

Sport as Social Policy: Midnight Football and the Governing of Society, by *David Ekholm and Magnus Dahlstedt*, Abingdon, Routledge, 2023, 232 pp., £120.00 (hardback), ISBN 9781032124773 (hardback)

With the book “Midnight football, sport as social policy” David Ekholm and Magnus Dahlstedt provide a Foucauldian-infused analysis to well-worn, yet still highly relevant debates on the role sport as a tool “for social good” and social policy. The book is divided in thirteen chapters. The first three chapters provide an informative overview of current knowledge on sport as an instrument of social policy and a generally clear outline of the book’s analytical framework and methodology. As the book’s perspective on the topic mainly revolves around a Foucauldian framework, in chapter 1 the authors provide an outline of notions such as power, genealogy, discourse, technology, governmentality, and explain their use in the book through Foucault’s notion of problematisation (p. 11). In chapter 2, the authors provide an overview of sport interventions in other contexts (from Canada to Brazil, to US and Belgium) to locate the empirical focus of the book in wider trends in relation to sport and social policy. Chapter 3 provides a contextual overview of the sport intervention in question, Midnight Football (MF), explaining the functioning of the project in specific (anonymised) neighbourhoods of two (anonymised) Swedish cities. The chapter also provides some methodological and ethical considerations on the long-term qualitative research that informed the study, although it is worth noting that a lack of temporal references for the study itself (the reader is not clearly told from in what timeframe the study occurred) does not help in locating the study, and the authors’ discussion in a wider historical, social, political (and policy) context. The nine chapters that follow delve into the presentation and discussion of the data, each addressing a key discursive and policy formations related to the practices of Midnight Football. Chapter 4 provides a discussion of the discursive formation of the urban periphery as a context of localisation of social problems on which the activities of MF are set

to intervene. These are namely to provide a positive space of socialisation for mainly racialised young men from marginalised urban areas, who are broadly understood in policy frameworks as *at risk* of “ending up” in crime and at the same time as *a risk* to wider society through their unstructured social activities. Chapters 5 and 6 provide an “insider” perspective on the discursive premises for the Midnight Football itself, through the voices of civil society actors (voluntary and sport associations), public sector (public and youth services) and (neo)philanthropists (private funders of the project). The chapters provide insightful data on the (typical) neoliberal construction of the “failures of the public sector”, described by civil society actors and philanthropists in the book as generally impassionate, ineffective, and costly in (not) addressing social problems. The chapter describes how such discourses thus inform the rationale for having civil society and philanthropic actors to “bring on the right track” young men in the urban peripheries. While these chapters are interesting, it is also worth noting that the authors do not make any clear connection between the data and conceptualisations of wider trends in social policy linked to neo-liberal reforms of the state in Sweden, and elsewhere, as these clearly relate to the (re)turn to sport as an “effective” tool to address social issues. This is something to which I will return later in offering some general comments on the book. Chapter 7 addresses the dimensions of direct and indirect social control that imbue the project by aiming to spatially contain and divert racialised young men from potentially criminal and/or anti-social activities during the “risky” temporal frame of weekend nights. Chapter 8 addresses the rationality of integration that informs the project and highlights well the different understandings of integration that traverse MF: an institutional one, portraying integration as facilitating the social exchanges between racialised young men and “majority” Swedes, and one emerging from the football coaches and leaders’ perspectives (often racialised, post-migrant men themselves) who talk about a more convivial integration between the different communities that inhabit the stigmatised “urban periphery”.

Chapters 9 and 11, on “Modelling” and “Empowerment” highlight the role of the football coaches in the project as role-models “empowering” young men to do the “right choices” in life (in this case choosing football over “risky” acquaintances and occupations). The chapters highlight the enactment of MF’s social policy objectives using “role models” and an “empowerment” rhetoric, in ways that posits young men at the social and spatial margins of the city as having the freedom *and* responsibility to “make the right choices” and avoid becoming “a risk”, instead of addressing the structural inequalities that shape their trajectories and opportunities. Chapters 10 and 12, focused on “Discipline” and “Desire”, return to the (in)direct social control dimensions of Midnight Football mostly enacted through the assumption that the (self)disciplining practices acquired through sport can spill-over in other social domains and on the idea that the desire to play football (or make it a profession) constitute a way to govern social problems through people’s choices and aspirations. In the conclusions, Chapter 13, the authors synthesise their main findings and reflections on sport as social policy, in a way bringing to the fore both the contributions and limitations of the book, I will address both in the following page(s).

