Sport, physical education, and social justice: religious, sociological, psychological, and capability perspectives

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Review of “Watson, N. J., Jarvie, G., & Parker, A. (Eds.). (2020). *Sport, Physical Education, and Social Justice: Religious, Sociological, Psychological, and Capability Perspectives*. Routledge.

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Abstract:

In this review I analyse the book "Sport, Physical Education, and Social Justice: Religious, Sociological, Psychological, and Capability Perspectives", edited by Nick J. Watson, Grant Jarvie and Andrew Parker, published by Routledge in 2020. After a first introduction in which I illustrate some traits of my experience that led me to be interested in these themes, I propose a brief summary in which I emphasize the main issues and theoretical approaches proposed by its 11 chapters. To conclude, I illustrate what I believe to be the main strengths and weaknesses of this book: the ability to embrace the complexity of the issues dealt with on the one hand, on the other perhaps the lack of pragmatism, and the absence of the issue of "health", which however is strongly linked to each of the topics analysed.

Review of “Watson, N. J., Jarvie, G., & Parker, A. (Eds.). (2020). *Sport, Physical Education, and Social Justice: Religious, Sociological, Psychological, and Capability Perspectives*. Routledge.

There is no doubt that the issue of social justice, today, is very important. Moreover, it is at the heart of many of my concerns: as a PhD student I used to discuss with my supervisor about the need for a committed, militant sociology. As a researcher, then, I began to converge towards a socially responsible sociology: I wanted to be the bearer of these “messages in the bottle” mentioned by Horkheimer and Adorno in *Dialektik der Aufklärung*. I approached the issue of social justice, such as John Rawls’ works, applying them in the field of health. And then, a few years ago I was recruited in my current university, in an environment in which social inequalities affect the local population, especially the younger generations. In this university, I lecture on social health inequalities and social justice in the areas of adapted physical activities and nursing sciences.

I found this book while trying to explore the link between physical activity and social justice. The first things that struck me were the “religious perspectives” mentioned in the title. If the reference to capabilities was obvious and quite common in the field of sport and social justice, the connection with religious perspectives was quite new for me. The book became even more appealing when I realized that two of three editors had dealt with issues related to religion too. Nick Watson was founder of the Global Congress on Sports and Christianity. Andrew Parker was Professor of Sports Ministry at Ridley Hall Theological College (Cambridge, UK). Grant Jarvie was the closest to the issues of equality and social justice. My first impression of a religion-focused book was initially confirmed by the Editorial. Not that I was sorry: I considered this as a further indicator of originality.

Deepening the reading, the work seems more balanced. If in the first chapter, the (Christian) religious dimension is still central, in the second - a position statement, such as the following chapters, up to the ninth - it is more nuanced, and the topic of Judaism appears more like a cultural one, despite the references to ancient core texts. The author proposes a historical excursus of the relationship between Jews, sport, and discrimination.

The three following chapters, moving away from the more theological framework of the previous ones, enter the merits of the relationship between sport for development and peace (SDP) and the theory/practice of social justice. Chapter three deals more with capability approach as a framework for the construction of the common good, while the fourth, basing in a psychological approach, analyses some participatory local sport programs, providing postulates encapsulating the characteristics of high-quality critical sport for development, and drawing on principles of decolonization. Similarly, the following chapter, provides a critical sociological approach (*à la* Charles Wright Mills), hypothesising that sport-based programs can have a positive impact going beyond the world of sport itself if mobilized through a transformative approach addressing fundamental issues of global underdevelopment and inequality.

Chapter six to nine are more education-centred. Garratt and Kumar's one, rooted on a Foucauldian approach, criticises the historical dominance of children's engagement in competitive sports in schools and the elision between physical activity and physical education, that, in the authors' view, may have served to perpetuate the *status quo*. It concludes with a case study of positive practice, interesting but perhaps too short. This negative view of the competitive practices is partially questioned in the seventh chapter, in which – starting from a wide range of definitions – the authors suggest that “character education in a competitive and democratic sport team contexts can promote social justice by impacting the development of athlete's character” (p. 112). Chapter 8 offers a figurational sociological approach to understand issues relating to bullying in school based physical education. Basing in an Eliasian approach, it addresses mainly gender and sexuality-based bullying, while the issue of racism and racial inequality is at the core of the following chapter, drawing from work in the tradition of critical race theory, stressing the political dimension of sports too.

The last two chapters deal more with societal issues. Jarvie and Ahrens' chapter refers most of all to Amartya Sen's theoretical frame and focuses on the experience of The Homeless World Cup Foundation, and Street Soccer Scotland, one of its partner organizations, and on their actions for social integration and development of capability. The last chapter, analyses the role of sport protest under Donald Trump's presidential administration, proposing two examples. The first one, highly visible, is Colin Kaepernick's well known case, and his struggle against racism. The second one, less recognised, is New England Patriot's members' refusal to meet the president, and their fight against sexism.

This book, that is addressed to a wide range of readers (undergraduate, postgraduate, researchers, practitioners, general public), has several interesting aspects. Among these, it addresses the relationship between physical activity (sport, physical education) and social justice through both microscopic (individual experience, psychological dimension, educational relationship) and macroscopic (social, societal, cultural, and religious) frames. Furthermore, it proposes a strong interdisciplinary dimension, crucial to address the complexity of the issues analysed (capability, social justice, sport, racism, etc.).

We come to the (few) weaknesses of this book: first, it tries to propose potential strategies for social justice action, without entering a pragmatic dimension, often limiting itself to proposing some examples, analysing them basing on some specific theoretical perspective, and then describing their positive effects. Furthermore, none of the chapters focuses on the health dimension, which however is strongly linked to each of the issues analysed, especially that of social justice. But these are certainly weaknesses that do not affect the overall quality and originality of this one-of-a-kind book, which I warmly recommend.