

BESNIER NIKO, SUSAN BROWNELL, AND THOMAS F. CARTER 2018. *The Anthropology of Sport: Bodies, Borders, Biopolitics*. Oakland: University of California Press. 336 p. ISBN: 9780520289000 (hardback); ISBN: 9780520289017 (paperback); ISBN: 9780520963818 (E-book).

BESNIER, NIKO, DOMENICA GISELLA CALABRÒ, AND DANIEL GUINNESS (eds) 2021. *Sport, Migration, and Gender in the Neoliberal Age*. London and New York: Routledge. 274 p. ISBN: 9781138390645 (hardback); ISBN: 9781138390652 (paperback); ISBN: 9780429423277 (E-book).

As Victor Turner (1983: 104) once argued, ‘the way people play perhaps is more profoundly revealing of a culture than how they work’. Theodor Adorno (1981 [1955]: 56) had nearly three decades earlier put it even more categorically, with sport explicitly in mind: ‘if one were to summarize the most important trends of present-day culture, one could hardly find a more pregnant category than that of sports’. Sports are everywhere in today’s world. They have their ‘rightful’ place in daily news broadcasts, usually at the very end of these, as if a full stop to everything else. The Summer Olympics have allegedly become the largest single congregation of humans on the planet. According to some calculations, sports in aggregate have become one of the biggest sectors of world economy. Sports clubs, city marathons, cycling races, yoga classes, and CrossFit gyms have been mushrooming and not only in the ‘Global North’. The COVID-19 pandemic has, of course, had an impact on all of this. At the time of writing this review, football matches have been played in empty stadiums for more than a year. City marathons have been replaced by virtual races and some particularly dedicated runners have even been completing marathons on their tiny balconies. Sporting mega events such as Tokyo 2020 Olympic Games and UEFA EURO 2020 have been postponed by a year,

various other tournaments and championships have shifted into ‘sports bubbles’. That said, it is quite remarkable how quickly most professional and recreational sports have adapted to the conditions of the pandemic, which is yet another indicator of the vastly important role that sport plays financially, symbolically, and emotionally in the contemporary world.

Despite the overwhelming significance of sports in everyday life, the topic was for long ignored by anthropologists who, unlike sociologists and psychologists, have seemed to consider it either too trivial or too familiar a realm to merit serious analytical scrutiny. In that sense, perhaps surprisingly, sport as a topic shares the fate of Christianity. To use Cannell’s (2006: 4) eloquent term in her discussion of the latter, until not very long ago it has been ‘the repressed’ of anthropology. The claim is not absolute, of course—ethnographies of Trobriand cricket and Balinese cockfight occupy an important place in the discipline’s intellectual heritage. But earlier anthropological research on games and playing have seldom led to the ethnographic analysis of what could be understood as ‘sport’ in the modern sense. As Robert Sands (2002: 7), one of the pioneering anthropologists of sport, lamented just two decades ago, anthropology ‘is one of the few social sciences that still finds the study of sport beyond, or perhaps beneath,

the discipline'. Fortunately, such attitude is now changing, and sport has become an increasingly legitimate topic for anthropological research and ethnographic scrutiny. The two recent books introduced here are an eloquent proof of that.

*Anthropology of Sport: Bodies, Borders, Biopolitics* is, in essence, a comprehensive introduction to the subdiscipline, jointly written by three leading anthropologists of sport. Echoing Turner and Adorno quoted above, the book fittingly begins with the acknowledgement that '[f]ew activities in the lives of ordinary people around the world bring together physicality, emotions, politics, money, and morality as dramatically as sport'. In the following three hundred pages, Besnier, Brownell, and Carter approach sport as 'a microcosm of what life is about' and as a window on what Durkheim called 'the serious life', offering the reader an ethnographically and theoretically rich discussion of a variety of interrelated topics. First introducing the history of focusing on play, games, and sport in anthropological research in general, the authors proceed to scrutinizing sport through the lens of postcolonial studies, to analyzing the relationship between sport, health, and medicine, and to exploring the complex links between sport, class, race, and ethnicity. From here, the discussion moves on to exploring the value of sport for feminist and anthropological critiques of sex, gender, and sexuality, to studying sporting mega events while building on performance theory, to fitting sport with theories of nationalism, and finally to approaching international sports as a global system.

As the authors make explicit from the very start (p. 4), their aim is not to engage in debates over whether, for example, chess, cockfighting, video games, and bodybuilding are 'real sports'. Instead, they have included in their analysis a broad spectrum of physical and competitive

activities while remaining critically aware of the historical processes that have led to only some of these activities being categorized as 'sport'. Throughout the discussion, the authors establish links between the local—in case of many topics, in fact, individual sporting bodies—and the global aspects of sport. Such purposeful traversing of social scales explains why the sports under more extensive scrutiny in the book are, for example, football, rugby, cricket, baseball, and sporting mega events while local indigenous or traditional sports receive relatively less attention. The discussion extensively draws on the authors' own long-term experiences as athletes, organizers, practitioners, and spectators of sport, giving the approach a more 'personal touch' and thus rendering the reading experience even more enjoyable and insightful.

*Sport, Migration, and Gender in the Neoliberal Age* digs deeper into some of the topics covered in *Anthropology of Sport*. This co-edited volume is an outcome of Niko Besnier's five-year project titled 'Globalization, Sport, and the Precarity of Masculinity' and it brings together ethnographic case studies by project members and invited authors on football, rugby, cricket, ice hockey, long-distance running, boxing, tennis, and (Senegalese) wrestling. Focusing on a wide variety of cultural and national contexts, the articles of the volume provide the reader with a nuanced perspective on the interconnections of sport, South-North labor migration, and gender in the contemporary world. The volume also offers novel insights into neoliberalism since sport migration, an obvious manifestation of this, has hitherto remained a relatively understudied phenomenon by anthropologists. The topic of gender, as Susan Brownell (p. 256) emphasizes in the epilogue to the volume, might feel like an 'add-on' to the relatively weightier topics of migration and neoliberalism, but the additional focus on gender in nearly all

articles of the volume constitutes, in fact, one its major contributions. As most of the case studies eloquently highlight, the global sports economy of today's world cannot be understood without also focusing on the gendered dimension of it.

Just like *Anthropology of Sport*, or perhaps even more so owing to its narrower focus, *Sport, Migration, and Gender in the Neoliberal Age* foregrounds the value of the ethnographic approach in the study of sport. Doing ethnography has enabled the contributors to the volume to escape over-simplifications about athlete migrations in the neoliberal age. Studies of African footballers in Turkey, Kenyan runners in Japan, young Finnish male hockey players, Ghanaian boxers, and the wives of Fijian rugby players—to bring just a few examples of the many exciting cases brought together in this book—demonstrate the value of ethnography for uncovering the various micro-level factors, individual aspirations, and relationships in the athletes' lives as these unfold in the context of global economies and macro-level processes, being shaped by but also contesting them.

To conclude, both books are a valuable and rewarding read for all scholars and students of anthropology of sport, and, in fact, for anyone interested in reflecting on sports beyond what happens on the field, in the ring, or on the court. Neither of the books is *just* about sports—instead, sport constitutes a window into studying some of the most central topics in contemporary anthropological discussions

such as the body, self, race, class, identity, gender, ritual, performance, spectacle, nationalism, globalization, power, inequality, and so forth. As such, both *Anthropology of Sport* and *Sport, Migration, and Gender in the Neoliberal Age* demonstrate the significance of sports for understanding and interpreting contemporary societies and social life and pull sport away from 'beyond' and 'beneath' the discipline, into the very center of anthropological scrutiny.

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