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Towards a feminist playology: social sport studies and the limits of critique

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Conclusion

Towards a feminist playology

Now we are directing ourselves towards a conclusion, we must ask once more what the theory of play offers to our understanding of the data that emerged from the interviews over and above the Marxist, cultural studies and Foucauldian poststructuralist paradigms that we find in the field of social sport studies. More particularly, we must conclude how the integration of the insights provided for by the theory of play and our establishment of a post-Marxist framework, provides us with the required model or method for making adequate sense of the experiences of the elite women's football players, such as expressed by themselves. To this end, it is worthwhile recapitulating both the empirical and theoretical findings of the preceding chapters.

In the first 3 chapters of this thesis, I have presented my fieldwork of elite women's football in the Low Countries as a critical perspective on contemporary dynamics and intersections of gender, ethnicity/race, sexuality and athleticism in modern sports. The empirical study looked at the social significance of elite women's football in the context of two related developments in elite women's football, as set out in the introduction to this thesis. First, women's football has seen enormous growth over the past years in terms of levels of participation and media attention. Second, the sport is no longer solely an amateur one, but became semi-professional with increasing levels of facilities, sponsorship and support systems. Both developments should, however, be understood in relation to the still dominant image of football as a masculine sport.

In order to give an account of the social significance of elite women's football, I first of all gave an overview of the theoretical frameworks in the field of social sports studies. On this basis, I delineated three paradigms that currently inform the field of social sport studies: Marxism, cultural studies and Foucauldian poststructuralism. Central to the Marxist-informed framework is the theorisation of the experiences of elite athletes in reference to labour, that is the reproduction of material existence. For Marxist-informed sport theorists, elite sport is a derivative phenomenon growing out of alienated labour in which those positive values that are usually associated with leisure and sports are either negated as a result of the dominance of the values of capitalist society or recognized in an illusory fashion. Accordingly, in Marxist-informed sport studies, the experiences of elite athletes are either understood in terms of the alienated character of work, or in reference to an illusionary realm that is falsely equated with the realm of freedom. Central to the cultural studies paradigm is the explanatory value attributed to Gramsci's notion of hegemony. Accordingly, in this framework power is not conceptualised in terms of coercion, but as more subtle forms of ideological dominance. However, I argued that in congruence with the Marxist paradigm, the cultural studies trajectory eventually overlooks the relevance of sport to sexual politics. This irreducibility of identity exclusion to class oppression is a core theme within the Foucauldian poststructuralist paradigm. Central to the poststructuralist paradigm is the emphasis on the local or in short localities as the site for the theorisation of the workings of power. Accordingly, this framework allows for an analysis of the diverse modes of subjection in relation to gender, race/ ethnicity and sexuality in elite sports.

Second, informed by the insights provided by the existing frameworks in social sport studies I analysed the data that emerged from the interviews. The analysis pointed out the necessity of both a confirmatory and complementary stance towards the existing frameworks. As regards confirmation, the data of this research supports the established view that both the experiences of 'policing of gender' and 'high performance' are central for elite sport players. The theme of 'high performance' is accounted for in those social sports studies that, taking their cue from the Marxist, cultural studies and Foucauldian poststructuralist frameworks, interrogate the modern instrumental approach to sport and its neoliberal development. The theme of 'gender policing' is accounted for in all those social sport studies that, drawing upon cultural studies and (feminist) poststructuralist frameworks, focus on identity construction and the question of gender-normalization, transgression and compliance in relation to high performance sport.

Concerning the need for supplementation, a key part of the data that emerged from the interviews, namely those encompassing references to sacrifice, cannot be accounted for by the existing frameworks in social sport studies. More particularly, it was made apparent that in contrast to the view upheld by the existing frameworks in social sport studies the themes of 'gender policing' and 'high performance' do not exhaust the experiences of the elite women's football players, as these reveal that their 'willingness' to make sacrifices cannot be explained in terms of football's culture of obedience.

