Sport Sociology, In Question

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In this article, which is an expanded and updated adaptation of the 2018 North American Society for the Sociology of Sport Presidential Address, I look at the challenges and opportunities presented to the field by the Sokal 2.0 hoax. Specifically, I look at issues of epistemology and politics as expressed in, and produced through, the field(s) of sport sociology, physical cultural studies, and critical studies in/of sport. I conclude with a discussion regarding how sport sociologists and scholars in related fields might look to form new associations as they continue to produce politically-meaningful scholarship and seek social justice and social equality there through.

In this intervention, I would like to discuss two matters of concern, as Bruno Latour might put it. In his 2004 essay “Has Critique Run Out of Steam?”, Latour (2004) opens this way:

Wars. So many wars. Wars outside and wars inside. Cultural wars, science wars, and wars against terrorism. Wars against poverty and wars against the poor. Wars against ignorance and wars out of ignorance. My question is simple: Should we be at war, too, we, the scholars, the intellectuals? (p. 225)

One war being fought by the scholars and intellectuals to which Latour refers is being waged on metaphysical battlefields—namely, in the regions of epistemology and ontology. For Latour, these wars as waged in the academy present a double problem: on the one hand, matters of fact—climate change, warmer gulf waters leading to stronger and more frequent hurricanes, proliferating sport-induced head trauma leading to increases in CTE, fracking and increases in seismic activity in Appalachia, hate speech inciting racially-motivated murder, and so forth—are continually being transformed or deformed into matters of concern; through ideologically-motivated discourse and praxis—often in the form of Trump-era Twitter “truths” and populist doublespeak. The material world and explanations thereof are folded into a Derridian dystopia of signifiers, cultural turns, hegemonic relations, and false consciousness(es).

On the other hand, there is mounting disquiet in the public sphere with respect to the purported prevalence of politically-motivated scholarly actors presenting “ideological arguments posturing as matters of fact,” as Latour (2004) put it. He continues:

... entire Ph.D. programs are still running to make sure that good American kids are learning the hard way that facts are made up, that there is no such thing as unmediated, unbiased access to truth, that we are always prisoners of language, that we always speak from a particular standpoint, and so on, while dangerous extremists are using the very same argument of social construction to destroy hard-won evidence that could save our lives. (p. 227)

Thankfully, and perhaps to Latour’s chagrin, I went to one such Ph.D. program.

Seemingly unconcerned by my academic training, however, Latour (2004) carries on by likening critical theorists to conspiracy theorists (implicating Foucault, Baudrillard, and Bourdieu along the way):

we in the academy like to use more elevated causes—society, discourse, knowledge-power, fields of forces, empires, capitalism—while conspiracists like to portray a miserable bunch of greedy people with dark intents, but I find something troublingly similar in the structure of the explanation, in the first movement of disbelief and, then, in the wheeling of causal explanations coming out of the deep dark below. What if explanations resorting automatically to power, society, discourse had outlived their usefulness and deteriorated to the point of now feeding the most gullible sort of critique? (pp. 229–230)

This is a foundational claim in Latour’s oeuvre; namely, that inquiries into the social which in the first instance look for power as expressed in and as discourse have played a pivotal role in shaping social scientific and humanities-oriented research over the past half-century (if not longer), but that in that critical determinism the ‘real world’ or its material conditions have often receded into the shadows of inquest. This line of concern is perhaps best captured in this lengthy quote:

My argument is that a certain form of critical spirit has sent us down the wrong path, encouraging us to fight the wrong enemies and, worst of all, to be considered as friends by the wrong sort of allies because of a little mistake in the definition of its main target. The question was never to get away from facts but closer to them, not fighting empiricism but, on the contrary, renewing empiricism...the critical mind, if it is to renew itself and be relevant again, is to be found in the cultivation of a stubbornly realist attitude. The mistake we made, the mistake I made, was to believe that there was no efficient way to criticize matters of fact except by moving away from them and directing one’s attention toward the conditions that made them possible...Critique has not been critical enough in spite of all its sore-scratching. Reality is not defined by matters of fact. Matters of fact are not all that is given in experience. Matters of fact are only very partial and, I would argue, very polemical, very political renderings of...
matters of concern and only a subset of what could also be called states of affairs. (Latour, 2004, p. 231)

Given Latour is en vogue amongst Western intellectuals these days—in 2018 he was featured in a 15-page profile in the New York Times Magazine—and that he is taking direct aim at previously en vogue critical theorists, postmodernists, and poststructuralists (namely Foucault, Butler, Baudrillard, Cixous, Deleuze, Guattari, Derrida, and Kristeva) who have influenced a significant portion of the scholarship and thinking produced within the NASSS academic community in the last two decades, I thought it might be a useful exercise to take this critique seriously and envisage where such a relational, stubbornly realist orientation might take the sociology of sport.

