sporting venues is not simply a matter of attending games; it is also about visiting those venues at other times as well. It is then that one is able to fully appreciate the locations and their immediate surroundings and to gauge what tales the streets can tell about the sport that is played there and about the people who play that sport. The following vignettes offer a *flâneur*’s insights into sport and its places in three cities – Belfast in Northern Ireland, Seville in Spain and Tokyo in Japan.

Belfast

Sport has been long recognised as a marker of identity in Northern Ireland. The sports that one plays and watches and the places where one chooses to do so testify, far more often than not, to communal loyalty centred on the relationship national identity and social space. Even participation in physical activity more generally has been greatly influenced by feelings of fear and mistrust. Sports stadia such as Casement Park, home to the Gaelic Athletic

Association (GAA) in County Antrim, and Irish league soccer grounds, including Windsor Park, the Oval, Seaview and Solitude, although unimpressive when set against the high standards of major stadia other countries, are vitally important inscriptions on Belfast's cultural landscape. Even though the composition of the teams that play at these soccer grounds may evolve over time, most of the fans who attend their games remain constrained by the cultural myopia that has underpinned inter- and intra-communal conflict. Being present at sporting places is often a matter of affirming either explicitly or, at the very least implicitly, one's political allegiance.

In terms of physical space, Belfast is a relatively easy city in which to idly wander; most of the main sports venues are in walking distance of the City Hall. In the worst days of civil unrest, however, few people would have simply wandered from one sporting place to another or, indeed, from one neighbourhood to another. Rightly or wrongly, fear was a major constraint, and almost certainly remains so even in these times of relative peace. It also worth noting that, even if a sense of fear has no rational foundation, it is always real for the person who feels it. It helps, of course, that there are clear indications – murals, painted kerbstones, flags – that one is in close proximity to an area which one might have some cause to fear. As an outsider (or incomer), I walked the city's streets far more than most.

The two largest football grounds in Belfast, Windsor Park and the Oval, are located at different ends of the city. Both, however, are situated in what have traditionally been regarded as Protestant working-class areas. Admittedly, the population around Windsor Park, home to Linfield Football Club and the Northern Ireland national team, is now less homogeneous than was once the case and is true of the east Belfast streets that surround The Oval, home to Glentoran Football Club. Nevertheless, the environs around both grounds are

still characterised by loyalist iconography in the form of painted kerbstones, murals and flags. It comes as little surprise, therefore, that many Catholics are unwilling to visit either stadium. This is equally true of Protestants who show no desire to visit Casement Park in west Belfast, the major venue for Gaelic games in Northern Ireland. In this instance, the surrounding area is solidly nationalist and Catholic – hence, the topophobic response. In addition, the GAA, which governs Gaelic games throughout Ireland, has long been seen by many Ulster unionists as a republican organisation.

As one walks up the Falls Road towards Casement Park, black taxis speed past. They provide a mode of transport not unique to Belfast but one which has conferred its own particular character on the city. Cabs leave various sites close to the city centre and travel along a number of main roads leading to residential areas in the north and west of the city. The operation itself reflects the city's patterns of residential segregation. Drivers wait until six passengers (including one in the front passenger seat) have taken their places. The ultimate destination of the taxi that has just picked up two passengers is Twinbrook, a working-class estate on the outskirts of west Belfast, once home to Bobby Sands, the first of the republican hunger strikers to die in the Maze Prison in 1981. The walk to Casement is intermittently marked by republican iconography and suffused with memories of the troubles - an Irish Republican Army (IRA) memorial on the left and, on the right, a *Sinn Féin* information centre, the gable end of which is adorned with a large mural depicting Sands. Further on, to the left, is Milltown Cemetery with its republican burial plots. This was the scene of loyalist gunman Michael Stone's audacious attack on an IRA funeral in 1988. Soon Casement Park appears. As in most nationalist areas of the city, street names in the surrounding Andersonstown district are rendered in Irish Gaelic as well as in English. So this is *Páirc an*

Casement, named after Sir Roger Casement, a nationalist hero but, in the eyes of unionists, a traitor to Britain. This is in keeping with a fairly widespread practice within the GAA to call stadia and clubs after prominent nationalist and republican figures.

The stadium itself is impressive in an old-fashioned way - a large oval-shaped bowl with a much bigger playing surface than at soccer grounds. Inside as well as outside the signs are in Gaelic. The location, the iconography, the use of the Irish language – nothing about Casement would seem welcoming to most Protestants although one suspects that overseas visitors to the city might feel more comfortable here than in the streets surrounding the major soccer grounds, particularly The Oval. The fact remains that this is an Irish nationalist place, not a stadium that could be in the forefront of a campaign to put Belfast on the global sporting map. Walking back toward the city centre, however, there is the Red Devil Bar, named in honour of Manchester United, one of the world's most successful sporting brands. In these terraced streets which have witnessed so much violence over the years, the idle wanderer observes the juxtaposition of global and local sporting reference points.

Seville

Even visitors to the city of Seville who are repelled by the whole idea of bullfighting must surely be impressed by the beauty of Plaza de Toros de la Real Maestranza, the city's bullring. It is unlikely, however, that they would spend long in the surrounding area or be equally impressed by the images of *toreros* at work and the heads of long dead bulls that adorn the neighbourhood bars of El Arenal, the district of which La Maestranza is the centrepiece. But

it is here that the idle wanderer can acquire a sense of why this form of entertainment – sporting or cultural – survives in so many parts of Spain.