Third, on this basis, I concluded that the existing frameworks in social sport studies are not sufficient for this study and formulated the central research question this research poses: **How should we conceptualize the experiences of the elite women's football players in order to do justice to the experience of sacrifice that always accompanies it?** I argued that our task of giving a comprehensive account of the experiences of the elite women's football player cannot rely on the existing theoretical frameworks alone, but must be complemented with a theoretical framework that (i) allows us to make sense of the theme of sacrifice and (ii) allows us to theorize the experience of 'high performance', 'gender policing' and 'sacrifice' as unified. For the women's football players experience 'high performance', 'gender policing' and 'sacrifice' in conjunction with one another.

Fourth, to this end I considered two related, yet distinct theories that are promising for an account of sacrifice. These are the an-economic theory of sacrifice, such as we find in the work of the main figures of the Collège de sociologie, amongst whom are Caillois, Michel Leiris and most notably Georges Bataille, and the pre-rational theory of play that we find in the works of Fink, Gadamer, and Huizinga. Regarding the an-economic theory of sacrifice, it has been made clear that this understanding is important for our task, as it allows us to theorize the experience of sacrifice as a limit experience, and secondly counters the logic of scarcity. However, it was also made clear that we must depart from Bataille's notion of sacrifice, as it is incompatible with the themes of 'high performance' and 'gender policing.' We are in need of a concept of experience that allows for an understanding of 'sacrifice'

congruent with the experience of 'high performance' and 'gender policing'. Subsequently we argued that the theory of play provides us with the required tools to give a theoretically sound account of the references to sacrifice in the data of this study. The theory of play offer us a concept of experience—the experience of play—which both temporarily suspends the rules, regulations and causalities of the dominant reality, yet cannot be understood as the other side of reason. By contrast, according to the pre-rational philosophy of play, the distinction between the rational and the irrational (or in terms of the language of play, the playful and the serious) is only a secondary or historical phenomenon. In 'reality proper', they argue, playfulness and seriousness are united. Finally, I have concluded that the pre-rational theory of play provides the theoretical model needed to conceptualize the experience of sacrifice, as being distinct from, yet bound to the experiences of 'high performance' and 'gender policing'.

In chapter 4 I looked at the philosophical significance of the introduction of play into the existing frameworks in social sport studies. More particularly, as the theory of play has made visible that the existing frameworks miss important insights in theorizing the subject, I have argued that we must establish a method capable of giving a comprehensive account of the data that emerged from the interviews with the elite women's football players. To this purpose I read the existing frameworks in social sport studies through the theory of play and questioned how the theory of play forces us to think them anew. First, I argued that each of the paradigms has something to offer to our analysis of the data that emerged from the surveys. More particularly, on the basis of our establishment of a post-Marxist framework, I suggested that; (i) the Marxist side of the framework allows us to make adequate sense of the theme of 'high performance', by way of a theory of alienation, albeit not explicitly normative: (ii) the Foucauldian poststructuralist side of the framework allows us to make sense of the theme of 'gender normalisation' by providing the necessary theoretical tools to theorize the diverse modes of subjection in the context of the experiences of the elite women's football players; (iii) the theory of play allows us to make adequate sense of the theme of 'sacrifice'.

Second, I argued that by forgetting or overlooking play, both sides of this framework result in a normative monism that forecloses the possibility of a proper understanding of the references to sacrifice that we find in our data. In contrast to the normative monism that we find in the existing frameworks, I show that the experience of sacrifice points to an experience of the co-existence of value systems, that is that of the dominant reality and play. The elite women's football players do not sacrifice a certain part (say, their health) of the real world to another (say, money), but to play. The results are playing subjects occupying what Fink calls a particular schizophrenic position, one side engaged with the dominant reality and the other with the world of play. Accordingly, I argued that the theory of play forces us to consider not determinacy, but indeterminacy as the defining characteristic of the subject.

Third, on this basis, I argued that the theory of play offers us a new model of the subject: the playing subject and with that a new way to think freedom and resistance that is lacking in the field of social sport studies. Lacking, as the theory of play exposes the conceptual, ethical and political wrongs of positing determination as the true principle of life and by extension take an active part in normalisation. First, insofar as the existing frameworks in social sport studies adhere to normative monism, they make the players' engagement in play inexplicable even to themselves, resulting in self-alienation and self-pathologisation. Second, given the adherence to normative monism, in these frameworks, resistance is sought within the domain of objectivist reason itself, which risks triggering further modes of oppression.

