

Assessing the sociology of sport: On national identity and nationalism

International Review for the

Sociology of Sport

2015, Vol. 50(4-5) 375–379

© The Author(s) 2014

Reprints and permissions:

sagepub.co.uk/journalsPermissions.nav

DOI: 10.1177/1012690214538863

irs.sagepub.com



Alan Bairner

Loughborough University, UK

Abstract

On the 50th anniversary of the ISSA and IRSS, Alan Bairner, one of the most influential scholars to study the socio-cultural relationship between sport and nation, reflects on the dynamics of national identity and nationalism in sport. Because the sociology of sport has too often taken for granted concepts such as nation, nation-state, nationality, national identity and nationalism, an ongoing need has been to engage debates about those concepts in mainstream nationalism studies. Because the most powerful form of national performance today may be seen in sport, understanding tensions between not only the national and global, but also between the nation-state and the historic nation and between nationality and national identity remain key challenges. Complex dynamics of competing identities may be seen in exemplar studies of sport in Spain relative to Catalonia and the ‘united’ (or not) qualities of the United Kingdom relative to Ireland, Scotland, Wales and, indeed, England. In the future, it is posed that the study of sport and nation must move beyond reliance on media analysis and received notions of ‘imagined community’ and seek more access to and understanding of elite performers and organizational actors.

Keywords

nation states, national identities, nationalism, nationality, nations

Reflections on the trajectory of the sociology of sport

In 1932, Manhattan-born, Scottish resident and nationalist James H Whyte (1932: 266) wrote, ‘At a time when the words nation and nationality and nationalism are so often on the lips of Scotsmen one might expect some clear idea of the precise meaning of these words to prevail. But no’. It would not be too harsh to substitute the words ‘sociologists of sport’ for the word ‘Scotsmen’. There has certainly been a tendency in the sociology of sport to take for granted such concepts as nation, nation-state, nationality, national

Corresponding author:

Alan Bairner, Loughborough University, Ashby Road, Loughborough, LE11 3TU, UK.

Email: A.E.S.Bairner@lboro.ac.uk

identity and nationalism and to ignore debates about these concepts within mainstream nationalism studies (Bairner, 2008). In addition, in the sociology of sport, these concepts and the issues to which they relate have frequently been submerged within debates about globalization, with the nation regularly presented as being under threat from or resistant to the forces of global homogenisation rather than as an object of intrinsic scholarly interest (Giulianotti and Robertson, 2007; Maguire, 1999; Miller et al., 2001). As a consequence, the extent to which sociologists of sport have contributed to our understanding of the various relationships that exist between these terms has been rather limited not least when compared with the work of sport historians (see for example Cronin, 1999) and anthropologists (see for example Vaczi, 2013).

Assessing the challenges of the sociology of sport

Steven Jackson's (1994) examination of the relationship between sport and national identity rightly proved influential. Although also locating his analysis in the global context, in this instance with particular reference to the idea of Americanisation, Jackson dealt specifically with issues relating to national identity in a particular country, his native Canada. His subsequent work on this theme was significant for what it told us about the relationship between socio-economic change, mediatisation, the intersection between 'race' and national identity, and general representations of the nation (Jackson, 1998a). What it did not seek to do, however, was engage at any great length with wider theories of nationalism.

Rowe's (2003) discussion of the interaction between sport, the national and the global took the debate a little further. Although Rowe too discusses the nation in relation to globalisation, those with a primary interest in the nation *per se* would do well to heed his conclusion that 'sport's compulsive attachment to the production of national difference may...constitutively repudiate the embrace of the global' (Rowe, 2003: 292). Yet again, however, the degree of engagement with mainstream sociological approaches to nations and nationalism is relatively slight.

One monograph that is undeniably exempt from such criticism and, indeed, goes so far as to accuse mainstream nationalism studies of neglecting sport is John Hargreaves' (2000) *Freedom For Catalonia: Catalan Nationalism, Spanish Identity and the Barcelona Olympic Games*. Hargreaves begins that book with a discussion of the relationship between sport and nationalism. He writes that 'while specialists in nationalism have paid a good deal of attention to central aspects of culture such as language and religion, they have paid remarkably little attention to that other aspect of culture around which nationalism so often coheres in the modern world, namely, sport' (Hargreaves, 2000: 3). This was a little unfair given that Billig (1995) had already commented at some length on the relationship between sport, nationalism and masculinity. More recently, furthermore, Edensor (2002: 78) has argued that 'probably the most currently powerful form of national performance is that found in sport'. What was important about Hargreaves' analysis, however, is that it explored the differences between nationalist and non-nationalist constructions of sport and did so with reference to an important case study that continues to allow for distinctions to be made between the nation-state (Spain) and the historic nation (Catalonia) and also between nationality (Spanish) and national

