Article

Subjecting pandemic sport to a sociological procedure

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Abstract

The Covid-19 global pandemic posed a particularly acute problem for sport. Although there was massive sectoral disruption in areas like higher education, music, and tourism, sport is unusually dependent on commercial media-financed, impossible-to-repeat live events performed before large co-present crowds that form a key part of the spectacle for the many times larger, distant audiences using an expanding range of screens. Covid-19 exposed the inner workings of sport as a machine that could be disabled by its own global interdependency. The compulsive generation of inequalities of class, 'race'/ethnicity, gender, sexuality, age, ability, space, and so on resulting from the advanced commoditisation and consequent hierarchisation of contemporary global sport, created the structural imbalance and vulnerability that Covid-19 has mercilessly punished. This article applies a sociological analysis to sport before, during and after the pandemic, arguing that an emphasis on the relationships between human rights and cultural citizenship is required to improve the social institution of sport. It argues that if sociology does not play a key role in reforming sport after Covid-19, then it will have lost the moral compass that first guided the discipline in early modernity when the institution of sport emerged.

Keywords

cultural citizenship, globalisation, human rights, inequality, media, nation, pandemics, power, sport

Introduction: social and sporting disorder

Pandemics and other disasters in the first decade of the 21st century, such as SARS-CoV-1 and 2 (Covid-19), H1N1/09 and the Global Financial Crisis, are conventionally interpreted as watersheds or turning points.[1] Widespread diagnoses declare, not least among 'moral entrepreneurs' (Becker, 1963), that there can be no return to pre-pandemic conditions, and predictions are made about what the post-pandemic order will look like. Sociologists know that most such assessments are at best partially valid and at worst wildly off beam. Human societies are always, everywhere, bearers of past and existing social structures and relations, and in the process of macro, meso and micro social

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change. There are pivotal moments when transformations occur, but they are necessarily produced out of already-existing conditions and in-play trends. Potential transformations also reveal the resilience of current structures and habits, and it is no mean task to discern this year's mega-trend from tomorrow's wishful thinking or apocalyptic nightmare. Jokes proliferate about an epidemic of discourse, including among sociologists, and there is an inevitable spike in pandemic-themed conferences, journal special-issues, books and media appearances. But that is as it should be – no discipline worth the name has the luxury of languid detachment in the face of the most pressing questions, especially one that is the self-declared 'science of society'. The following discussion mainly addresses the Australian context, although much of it is applicable, with the necessary adjustments, to many other parts of the world.

Sport has occupied a prominent position among the multiple issues that Covid-19 has raised. Living through the pandemic has meant constant exposure to debates about the social role of sport and the forms in which it should be permitted or proscribed, and for how long. In Australia, at a time when there had been 80 reported Covid-19 cases in the country, there was some anxiety about the decision to allow the Women's Twenty20 World Cup final between Australia and India to take place. The 86,174 attendance at the Melbourne Cricket Ground (MCG) on 8 March 2020 was 'the largest crowd for a women's sporting event in Australia and the highest crowd figure for a women's cricket match globally' (CRICKET.com.au, 2020), and the second largest in women's sport anywhere in the world. The following weekend, Prime Minister Scott Morrison first defiantly confirmed his intention to watch his favourite rugby league team, Cronulla, and then decided against it on public health advice and given the imminent cancellation of 'all non-essential gatherings of more than 500 people' (SBS, 2020). There then followed sport events without crowds and, later, decisions to close down most sport (excluding horse racing on empty courses) from school to community to professional level.

Cancelling sport garnered enormous media and public discussion, especially with regard to the major sports leagues involving men. Sport, some argued, was part of the essential fabric of society and the rhythm of social life, and its pleasures essential to the psycho-social health of the nation (Huntsdale, 2020). Indeed, Peter V'landys, Australian Rugby League Commission (ARL) Chairman (who is also Chief Executive of Racing New South Wales and probably best known for controversially promoting the Everest horse race on the sails of the Sydney Opera House), proposed an inextricable link with national identity in asserting that, 'An Australia without rugby league is not Australia' (AAP, 2020).

It is important for sociologists to apply critical scepticism to such claims while understanding their discursive origins. Sport, in Bourdieusian (1988) terms, is certainly an important field in Australia (Rowe and Gayo, 2020) and to varying degrees across a globe where peak sport organisations like the International Olympic Committee (IOC) and the Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA) rival the United Nations (UN) in networked size and influence. The 'marriage made in heaven' between the sport and media fields provides enormous cultural reach and institutional interdependency. What can be learned, then, from applying sociology to the arena of sport under a pandemic?

