


# Assessing the sociology of sport: On action sport and the politics of identity

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## Abstract

On the 50th anniversary of the ISSA and IRSS, Belinda Wheaton, a key figure in understanding emerging, high-risk, and lifestyle sports and their cultures, assesses developments in the sociology of sport that concern the politics of identity and action sport. In reflecting on the trajectory of inquiry, Wheaton notes the struggles of scholars to determine what constitutes sport and reflects on the ways in which action sport both challenges and reproduces dominant relations and meanings. Because many forms of action and informal sport continue to grow rapidly and outpace the expansion of many traditional sports in many Western nations, they represent an important lens for understanding sport in contemporary settings because they are characterized by boundary-crossing activities that traverse sport and art, play and games. Key challenges for the field include understanding the paradoxes that come with commercialization and professionalization as well as understanding how emergent sport subcultures may evolve in non-Western settings. Key on the agenda for the future will be a need for scholars to continue to expose the political formations and to link identity politics in emergent sport to broader structural forces to better understand power and inequality.

## Keywords

action sport, cultural politics, identity, lifestyle sport, subculture, youth sport

## Introduction: 'that's not sport!'

Debate about what *sport* is, and how it can be differentiated from play, leisure and games, is a question that has engaged sport philosophers for decades and continues to drive debate in introduction to 'sport' classes. Yet for most sociologists of sport, this problem is a fleeting one; their focus has tended to be on elite or competitive sporting organizations, cultures, events and industries. These are important concerns, but they

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only represent one part of the sporting landscape. In this essay I conceptualize *sport* as a multifaceted, boundary-crossing activity (Atkinson, 2010) that does not *need* to involve competitive activity, rules or institutions. I argue that informal non-competitive sporting activities have long-been and remain a central part of the sporting landscape. My focus is on action and lifestyle sports and their increasing centrality to the global sports-scape in the 21st century, as participatory experience, as mediated event and as part of the global and local sport industry. I argue that this intensifying trend presents a conceptual and empirical challenge for a sociology of sport rooted in traditional understanding of what sport is; and simultaneously present opportunities to think about what a less-competitive, more inclusive, ethical, environmentally-aware, cosmopolitan sport culture *could* be.

### **Reflections on the trajectory of action-sport in the 21st century: challenging and reproducing the dominant?**

Since their emergence in the 1960s, action sports such as skateboarding have experienced unprecedented growth both in participation and in their increased visibility. Evolving in a unique historical conjuncture of global communication, corporate sponsorship, entertainment industries, and a growing global young, affluent demographic, action sports have spread around the world far faster than most established sports (Thorpe and Wheaton, 2011). Driven by a multi-million-dollar industry selling commodities and lifestyles to 'hard-core' aficionados and grazers alike, action sports have an importance that 'far transcends' the relatively few numbers of dedicated active participants (Booth and Thorpe, 2007: ix).

The allure and excitement of action sport has been appropriated to sell every kind of product, service and experience imaginable. The media's appetite for such sports is exemplified by the success of ESPN's X-Games which, by 2003, less than 10 years after its inauguration (1995), had commanded a global audience of 50 million (Thorpe and Wheaton, 2011). Conversely, during this time period, the youth audience for the Olympics was steadily declining (Thorpe and Wheaton, 2011), and television contracts for the Big 3 – football, baseball and basketball – lost the North American networks billions of dollars (Booth and Thorpe, 2007: 190). The emergence and increasing media support for action sports in the Olympic Games (e.g. snowboarding, BMX, windsurfing, mountain biking), is testament to their continued appeal to youth audiences and ability to adapt across boundaries from 'lifestyle' to achievement sport. The star performers such as Tony Hawk (skateboarder), Shaun White (snowboarder), Kelly Slater and Lisa Anderson (surfers) have, like other global sport celebrities, transcended their subcultures to inhabit trans/national space.