identity (Catalan), the latter resulting for many in an adherence to separatist nationalism. Summarising the conflict that surrounded the Barcelona Olympics, Hargreaves (2000: 165) argued that ‘Catalan nationalism could have been an explosive, destabilising force’, but in the end, merely represented ‘a significant step in the delicate process of negotiating a greater degree of autonomy for Catalonia within the existing democratic constitution’. The fact that a struggle ostensibly around sport could even achieve this much is not insignificant.

Like Spain, the United Kingdom and Ireland have provided particularly fertile terrain for sociologists of sport with an interest in nationalism and national identities. This can best be explained by reference to the anomalous situation which allows for the co-existence of *nation-state* Olympic representation and *national* governing bodies and teams in a variety of sports, most notably perhaps rugby union and association football. Amongst those authors who have developed our sociological understanding of the relationship between sport and nation in what were once described as the British Isles are Malcolm (2012) who offers an insightful analysis of the association between cricket and Englishness and Harris (2006) who has written on rugby union and Welsh national identity. Perhaps unsurprisingly, Ireland and, in particular, Northern Ireland during the period of what became known as ‘The Troubles’ has attracted even more attention. The roots of this body of literature can be traced to the publication of *Sport, Sectarianism and Society in a Divided Ireland* (Sugden and Bairner, 1993). Where better to study the relationship between sport and the nation than in a society in which sporting practices then and now reflect different expressions of national identity and, on occasions, even exacerbate the political divisions that these rival identities help to reproduce?

George Orwell (1945/1970: 62) wrote that ‘at the international level sport is frankly mimic warfare’. Nor, according to Orwell, can it be anything other. He argued that ‘even if one didn’t know from concrete examples (the 1936 Olympic Games, for instance) that international sporting contests lead to orgies of hatred, one could deduce it from general principles’ (Orwell, 1945/1970: 61–62). Sporting competition can lead to obsessive behaviour. Indeed, according to Orwell, ‘the whole thing is bound up with the rise of nationalism – that is, with the lunatic modern habit of identifying oneself with large power units and seeing everything in terms of competitive prestige’ (Orwell, 1945/1970: 63). But how far is this true? Does sport enflame political nationalism or does it, as one Scottish nationalist argued, simply produce what he called ninety-minute patriots but presumably could also be described as eighty-minute patriots, eighteen hole patriots, nine inning patriots and so on? Jarvie and Walker’s (1994) collection of essays was important in a number of respects – first, because it sought to answer these questions without necessarily succeeding in doing so; second, because it consisted of an eclectic mix of disciplinary approaches (only around half of the contributors were sociologists with most of the others being historians); and, third, because it demonstrated the need for methodological diversity.

Future directions for the sociology of sport

More studies of under researched national contexts in relation to sport are undoubtedly required, especially if the questions posed by Orwell’s analysis are to be answered. Even

more urgent, however, is the need for a wider range of methodological and theoretical techniques. Media analysis has tended to dominate the research methods used by sociologists of sport to study national identities and has produced some valuable insights (Lee and Maguire, 2011). However, whilst recognising the difficulties faced by researchers seeking to access elite performers, much more of the type of data which this can produce is certainly needed, as is demonstrated by the work of Jason Tuck (2003). Following on from Jackson's (1994, 1998a) pioneering studies, moreover, it would also be good to read more about the intersections between nation and nationalism on the one hand and a range of other categories including social class, 'race', ethnicity and gender on the other. For example, instead of focusing primarily on how female athletes are represented in their national media, it would be interesting to learn how these women see themselves in relation to the national project. Are men alone the proxy warriors who play sport on behalf of the nation or can women also fulfil this role and, if so, in which sports and in which countries? With intersectionality in mind, it is worth mentioning Jackson's willingness to address wider issues of national identity in relation to multiculturalism, indigenous culture and gender (Jackson, 1998b, 2004).

With reference to theoretical approaches, what is required is far greater engagement with mainstream nationalism studies and the theories they produce. These include primordialism, ethno-symbolism and modernism (Bairner, 2009). Too often, sociologists of sport have seemed happy simply to refer to the term 'imagined community' and move on without further scrutiny of that concept itself. Even though sport is a hugely important marker of national identity and a useful starting point for discussion of nationalism, how much can we really understand about nations and national identities if we only view these through the lens of sport and, indeed, in relation to globalisation? With this thought in mind, it is refreshing to see analyses of sport from young scholars with a background in mainstream nationalism studies (Brentin, 2013; May, 2013).