The sporting global

For many years I have worked on sport, media, nation and globalisation, once provocatively claiming that sport might be said to 'repudiate' globalisation in its fullest – that is, cultural – sense, in debating the issue with scholars such as David Andrews and

George Ritzer (2007; see also Rowe, 2011: 147–51). My intention has been both to recognise the importance and the limitations of globalisation as a force for creating socio-cultural connectivity and commonality, but in a context where sport – especially in mediated form – has become not only globalised, but one of the key exemplars of the globalisation process itself. Sports mega events have reliably supplied a ready-to-hand, if mostly misunderstood image of Marshall McLuhan's (1964) concept of the 'global village' in action, although focused sociological analysis of them reveals that these temporary, mediated settlements display, in Tonnies' (1955) terms, less the structured stability of *Gemeinschaft* than the unscripted fluidity of *Gesellschaft*.

Covid-19 has suggested another way of seeing the globalisation process. In an echo and inversion of the common journalistic wisdom that all politics is local, it might be proposed that all sport is global. This is not to argue that sport is globally homogeneous, but that it is interconnected as never before, meaning that no sporting nation is an island even if, geographically, it is one. Pandemic-inspired lockdowns and cancellations have highlighted the intricate, intensive nature of both intra- and cross-border sport, and its susceptibility to interruption or even to the prospect of one. For example, one major consideration in postponing the 2020 Tokyo Olympics and Paralympics was that any change to the schedule would disrupt other major sports events and leagues. The eventual compromise of delaying the Tokyo Games by one year came with an unequivocal understanding that, if it did not happen on the revised dates, it would never happen at all.

Sport as a cultural form has long displayed a globalising impetus. As competitive, regulated and quantified physical culture, modern sport was disseminated in the 19th century, first along the pathways of the British Empire and then far beyond. As the physical practice of sport spread across the globe, its cultural visibility mushroomed with the media, especially television, through textbook, virus-like exponential growth. A vast media sports cultural complex (Rowe, 2004) emerged involving ever-growing spectacle and expanded content, with circuits like those in tennis, cricket, rugby union, motor racing and golf criss-crossing the globe, their every move tracked by the media to enable viewing in distant places across multiple time zones. This elite global sport sits atop its everyday practice in schools and communities, linked in a variety of ways through branded sport and leisurewear goods, commercial sponsors, and sport workforce training and preparation. Sport's commercially inspired globality, in turn, has been both reinforced and challenged by its role in diplomacy, development and sustainability through the increased involvement of the UN (sportanddev.org, 2020).

Covid-19 exposed the inner workings of sport as a machine that could be disabled by its own global interdependency. In this regard it is by no means unique – there has been massive sectoral disruption in higher education, music, tourism and so on – but sport is unusually dependent on commercial media-financed, impossible-to-repeat live events performed before large co-present crowds that form a key part of the spectacle for the many times larger distant audiences using an expanding range of screens. Its substantial environmental footprint, involving constant travel and heavy energy use, including of domestic devices and the servers needed to power digital screens (Miller, 2018), vividly demonstrates the planetary implications of a popular pursuit. The pandemic provided discomfiting evidence of the deep political, economic and psychic investment in stimulating sport consumption as habit, and the consequent problems engendered for a large segment (by no means the majority) of the global population prompted by its withdrawal. What are the social consequences of this interruption of sport and media supply?

Rigging the game

Sport discourse is characterised by a range of competing and sometimes contradictory positions. For example, it is both celebrated as integral to national culture and criticised for overshadowing other forms of culture, such as dance, literature and painting (Bryant, 2011). There are complaints that too few (especially younger) people physically participate in sport compared to those who watch it, especially on television (Walton, 2018). Covid-19 has provided something of an experiment in societal and sporting priorities, as the temporary loss of both physical and broadcast sport had an analogous socio-cultural effect to the reduction of air and road traffic on the environment. It clarified how far the balance of sport is weighted heavily towards professional, mediatised sports and their audiences. Less lucrative, commercialised sports, especially women's (Pape, 2020) and those at community level (Hinds, 2020), received much less care and concern.

There has long been a debate in the sociology of sport that, as it developed according to the logic of capitalism, sport compulsively generated inequalities of various kinds – of class, 'race'/ethnicity, gender, sexuality, age, ability, space and so on (Spaaij et al., 2015). Therefore, just as the pandemic has had more serious consequences for the already disadvantaged, such as infection and fatality rates, it has predictably created greater problems for the less well-resourced parts of the sport system. For example, pre-pandemic women's sport has been gaining a stronger position in terms of opportunities and rewards in relation to men's, but the sudden shrinking of sport's surplus threatens to reverse those gains following retrograde institutional judgements about the distribution of scarcer resources (Clarkson et al, 2020). There has been much more media focus on the restoration of men's professional sports leagues than on many other forms, including women's, non-elite and community sport. Similarly, concerns about the future of the Tokyo Olympics have comprehensively overshadowed those directed towards the Paralympics, just as wheelchair tennis was initially excluded from the 2020 US Tennis Open, only to be reinstated after protest.

