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

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English Summary

This project started with the aim to develop knowledge about the social significance of the experiences of elite women's football players in the Low Countries. More precisely, it aimed to understand how elite women's football players experience football as both an emancipatory and oppressive practice. It asked this in the context of two related developments. 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 has become semi-professional with increasing infrastructure, facilities, sponsorship and support systems. Both developments should, however, be understood in relation to the image of football as a masculine sport which remains dominant. It was only in 1971, with the end of the ban on organized women's football in Europe, that women's football players could officially occupy a place on the field, and in 1979, that the Dutch football organization enshrined girls' football in its regulations.

The data that emerged from the empirical part of this study revealed that the usual questions concerning the diverse ways that elite women's football players are constituted as subjects must be complemented with another question: how can we account for the willingness of players to make sacrifices in terms of health, social life and financial security?

While the making of sacrifices seems part and parcel of any elite sportsperson's life, remarkably the insights that we find in the current literature in social sport studies are not able to make sufficient sense of the elite women's football players' experiences of sacrifice. These insights, largely informed by Marxism, cultural studies and Foucauldian poststructuralism, address the willingness of players to make sacrifices in terms of instrumental reason. The data of our study point out that this understanding overlooks a deeper level of experience that cannot be understood with reference to instrumental reason: the irreducible lived meaning of playing football.

The thesis put forward in this research is that the existing Marxist, cultural studies and Foucauldian poststructuralist frameworks of social sport studies must be supplemented by the theory of play inherited from Johan Huizinga, Eugen Fink and Hans-Georg Gadamer for both theoretical and ethical reasons. I argue that the theory of play allows us to make sense of the experiences of sacrifice. More precisely, understanding play as an independent, irreducible structure of experience, allows us to make sense of the women's football players' experiences of sacrifice in a way complimentary to and compatible with the indispensable insights of Marxism, cultural studies and Foucauldian poststructuralism. Secondly, I argue that the theory of play shows that the existing frameworks miss important insights into theorizing the subject and, by extension, introduces a notion of freedom and resistance that is currently *lacking* in the field of social sport studies. The new model this thesis establishes is called 'feminist playology'.

Feminist playology synthesizes the key theoretical insights that we find in Marxism, cultural studies, Foucauldian poststructuralism and the theory of play into a new model. To be more precise it consists of a two-step synthetic account. First, it establishes a synthesis of Marxism, cultural studies and Foucauldian poststructuralism under the label of post-Marxism and secondly, it establishes a synthesis of post-Marxism with the theory of play. It argues first of all that the Marxist side of the post-Marxist framework provides the necessary tools to situate the historical separation of play and work in the context of elite sports. Secondly, it argues that the Foucauldian poststructuralist side of the framework provides the necessary tools to theorize the diverse modes of subjection in the concrete context of the experiences of elite sportspeople. Thirdly, it argues that the theory of play provides the necessary tools to think subjectivity, freedom and resistance that are lacking within the existing theoretical frameworks. And, it is called 'feminist' as it offers an account of resistance to normativity in general taking gender normativity as its paradigm.

Feminist playology advances a conceptualisation of freedom that is independent from a reference to instrumental reason. By contrast, it is based on the anthropological discovery of a new kind of subjectivity: the playing subject who engages both the dominant reality and play, in the absence of a third overarching scale of value. Hence, it argues that it is not determination, but indetermination that characterises the playing subject. Indetermination is what exceeds the terms and functions outside the oppositional understanding of the subject, as either resting on pure consciousness or being fully constituted by the outside world.

To be more precise, feminist playology advances the thesis that the playing subject is a free subject as she has a choice between at least two worlds. This choice is expressed as the inalienable capacity to call oneself back from and into play, without being subjected to power and discourse or material necessities. Feminist playology argues, however, that there is nothing inherently good or bad about the playing subject's capacity to choose between worlds. 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 playing must be understood as a consequence of indetermination, the very indetermination that characterises the subject.

In addition, the playing subject reveals that any talk of resistance should be revised. 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, feminist playology emphasises that resistance must be understood as resistance against monism, that is determinism. Resistance is the practice of living in multiple worlds.