In conclusion, nations and nationalism are not about to disappear and international sport – that is, sporting competition between nations and/or nation states – will continue to be the very essence of global sports mega events. With this in mind, sociologists of sport must rise to the numerous intellectual challenges that are presented as a consequence. The foundations have been laid; but for now the possibilities still remain endless.

Funding

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

References

- Bairner A (2008) Sports and nationalism. In: Herb GH and Kaplan DH (eds) *Nations and Nationalism: A Global Historical Overview, 1945–1989*, vol. 3. Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, pp. 991–1004.
- Bairner A (2009) National sports and national landscapes: In defence of primordialism. *National Identities* 11(3): 223–239.
- Billig M (1995) *Banal Nationalism*. London: SAGE.
- Brentin D (2013) 'A lofty battle for the nation': The social roles of sport in Tadjman's Croatia. *Sport in Society* 16(8): 993–1008.

- Cronin M (1999) *Sport and Nationalism in Ireland: Gaelic Games, Soccer and Irish Identity since 1884*. Dublin: Four Courts Press.
- Edensor T (2002) *National Identity, Popular Culture and Everyday Life*. Oxford: Berg.
- Giulianotti R and Robertson R (eds) (2007) *Globalization and Sport*. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Hargreaves J (2000) *Freedom for Catalonia? Catalan Nationalism, Spanish Identity and the Barcelona Olympic Games*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Harris J (2006) (Re)presenting Wales: National identity and celebrity in the postmodern rugby world. *North American Journal of Welsh Studies* 6(2): 1–13.
- Jackson SJ (1994) Gretzky, crisis, and Canadian identity in 1988: Rearticulating the Americanization of culture debate. *Sociology of Sport Journal* 11(4): 428–446.
- Jackson SJ (1998a) A twist of race: Ben Johnson and the Canadian crisis of racial and national identity. *Sociology of Sport Journal* 15(1): 21–40.
- Jackson SJ (1998b) The 49th paradox: The 1988 Calgary Winter Olympic Games and Canadian identity as contested terrain. In: Duncan M, Chick G and Aycock A (eds) *Diversions and Divergences in the Fields of Play*. Greenwich, CT: Ablex Publishing, pp. 191–208.
- Jackson SJ (2004) Exorcising the ghost: Donovan Bailey, Ben Johnson and the politics of Canadian identity. *Media, Culture & Society* 26(1): 121–141.
- Jarvie G and Walker G (eds) (1994) *Scottish Sport in the Making of the Nation: Ninety-Minute Patriots?* Leicester: Leicester University Press.
- Lee JW and Maguire J (2011) Road to reunification? Unitary Korean nationalism in South Korean media coverage of the 2004 Athens Olympic Games. *Sociology* 45(5): 848–867.
- Maguire J (1999) *Global Sport: Identities, Societies, Civilizations*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Malcolm D (2012) *Globalizing Cricket: Englishness, Empire and Identity*. London: Bloomsbury.
- May A (2013) *The construction of national identity in Scotland and Northern Ireland: Culture and politics after Thatcher*. Unpublished PhD Thesis, Kingston University, Surrey.
- Miller T, Lawrence G, McKay J, et al. (2001) *Globalization and Sport: Playing the World*. London: SAGE.
- Orwell G (1945/1970) The collected essays, journalism and letters of George Orwell. In: Orwell S and Angus I (eds) *In Front of Your Nose, 1945–1950*, vol. IV. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, pp. 61–63 (First published, Tribune, 14 December 1945).
- Rowe D (2003) Sport and the repudiation of the global. *International Review for the Sociology of Sport* 38(3): 281–294.
- Sugden J and Bairner A (1993) *Sport, Sectarianism and Society in a Divided Ireland*. Leicester: Leicester University Press.
- Tuck J (2003) Making sense of Emerald commotion: Rugby union, national identity and Ireland. *Identities: Global Studies in Culture and Power* 10(4): 495–515.
- Vaczi M (2013) The Spanish fury: A political geography of soccer in Spain. *International Review for the Sociology of Sport*. Epub ahead of print, 25 February. DOI: 10.1177/1012690213478940.
- Whyte JH (1932) Editorial notes: The background of present-day nationalism, 1. *The Modern Scot* 2: 266–269.

Copyright of *International Review for the Sociology of Sport* is the property of Sage Publications, Ltd. and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.