There are also clear hierarchies within male professional sport, such as in the United Kingdom, where the extravagantly media-enriched English Premier League and the Championship League below it could restart their seasons in empty stadia following the loosening of lockdown restrictions in June 2020. In contrast, apart from a few decisive playoff games involving promotion, the two lower leagues, and the many more below them in semi-professional leagues, could play no more games in the 2019–20 season because they could afford neither the cost of Covid-19 testing nor of home-and-away games without paying spectators. The virus did not cause such sporting inequalities, but it exacerbated them, starkly revealing elite sport's reckless dependency on a small number of entities requiring a constant injection of capital, the inadequacy of the 'trickle down' to women's, lower level professional, semi-professional, disability and community sport, and the inadequate public funding of grassroots sport. What were the transactional field dynamics of this struggle for power and position?

The sport and media fields in play

The spread of Covid-19 led to intense manoeuvring over how the bringing together of sportspeople and crowds could overcome the sinister, unknown predation visited by and upon the 'risk society' (Beck, 1992). The consequent constraints were resisted by those who emphasised professional sport's 'exceptionalism' as a cultural form that could be regarded as an essential industry in which athletes, audiences and stadia were represented as the symbolic equivalents, respectively, of health professionals, patients, and hospitals. In Australia, professional sports with billion-dollar, media rights-fuelled budgets, like Australian rules football, cricket, tennis, rugby union and rugby league, were shown to be financially fragile. Others, like association football (soccer), basketball and netball looked no less precarious as all key sources of revenue dried up: media, sponsors, merchandising, hospitality and paying spectators. Already under pressure from falling advertising revenues and audiences caused by media industry disrupters like Facebook, Google, Amazon and Netflix, TV broadcasters had previously signalled to sport that the inflated cost of showing live sport needed to be curbed (Masters, 2019). During the pandemic Australian broadcast media received a relief package from the federal government, including tax relief and suspended local programming obligations (Australian Government, 2020).

The other half of the media–sport nexus likewise lobbied government in response to Covid-19 in claiming an elevated place in Australian society. Sport organisations already have income tax exempt status in the country, as well as being in receipt of public funds and in-kind support from all three tiers of government. Exerting pressure and influence within the sport field and in other relevant fields, such as the political, is integral to the distribution and exchange of social, economic and cultural capital (Bennett et al., 2020). The expedited reintroduction of live sport events, and so the congregation and travel of sportspeople and fans, was demanded of government, especially of the states which would host them. Sport was kept constantly to the fore in debates about the 'return to normality', with sport events permitted from late May 2020 and small numbers of in-stadium spectators gradually reintroduced as new Covid-19 cases fell. The National Rugby League (NRL) was especially active in seeking to extract concessions from government. Before the pandemic, it had been a substantial beneficiary of the commitment of AU$2.3 billion in New South Wales (NSW) government funds for the controversial demolition and/or rebuilding of three stadia. When, in the light of Covid-19, the NSW government decided to reallocate AU$800 million of that funding for non-sporting purposes, the NRL sought to have these funds spent on rebuilding four smaller suburban grounds – again to its principal advantage and with the threat of moving its grand final to another state (Chammas and Phillips, 2020). In its campaigns, the NRL was consistently supported by News Corp, the Murdoch-family controlled media company which, through Foxtel, the dominant pay-TV provider, has a major stake in sport and, especially, in the crowd-enhanced screen sport spectacle. In this way key elements of the media and sport fields cooperated in agitating to influence public health policy in the midst of the pandemic (indeed, V'landys regretted ever interrupting the season because of the pandemic; Nine.com.au, 2020) and in the name of 'the public'. The live spectacles that they enable are undoubtedly prized by a substantial proportion of the population – but what do they look like during a pandemic lockdown?

Mediation and simulation

Before the sport contests were postponed altogether because of Covid-19, and initially on their return, there were various televised football, basketball, netball and other sports played in the absence of co-present crowds. This was a strange audience experience, usually occurring as a punishment for bad behaviour, such as crowd violence or racist chants, rather than as a form of health protection. These games only emphasised live mediated sport's dependency on the sights and sounds of the stadium crowd, which provides the essential atmosphere for the much larger television audiences, some of which may be on the other side of the world. Beyond Australia, much bigger competitions like the English Premier League, the National Basketball Association (NBA) and the National Football League (NFL) are similarly dependent on sport crowds as actors and extras who pay to make the spectacle more saleable. The pandemic gave some respectability to tricks already used by television to disguise low stadium crowd attendances, such as tight camera angles to hide empty terraces, amplified actuality sound and even fabricated fans. Atmosphere was now enhanced by sound sampling from a digital database (without booing, audible obscenities, and so on) and absent spectators could pay to have a face – either their own or, perhaps, a public figure's – placed on cardboard cut-out human shapes to give the impression of living, breathing attendees. Covid-19 brought to the surface the 'dark arts' of media manipulation of sport viewers, now offering the option of being with or without artificial sound.

