Assessing the sociology of sport: On utopianism and pragmatism

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Abstract
On the 50th anniversary of the ISSA and IRSS, an influential scholar on sport participation, development and governance, Bart Vanreusel, considers the research project of the sociology of sport in light of the dynamics between utopianism and pragmatism. Reflecting on Thomas More’s work Utopia, published in 1516, Vanreusel notes that, in contrast to other fields, utopianism has not had a significant impact on the sociology of sport; rather, opposing viewpoints using critical perspectives have had sometimes dystopian views on sport cultures. In considering the challenges and future of the sociology of sport, it is argued that utopian views and ideologies of human harmony and a better world have supported major social movements in sport such as Olympism and Sport for All. Indeed, utopian-based practices such as Olympism and Sport for All did result in a proliferation of pragmatic, and often functionalist, research. While sociology of sport over the last 50 years has managed to scrutinize present social realities, its resistance to pragmatism has hindered building new research upon its findings to address new and future social realities. Neoutopianism, featuring reality-based beliefs in large and small scale models for social change and a better world through sport, can drive the research agenda in the future and help rebuild sport cultures.

Keywords
development, Olympism, social change, Sport for All, utopia

Utopia and the sociology of sport
Thomas More’s work Utopia was first published in 1516 at my home university in Leuven where today the main library, although destroyed in both world wars, still holds an original print. Since then utopianism has inspired major fields of human culture and endeavour. Politics, ideologies, arts, literature, architecture, urban planning, space exploration, technology, leisure and other domains at particular moments in time were inspired...
by waves of utopianist thinking. In their work on utopianism and the sciences Kemperink and Vermeer (2010) noted that in everyday language, the terms ‘utopia’ and ‘utopianism’ have a pejorative meaning as an idle dream and have even been regarded as dangerous and totalitarian. For this essay, we adopt their concept of utopianism: ‘…broad and as non-normative as possible, with its fundamental characteristic to be a belief in or a contribution to the realization of a better world. This belief can be realistic or unrealistic, logical or illogical, applied or left confined to the drawing table, examined critically by utopians themselves or by others in hindsight’ (Kemperink and Vermeer, 2010: X).

In contrast to other fields, utopianism doesn’t seem to have had a significant impact on the sociology of sport over the past 50 years. Research on utopianism in sport or influences of utopianism on the sociology of sport are scarce and mostly ideological. In his historical examination of early gymnastic systems and physical education in Belgium (1900–1914) Delheye (2010) discovered utopian discourses as ideologies of human movement as a contribution to the fitness of the nation, to the regeneration of the race and to colonial expansionism. Settings of physical culture are sometimes poetically presented as idealized utopian worlds (Van den Berg, 2010). One could argue of course that research on sociology of sport that seeks to change the condition humaine shares a utopian connotation.

Opposing viewpoints are more prevalent. Rather than elaborating utopian ideas and ideals, the sociology of sport has a tradition of delivering critical analyses on the imperfect world of sport with sometimes dystopian views on sport cultures. In his analysis of Adorno’s writing on sport, Inglis (2010) points at such dystopian views on sporting and other popular cultures. But at the same time he presents Adorno as a utopian thinker, ‘…albeit one whose utopianism is deliberately masked in a cloud of dark pessimism’ (Inglis, 2004: 89).

It is argued here that utopian views and ideologies of human harmony and a better world have legitimized and supported the origin and growth of major social movements in sport such as Olympism and Sport for All. In this indirect way, utopianism contributed to the emergence of the sociology of sport as a domain of research, debate, falsification and verification of utopianism in sport cultures.

To illustrate this point, early attempts in sociology of sport to explain differences in Olympic success between nations and people implicitly assumed utopian visions of makeable sport worlds (Ball, 1972; Kiviaho and Mäkelä, 1978). Recently former International Olympic Committee (IOC) president Jacques Rogge echoed utopianism when he addressed the athletes at the opening of the 2012 London Olympic games with the phrase make us dream and the London Olympics were advertised with the well marketed and somewhat voluntarist utopian slogan – inspire a generation.

Not only Olympism but also the Sport for All movement was conceived by utopian ideas about better sport worlds. The first Sport for All charter, published by the Council of Europe in 1974, included human rights and equal opportunity principles as a fundament for the future development of Sport for All. Although actual versions of the Olympic Games, other mega sport events in general and worldwide Sport for All movements may be far away from utopia today, they were partially inspired by, and originated from, utopian views on human physical culture. The emergence, the expansion and the globalization of popular sporting cultures, including utopian thought and rhetoric, generated and
fuelled research into the sociology of sport, not so much as an approval of utopian claims by sport cultures but rather as an analytical and sceptical reaction to it.

**Pragmatism instead of utopianism**

Utopianism never appeared to be an acceptable perspective in the sociology of sport. Yet authors such as Wright (2010) have taken utopianism into contemporary thought by developing alternative perspectives for social change and by presenting models of ‘real utopias’ as what he calls the tasks of emancipatory social science.