Even when the rain is heavy and the opening of the new season is almost certain to be abandoned, the excitement created by bullfighting is palpable. Once the event is called off, many *aficionados* make their way home to distant parts of the city, to other towns and villages in Andalusia and to other regions of Spain. Some decide to remain in the neighbourhood and enjoy the evening by drinking and eating tapas. In one small bar only a few short steps from La Maestranza, a group of old men sit in the corner drinking large glasses of red wine. As is customary, the wall behind the bar is covered with images of the Virgin Mother, a number of football related memorabilia (in this associated with Real Betis, one of the city's two La Liga teams), and a group of signed photos of bullfighters, some of them with their arms around the shoulders of bar owner who stands proudly in front his personal gallery. The atmosphere is subdued. On such an unusual night as this, thoughts and words are preoccupied with what might have been rather than with what has actually taken place.

All of a sudden the mood changes. The door opens. A tall young woman with long blonde hair comes in followed by a handsome young man and what appears to be their bodyguard. I take a quick look at the programme produced for the now cancelled event and see at once that the young man is one of the *toreros* who had been scheduled to perform. The old men become animated as does the bar owner. For a moment, I feel like an intruder. The young bullfighter crosses to the table where the old men are sitting. He shakes hands with each of them and orders more wine. His girlfriend and their associate take their seat at a nearby table.

The young man then approaches me, the silent, idle onlooker in the corner. Another handshake, and a beer ordered for a complete stranger. Everyone is smiling. It is as if we are now in the presence of a demi-God. This is not the excitement that the arrival of a famous footballer or a pop star would cause. There is a deeper reverence shown towards the new arrival – inspired perhaps by the recognition that only a few hours ago he had been preparing to enter the ring on two occasions and confront the prospect of death, almost certainly that of the bulls but possibly his own.

Anyone who wishes to understand bullfighting properly must witness bullfighting. It is undeniable, however, that one's understanding is also aided by simply walking close to the great, and not so great, arenas of Spain. The in-house infirmaries are a constant reminder of the danger that *toreros* face as is the statue of Alexander Fleming at the Plaza de Toros de Las Ventas in Madrid. The bemused *flâneur* may initially be surprised that a Scottish doctor should be celebrated at such a venue and in the street names of countless Spanish towns and cities. The explanation is, of course, quite simple. The discovery of penicillin saved the lives of many bullfighters who would previously have died as a result of the wounds inflicted by a *toro bravo*. Always the streets have stories to tell.

Tokyo

Ryoguko Kokugikan is the home of sumo wrestling in Tokyo. For an outsider to fully understand sumo is arguably a virtually impossible task achieved by only a few. Attending one of the three annual *basho* that take place at the stadium will certainly help. At least as instructive, however, is to wander around the surrounding area. Traditionally, many of the

stables where the wrestlers live and train were situated nearby and it is still possible to catch a glimpse of a junior wrestler doing some shopping or even to attend a practice session. As one leaves the nearby station, the first thing to notice is a small, squat statue of two wrestlers. Close by are stalls bearing a variety of sumo related souvenirs and a photo board similar to those seen at British seaside resorts but here allowing visitors to the neighbourhood to insert their heads above the body of a sumo wrestler and be captured for posterity. There are also restaurants where fans of sumo can eat the food that accounts for the bulk of the wrestlers. This is *chanko nabe*, a protein-packed stew with innumerable ingredients.

Only five minutes' walk from the station is a place where sumo is celebrated very differently. The Eko-in Temple is regarded as the spiritual home and original venue of sumo. Visiting it in the half light of a late January afternoon is a moving experience. Here is the Chikara-zuka or 'Mound of Strength' which was erected as a gift from the Sumo Association in 1937 remains an object of veneration for new wrestlers.

Again there is so much to be learned from the streets although a visit to a *basho* is also important. First, there is the reception committee of fans waiting to cheer their favourite wrestlers and their attendants as they step from private cars or taxis and make their way to the stadium. Tickets are taken by a former wrestler now making his way up the retired sumo wrestlers' ladder within the organisation. Once inside, there is more *chanko* and also bento boxes with contents linked to the names of prominent wrestlers. Then there is the arena itself - full of strange sights and sounds. Invented or not, there is something which to the outsider, is distinctively Japanese, with the exception, of course, of many of the wrestlers. The two star performers are both Mongolian. Other countries represented include Bulgaria, Estonia, and

the Czech Republic. This causes the traditionalists considerable angst. Yet, the irony is that, during this particular visit to Tokyo, the death was announced of Taiho, considered to be the greatest sumo wrestler of the second half of the twentieth century and arguably the greatest of all time. He had been born Ivan Boryshko Karafuto on the Japanese half of the island now controlled by Russia and called Sakhalin. His father was Ukrainian, his mother Japanese. After the Red Army occupied the entire island at the end of World War Two, his father was arrested and his mother and he fled to Hokkaido, Japan's northernmost island. Not only did he go on to become a great wrestler. He was also a popular celebrity especially in the eyes of Japanese children. After his retirement, however, he was never rewarded with high positions in the Sumo Association, a fact that some felt was attributable to his lack of pure Japanese blood. The small museum at the stadium is exhibiting a small collection of Taiho's memorabilia. Inside and outside the stadium, the symbolism of sumo is both beguiling and educational.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have sought to advance the case, first proposed by Georg Simmel, for impressionism as a sociological method of investigation (Frisby, 1992; Wolff, 1950). If the social scientist is in truth a trained observer of social life, then he or she must be prepared to put that training to the test. The *flâneur* gathers data without recourse to such techniques as triangulation. He trusts his own powers of observation at least as much and perhaps more the words of interviewees or the information provided in official documents. Because of his willingness and ability to move easily from one social setting to another, he is able to

accumulate a massive amount of subjective, but nonetheless insightful, data. He should never be ashamed to be described as an idle wanderer.

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