Accompanying this rapid expansion has been cultural fragmentation, with enthusiasts engaging in a wide variety of participation styles which, in the (post-Fordist) capitalist economy, support new and profitable niche markets (Thorpe and Wheaton, 2011). Thus, the ways in which consumers can experience action sports are ever-diversifying, simultaneously being promoted to previously peripheral audiences. The surfing 'experience', characterized by youthful white masculinity, is being marketed to an expanding range of

niche groups such as ‘tween’ girls (*Roxy’s* latest target), silver surfers (retirees with income), and ‘burkinis’ for Muslim surfer–girls (Comer, 2010). The commercial possibilities of the surfing experience include indoor surf domes, surf reefs, and wave pools as ‘on-board’ entertainment on luxury cruise ships. As Van Bottenburg and Salome (2010) suggest, activities characterized as self-directed, conducted in ‘nature’, are increasingly being repackaged as more structured indoor leisure experiences.

## Assessing the challenges for the sociology of sport

In the 21st century action sports are thus attracting a still-growing and diversifying body of male and female consumers and participants, from increasingly diverse global geographical settings, including parts of Africa, Asia and South America (see Booth and Thorpe, 2007; Comer, 2010). The lack of formal organizations and the outdoor nomadic nature of these activities makes it hard to measure participation accurately. However the available sources (such as sales of equipment, market research, participation surveys and media commentaries) confirm that involvement in many types of action and informal sports continues to grow rapidly, outpacing the expansion of many traditional sports in many Western nations (see e.g. Gilchrist and Wheaton, 2011; Howell, 2008).

Action sport cultures therefore provide an important lens to understanding the empirical and theoretical trajectories and challenges of ‘sport’ in the 21st century. These boundary-crossing activities that traverse sport and art, play and games (Atkinson, 2010) provide interesting and useful cultural forms and spaces to map the ways in which sport cultures, experiences and identities are shifting in the transition from modernity to post-modernity. Are these sport sites where traditional sporting identities, discourses and forms of embodiment, are reproduced, or challenged? Do these ‘reflexive life projects’, forms of identity management and lifestyles surrounding these cultures ‘hold potentially emancipatory potential’ (Carrington, 2007: 51) confronting what sport is, or could be?

Mapping some of the most fruitful directions of contemporary research, it is evident that action sport research across different sports, contexts and geographic locales has proliferated over the past decade (see debate in Thorpe and Wheaton, 2013). The paradoxes and continued challenges via commercialization and professionalization remain a focus. More innovative and productive theoretical lenses have been adopted, particularly around the spatial and affective dimensions of these sporting subjectivities and spaces.<sup>1</sup> But, reflecting the sociology of sport more broadly, research exploring intersectionality, ‘the multiply–constitutive character of axes of power, inequality and identity on a global scale’ (Carrington, 2007: 55), is more limited. Revealing the racialized spaces of lifestyle sports, and the articulations of race with gender, sexuality, age and class, historically, temporally and as it registers and resides in space, remains a key challenge in understanding their cultural politics, particularly in the expanding hubs outside the Global North (Wheaton, 2013). For example, action sports have been heralded as providing a challenge to traditional ways of doing and seeing sport; yet many have remained or even *become* the playgrounds of affluent western white men (Kusz, 2004). What are minority participants’ experiences of belonging and exclusion; how are sporting identities, discourses and forms of embodiment reproduced and challenged?

The rampant commercialization and mainstream incorporation of action sport cultures has, in some contexts, also led to more sexist, and homophobic cultures.