Utopian-based practices such as Olympism and Sport for All did result in a proliferation of rather pragmatic research. Often this research was implicitly or explicitly guided by functionalist approaches as pragmatic or scaled down versions of utopianism. Although functionalism is demised as a valid theoretical perspective in sociology of sport, it is still prominent in the discourses of sport organizations and their organizers. A fair amount of research in the sociology of sport is produced in the slipstream of functionalist practices. For example in order to monitor, evaluate and foster Sport for All developments, several generations of studies were carried out worldwide (Da Costa and Miragaya, 2002). But sport sociological research hardly provided utopian perspectives on Sport for All. Similarly, Olympism is meticulously constructed and deconstructed in the sociology of sport, but utopian ideas, designs and models for future Olympism appear to be less researched.

The choice for pragmatic instead of utopian thinking was recently exemplified in Belgium with its long history as a politically, culturally and linguistically divided nation, with an enduring struggle to find a common Belgian identity. Strong and shared feelings of national unity, expressed in the bilingual slogan ‘tous ensemble’ (all together), arose at the occasion of the performances of the national football team at the 2014 FIFA World Cup in Brazil. This coincided with democratic elections won by the political party that carried the splitting up of Belgium as a main theme on its programme. The sociology of sport pragmatically deconstructed the significance of this sport-related national unity by pointing at displays of 90-minute patriotism to explain feelings of national identity and unity at the occasion of sport performances.

According to available knowledge, a contrast between a democratic vote against national unity and fandom related expressions in favour of national unity is not uncommon as both social phenomena are pragmatically classified as independent from each other. Yet, public opinion leaders and philosophers reflected on this contrast and they drew potential future sociological ideas and models from it (Naegels, 2014; Sturtewagen, 2014). In contrast, sociology of sport didn’t take the opportunity to put these simultaneous social events in a utopianist perspective and it didn’t take the challenge to examine social perspectives and models in unifying expressions of fandom as new potential forms of community-building and citizenship as other domains of research have done. However, new ways and forms of nation building and citizenship may not just happen along the traditional lines of identity construction. In order to explore such new developing social identities, utopian views might be helpful.

To put it more generally, sport sociology over the past 50 years has managed to scrutinize present social realities, both by theory building and by empirical observation. But
it appears to hesitate building new research upon this knowledge from the perspective of new and future social realities. Sport sociology so far seems to have no intention to take its knowledge further and to develop utopian ideas and models. Since sociology of sport cannot define what a better world of sport and human physical culture could be, without the risk of being labelled normative or ideological, it chooses not to talk, think or speculate about it all. The sociology of sport seems to take the more risk-averse and comfortable position of researching imperfect worlds rather than trying to build better worlds. Furthermore, this non-utopian or even anti-utopian position by the sociology of sport is endorsed by actual academic norms and standards for research which would condemn utopian thoughts as non-scientific, normative, speculative, irrational, ideological and thus non-publishable. However, the experience of many colleagues is that utopian perspectives on better worlds of sport are often discussed, if not by faculty who teach sociology of sport, then by the request of students. In my experience, questions, debates and papers by masters’ degree students often implicitly or explicitly involve a quest for utopian thinking and debate. Utopianism appears to be one of the perspectives many students in the sociology of sport want to be addressed.

**Neo-utopianism and opportunities for the sociology of sport**

Although utopianism is hardly represented in today’s sociology of sport, it is very present in the social realities of today’s sporting cultures in various modes and expressions. Street protests at mega-sports events, the worldwide emergence of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) for sport and development, sport initiatives with a focus on empowerment for disadvantaged groups, environmental awareness and education in sport, emerging corporate social responsibility programmes by sport organizations and the corporate world, civic action against abuse and discrimination in sport, sport, peace and reconciliation initiatives as local practices supported by world organizations for sport, growing initiatives for good governance in professional and grassroots sport and equal opportunity policies in sport all share features of what could be named neo-utopianism.

Neo-utopianism is featured by a reality-based belief in the contribution to better worlds, and by large or small scale models and experiments for social change in and through sport. Neo-utopianism may build on accumulated knowledge in the sociology of sport in order to debate, design, develop, test, criticize and rebuild future sport cultures. Neo-utopianism should not be dependent on encompassing ideologies or dominant socio-political systems but it could build research on bottom-up approaches of civic initiatives, at micro levels. For example, the growing scientific knowledge on good governance and insights in new and multiple governance arrangements between actors as tools for social change may support neo-utopian work in the sociology of sport with regard to the future role of mega sport events in societies (Bruyninckx, 2012).

Indeed, one of the places that represents both utopia and dystopia is Robben Island, South Africa, where Nelson Mandela, among others, has been imprisoned. In a study on the Robben Island’s Sporting Legacy Project in South Africa the reflection by Keim (2012) summarizes the challenges and opportunities for the sociology of sport from what
could be called a neo-utopian perspective: ‘For sport to be transformative, for sport to bring peace within and between individuals and communities, the sport programmes we create must be a reflection of where we want to go, of who we want to be, as people and as a nation. The decision remains up to us’ (Keim, 2012: 6). Thus, in conclusion, Thomas More’s publication *Utopia* in 1516 has the potential to contribute to the 50 years of sociology of sport research within both the ISSA and *IRSS* in order to inspire a better world within, beyond and through sport.

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**References**


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