Thus, the playing subject has revealed that the understanding of subjectivity and freedom that we find in the existing frameworks in social sport studies not only begs the theoretical question of normativity, that is how can supposedly normalised selves counter their own normalisation, but is far from innocent, both ethically and politically. By contrast, our analysis of the playing subject brought into focus that the conceptual distinction between freedom and oppression itself is imposing modes of oppression. We argued that as long as the elite women's football players make use of tools informed by the belief in the opposition between playfulness and seriousness, they can, and supposedly only can, see their life and life choices as irrational. In addition, the analysis of the playing subject has revealed that as long as freedom remains tied to a negative concept of liberty, it remains dependent on normative monism, which in turn can only limit the subject.

For the playing subject, freedom does not consist of the elimination of constrains, but must be understood as the condition or capacity for choosing worlds. Thus, instead of thinking freedom as 'freedom from', where freedom is considered negatively as the elimination of constrains, the theory of play advances a positive understanding of freedom as the capacity to choose worlds. The word choice must here however be treated with caution, as it is does not refer to the notion of choice understood as a selection of options outside the subject that are independently available to it. This is the domain of instrumental reason. The freedom of the playing subject is not the freedom of selection, but a freedom of choice that is connected to an active self. More particularly, it is the inalienable capacity to call oneself back from and into play.

Hence, we argued that the playing subject is a free subject because she has a choice between scales of values. Regardless of its modes of subjection, the playing subject is gifted with this capacity to choose between worlds. Yet, in contrast to the oppositional pairing of freedom and oppression, this capacity has no given content and cannot be defined. This is because it is not a quality or attribute, of which the meaning is determined by something outside it. By contrast, the freedom brought to us by the playing subject must be understood as an expression of indetermination, the very indetermination that characterises the subject. On the other hand, every positive definition of freedom gives determinism the last say.

Accordingly, the playing subject revealed that if we still want to speak about resistance we must radically alter the common understanding of the term. Insofar as it is indetermination that liberates our lives from the forces that bind us, we can no longer adhere to the notion of resistance as *opposition* to power. By contrast we emphasised that resistance must be understood as resistance against monism, that is determinism. Resistance is the practice of living in several worlds; resistance against the false choice we are presented with: to consider ourselves as either subjects or objects. The playing subject is always both, that is both player and plaything.

Having recapitulated both our empirical and theoretical findings we are now in a better position to conclude what the theory of play offers to our understanding of the data that emerged from the interviews over and above the Marxist, cultural studies and Foucauldian poststructuralist paradigms that we find in the field of social sport studies. More particularly, we are now in a better position to conclude on the characteristics of our method or framework. The dominant view upheld by social sport studies is that elite football is a form of work, that is, it is considered an environment where instrumentality and productivity prevail. Accordingly, athletes are considered to be intending sports in an objectivist mode. However, this thesis has revealed that we must reconsider the prevailing idea that sport's culture of obedience would exhaust the experiences of the elite women's football players. More particularly, what the references to sacrifice have brought into view is that even though the elite women's football players are subjected to both normation and normalisation, a key part of their experiences are lived and regarded as their own reward. This, we argued, is the experience of play. Whether the initial intention to be involved in football was instrumental or not is however not determinative of the experience of play. In this regard, the world of elite football has proved itself to be a fertile terrain for subjects to live the uniqueness of play, albeit temporarily.

While this may sound promising, what this study has also brought into view is that even though the elite women's football players may have some tacit understanding of their experience of being in play, eventually within the concrete context of their experiences they are denied the conceptual recourses to make full sense of their experiences. It is precisely for this reason that a self-understanding through play may bring about emotional or spiritual health. What this importantly means is that the philosophy of play should not be understood as being merely a theoretical framework. It must also be understood as a therapeutic exercise that invites players to attend to the relation between reality and the self. Accordingly, the therapeutic potential of the philosophy of play consists of the fact that it allows for self-discovery.