Overall, it is out of doubt that “Midnight Football and the Governing of Society” provides a valid contribution to important dialogues on the use of sport in social policy domains. The authors’ choice to engage with a Foucauldian framework to address MF is relevant to dissect how a conjunction of modes of power and knowledge enabled the project to be framed as an “innovative” means to “reform” (at best) and “control” (at least) racialised young men framed as *a(t) risk*. At the same time, the authors’ over-reliance on a Foucauldian framework somehow limited the book’s analytical breadth and stifled the clear enunciation of some its original contributions. For example, the authors rightly mention processes of racialisation as a key factor in the determination of (post)migrant young men in urban peripheries as a “problem to be solved”. However, nowhere in the book these processes are aptly explained,

theorised, and contextualised in relation to the study. This could have been done by engaging more with perspectives that illuminated the pervasive forms of racialised exclusion in place in Swedish society (see Schierup, Ålund, and Kings, 2014). Notably, a Foucauldian framework could have also been used to address these issues (see, Su Rasmussen, 2011), yet such conceptualisation is absent. A more consistent dialogue with (among others) Hartmann's work (2016) could have also enriched the book's insights on the interplay between racialisation, inequality and responsabilisation in sport interventions. Hartmann's analysis of "Midnight Basketball" explicitly addressed how this (in)famous sport intervention implicitly reinforced problematic public imaginaries about inner cities' African-American young men as (potentially) great athletes *and* criminal threats. While Hartmann's work is cited and described in the introductory chapters and occasionally referred to in other points of the book, it has mostly been used as a contextual reference rather than as an interlocutor for the discussion of the book. Relatedly, the author's discussion on the "urban periphery" (Chapter 4) as mainly a discursive construction would have benefitted from also addressing the material conditions that co-constitute lived experiences of social and spatial marginalisation in Swedish cities (Tunström and Wang, 2019): wider issues that are made invisible or silenced by the project's focus on individual empowerment/responsibilisation. Again, it is notable here that theoretical perspectives that could have made possible to construct this dialogue in the chapter (such as Lefebvre and Massey's works) are again cited but not really engaged with.

Building on these points, an inconsistent dialogue with the extensive scholarship on sport and social policy and more broadly on sport and social (in)justice in urban contexts undermined the clear enunciation of some of the book's insightful arguments. Many of the arguments that the authors made through the data in the discussion chapters are far from new or groundbreaking for scholars working across the above cited domains, but the authors in many

cases missed to discuss how the data and themes presented resonate with existing analyses, *to then highlight the novel contributions that the book can provide*. This happens throughout the chapters, for example when the authors focus on how the social transformation envisaged by MF focuses on changing the individual and not wider inequalities (as discussed by Hartmann and Kwauk, 2011) or address the rationales for diverting young men’s social practices into the “safe spaces” of sport (see Agergaard et al., 2016). Likewise, well-discussed analyses on sport and neoliberalism(s) (Silk and Andrews, 2012) appear sparingly in the book, despite relevant contributions that these analyses could have offered in highlighting how sport constitutes such a powerful domain for narratives of individual responsabilisation *and* “big society”/community. Overall, the main implication of these missed or inconsistent dialogues is not simply a formal one, nor an issue of “citation politics”, but results in an often-cumbersome discussion that does not help to highlight what the book has to say in terms of original contributions to existing perspectives. In fact, the book makes (at times quite implicitly) some original and valuable points that I am not sure had the space to be discussed in full. This is when, for example, the authors highlight the ambivalence of a rhetoric of empowerment through sport as needing much more attention than currently provided in “strength-based” approaches to sport and social change. Or, when the alternative visions of integration made by MF coaches and participants in Chapter 8 could be possibly read as a *counter-conduct* to the “assimilationist” premises of Midnight Football, bearing in mind how counter-conducts do not amount to open resistance or opposition but as a “pursuit of a different form of conduct [...] towards other objectives that those proposed by the apparent and visible official governmentality of society” (Foucault, 2007, p. 199). The discussions of these chapters could have also potentially benefitted from an engagement with scholarship looking at informal football spaces (see Mauro, 2019) as lenses to interrogate the relationship between sport, (non)belonging and identity in contexts of urban marginalisation.

That said, the points made here are not intended to downplay the contribution of this book to current and relevant inter-disciplinary debates on sport in and as social policy but to offer critical, yet constructive considerations that can hopefully inform further productive dialogues on the topic. At the net of these observations, *Midnight Football* remains a valid contribution to scholarly debates across sport and social/cultural policy. The book can be a useful source for teaching undergraduate and postgraduate addressing sport and social issues, and for scholars researching the intersections of sport and social policy in times of intensifying economic and spatial inequalities and increasing nativism.

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