Concurrently, and somewhat paradoxically, participants believe their cultures embrace ways of living that are different to – and better (more inclusive, environmentally-aware, cosmopolitan, ethical) – than those of the (North American) mainstream. For example surfers have been at the forefront of environmental campaigns for cleaner seas and groups such as the Black Surfing Association are actively working to create spaces and opportunities for minority ethnic participants (see Wheaton, 2013). In *some* contexts action sports do have the potential to include participants from a range of different backgrounds, including the least privileged. Activities such as skateboarding, parkour and surfing are being targeted by an increasingly wide range of agencies and stakeholders because of their perceived value as a way to address a range of social ‘issues’ and ‘problems’ from social inclusion to health (e.g. Gilchrist and Wheaton, 2011). Emerging research and media reports have highlighted a growing number of action sports for development and peace [SDP] initiatives in the Global South (e.g. ‘Skatistan’ in Afganistan, and ‘Skateboarding for Hope’ in South Africa).

### **Future directions for the sociology of sport: action sport and the politics of identity**

To explore these issues I have advocated an approach that is contextually grounded; conceptualizes their cultures, economies and representations within the broader popular cultural leisure landscape; centralizes power relations; and adopts methodological reflexivity and theoretical eclecticism (Sugden and Tomlinson, 2002). My particular version of this approach (Wheaton, 2013) attempted to adopt an intersectional approach to cultural identity, consider how identity is constructed, marked and performed; attend to the myriad ways in which difference and exclusion is manifest (e.g. materially, discursively, spatially); and explore how cultural power is both reproduced and contested.

However, identity remains a contested and confused term, often seen to be divorced from, or a barrier to challenging wider forms of social inequality (Carrington, 2007). Drawing on the genealogy of identity and identity politics within cultural studies, Carrington (2007: 49) challenges this view, illustrating that identity can also be seen as a site for self-actualization and political struggle, as a ‘precondition’ for the development of an ‘effective oppositional politics’ (2007: 50). Centring questions of cultural identity helps expose ‘the complex articulations of dominant ideologies’ in action sport cultures while also acknowledging the ‘pleasure, creativity and instances’ of resistance and occasionally, transformation that sport can provide (Carrington, 2007).

The challenge for theorists then is not only to continue to expose the political potential of these subcultural formations but also to link identity politics to broader structural forces, exposing power and inequality both *within* and *between* these formations. As such, the ways in which particular discourses about action sports dovetail with ideologies of the neoliberal consumer can be exemplified, thus fashioning self-reliant, self-monitoring, individualistic and flexible consumers (Howell, 2008). However, while action sports are being mobilized by a range of agencies, the process is not without contestation and, concurrently, individual and collective experiences of identity are also shifting. Research

needs to tease out *how* particular discourses are made meaningful by people, and reveal who is included and excluded discursively, materially and spatially.

In summary, we need to consider if action sports can be more than a metaphor for Western affluent white hetero-normative sporting cultures and spaces (Jarvie, 2006). Research that reveals and provides a platform for some of the hidden, subordinate voices and experiences – such as African American surfers in California, Zulu skateboarders and surfers in South Africa (Wheaton, 2013), lesbian surfers in Cornwall (Roy, 2014), parkour participants in Gaza (Thorpe and Ahmad, 2013) and Skirtboarders inhabiting on-line spaces (Mackay and Dallaire, 2013) – is a starting point. Certainly participant-led organisations like *Surfers against Sewage*, *Stakistan*, and the *Black Surfing Association* provide compelling examples of the politically emancipatory elements within action sports cultures, illustrating how in these informal sporting spaces, cultural identity can be a foundation for developing, and articulating a critical consciousness that goes beyond the sporting sphere (Carrington, 2010). But we must also expose the complex and contradictory articulations of race, gender, sexuality, class, nationhood, dis/ability in these informal but increasingly globally widespread spaces and settings in which action sports take place. Only then can our research contribute to exposing the political possibility of ‘sport’, leisure and physical culture, and its potential to both establish and challenge social order.

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## Note

1. Space precludes a discussion of this research, but see especially Evers, Roy, Olive, Waitt (surfing), McKay, Chiver-Yochim, Atencio & Beal (skateboarding) Pavidis (roller derby); Kidder (parkour); Thorpe (snowboarding).

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