The pain of sport's drug-like withdrawal, it was semi-seriously observed, could only be alleviated by a live TV sport 'fix'. This craving might even entail resort to obscure sport events in parts of the globe where lockdowns were not enforced – for example, association football leagues in Belarus, Tajikistan and Nicaragua (Lusted, 2020), or, for television audiences in other countries where live sport stopped earlier and recommenced later, the reverse gaze on the NRL and the Australian Football League (AFL) (FOX Sports, 2020). The caricatured figure of the desperate 'binge watching' sport viewer loomed large, manifested in the nostalgic reviewing of 'classic' sport encounters and sport documentaries (as the extraordinary success of Netflix's [2020] Michael Jordan documentary *The Last Dance* demonstrated). But, it could not distract entirely from the tortured visage of a global 'media-sport biz' deprived of the product that it had created and temporarily lost. That face had turned away from warnings of over-exposure to risk, preferring instead to see perpetual entitlement to commercial expansion and public subsidy. What would be its expression after the pandemic?

Conclusion: cultural citizenship and the sociological imperative

The advanced commoditisation and consequent hierarchisation of contemporary global sport created the structural imbalance that Covid-19 mercilessly punished. As a result, the preoccupation with financial arrangements behind the sale of sport screen watching finally had to give way to the flesh-and-blood reality of the threat to life. The wicked problem of a hyper-contagious virus emerging in East Asia and passed rapidly around the world demonstrated the vulnerability of sport's global system of just-in-time, continuous production. Critical sport sociology has constantly questioned the skewing of social structures, values and practices by 'sportainment's' addiction to economic capital growth at all costs. Covid-19 stopped the merry-go-round for a time, but it soon began to revolve – albeit haltingly – again. Given the number of people who rely on sport for their livelihoods, and the pleasures and other benefits that it generates, it is in the general interest for sport to resume service. But that does not mean repeating its mistakes – as in other areas of social life, the pandemic provided an opportunity for reflection. If sport is, as so many have loudly proclaimed, a vital part of social life, then it must bend to the will of the social, not override it.

The concept of cultural citizenship (Rowe, 2018) needs to be mobilised to shape future sport in paying more than lip service to the relationships between human rights and physical culture. This requires intervention in the sport and media fields to hold them to their rhetoric of inclusiveness and egalitarianism by a fairer distribution of the fruits of their most lucrative product – live mega-media sport. Correspondingly, government subvention of sport should not reward the already well-remunerated. Rigorous intersectional policies are required that make the physical practice of sport more accessible and less discriminatory, and to preserve a sense of common cultural ownership for the prized media-sport assets that are being sequestered behind the profitable construction of paywalls (Scherer and Rowe, 2014). Sociology is especially well placed to monitor and advance these developments because it constantly calls sport back into the social world that produces it, and from which in its most capitalist forms sport seeks distance in times of plenty and rescue in times of crisis – like that of a global pandemic.

In sport and its related social contexts, anyone trained in sociology would challenge the anti-social dictum of 'social distancing', the misconceived stigmatisation of social interaction that actually applies to 'physical distancing'. In recommending instead 'distant socialising' or 'socialising at a distance' – a practice that sport is well equipped to observe – public policy can be placed in the service of social as well as of biomedical health. During a pandemic when racist street attacks and Black Lives Matter protests were both in evidence, a sociological sensibility is well attuned to the dangerous implications of a language discourse that evokes an ideology of virus-induced social segregation (Dingwall et al., 2013). It is tragic that it has taken a global disaster like Covid-19 for sport professionals, practitioners and spectators alike to be forced to take stock of the sport field's direction. It is unlikely that sport after the pandemic will be transformed, but it will certainly be changed. If sociology does not play its part in helping to re-set the course of sport after the virus has been controlled, then it certainly will have lost the moral compass that first guided the discipline into the equally troubled waters of early modernity from which the institution of sport emerged.

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Notes

1. This article has been developed out of what can be described as a hasty 'public sociological' intervention (Rowe, 2020) in the sociology of pandemics. It reveals – as will be evident from its shortcomings – the acceleration of the rhythms of 21st-century sociology within networked media cultures.

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