Before delving deeper, I should note that Latour is not alone in his reproach. By now many readers of this journal are probably familiar with the so-called “hoax” that three Portland-based intellectuals recently perpetrated against a number of humanities- and social science-based scholarly disciplines. A trio of self-described “Left-wing” activists—magazine editor Helen Pluckrose, mathematician James Lindsay, and philosopher Peter Boghossian—dedicated more than a year’s labor to expose, through the submission of a series of 20 fabricated and “farcical” research articles, what they perceived to be the “shoddy, absurd, and unethical side of academia” (quoted in Kafka, 2018).3

In what is now being fancifully referred to as “Sokal 2.0” or “Sokal Squared,”4 the authors’ stated aim was to expose the “culture of corruption” that supposedly preponderates in the fields of sociology, cultural studies, women’s studies, critical race studies, queer studies, postcolonial studies, indigenous studies, critical theory—and, based on the targeting of our journals as with these others—the sociology of sport. These fields, in the aggregate, were labelled by the hoaxers under the umbrella of “grievance studies.” As one reporter who interviewed the fraudsters wrote: “Their goal, in short, is to reveal the identity left as an emperor wearing no clothes: To show that the ideas you hear from liberal intellectuals, activists in #MeToo and Black Lives Matter, and even some Democratic elected officials are vacuous at best” (Beauchamp, 2018, p. 2). Theirs was, according to the authors, an intervention into the critical determinism that had come to hold sway over the contemporary social sciences.

Of the 20 fraudulent submissions, seven papers were accepted, four of which were subsequently published online, and three were in revision when the authors “had to take the project public prematurely and thus stop the study, before it could be properly concluded.”5 Two of the twenty articles were submitted to the flagship journals in our field: the Sociology of Sport Journal and the International Review for the Sociology of Sport—and it should be noted that both of these manuscripts were rejected. Weaving unfounded and far-fetched claims into the conclusions of their analyses, their ploy was to (over)use discipline-specific language and present as fact “findings” which they believed corroborated the dominant identity and cultural politics within grievance studies’ subdisciplines. Such an exercise, in their view, would prove that scholarship in these fields is politically-motivated, scientifically-unsound, and—by virtue of these field’s pervasiveness in the academy—deleteriously invasive on student learning and academic freedom.

Many commentators within and outside the academy heralded the hoaxers for uncovering the extent to critical theory has under mined “objective” and “scientifically-rigorous” social science. Among the ranks of their public confederates including high profile intellectuals and public commentators such as anti-feminist and anti-environmentalist Jordan Peterson, libertarian Dave Rubin, neoconservative Douglas Murray, and right-wing nationalist Ben Shapiro. As a result, there were renewed calls in news outlets such as USA Today, Newsweek, and the New York Times, as well as in trade publications such as the Chronicle of Higher Education, for university administrators to look critically at or even shutter the doors on programs where instruction and research activities are largely guided by feminist, critical race, postcolonial, and queer (naming but a few) perspectives. Their self-purported tactic was to fashion “research articles” that incorporated “the most oppression variables” (Beauchamp, 2018)—with the assumption that by drawing out issues of gender oppression, racism, sexism, and so on using “morally-fashionable” concepts that pervade the journals of fields focusing on gender oppression, racism, sexism, and so on. The cultural studies scholar Ben Carrington (2018) summarizes the politics of such a project thusly:

It’s clear in looking at who has taken up their cause (Douglas Murray, Ben Shapiro, Jordan Peterson, Niall Ferguson, et. al) and their own tweets and comments, that this was not a serious scientific experiment to test the robustness of the peer review process . . . rather it was a politically motivated and ideological attack on all forms of critical scholarship, especially feminist, queer and critical race scholarship, but also all forms of critical theory influenced by poststructuralism and Marxism. (para 1)

I believe Carrington’s response to the project generally reflects my own, so I will not add much here—only to say that theirs is not a critique which will go away on its own. In their efforts to discredit gender studies, intersectional feminism, and critical race studies, each remains active in the public sphere: Pluckrose continues to promote her faux researcher politics as Editor of the online magazine, Areo; Lindsay regularly appears on YouTube videos and satellite radio programs in the service of eradicating grievance studies; and Boghossian regularly contributes to right-wing and neo-conservative media outlets such as the National Review.

The poststructuralists among us might dismiss their fabricated academic texts as meaningless, or the Situationists in the back of the room might simply look to Sokal 2.0 as new fodder for detournement. Scholars committed to social justice, critical inquiry, and intellectual plurality have dealt with Sokal before and can certainly do so this time. However, I am reminded both by Latour and by the sport sociologist Jay Coakley that while the grievance griever’s methods are crude if not cruel, their efforts and politics do resonate with the rhythms of conservative populism which largely define the institutional logics and political rhetoric of our time. In their intermediations in Right-wing and neoconservative media outlets, they conclude that their hoax renders all scholarship in these journals as scientifically “vacuous” and further illustrative of “political correctness run amok” in the academy and in the United States more broadly (Beauchamp, 2018, p. 1). By way of such declarations, matters of fact—the questions raised and answered in our scholarship, by your fieldwork, interviews, heuristic contemplations, statistical analyses—get transformed into matters of concern—counterfeited as acts of political bias, social justice advocacy, based on unfounded claims, and farcical methodology.

This is where Latour and the neo-Sokalists part ways, and where I would like to put up my argument. As a matter of fact, the Sokalists’ fraudulent submission titled “Pretty Good for a Girl”: Feminist Physicality and Women’s Bodybuilding” is not featured in the pages of this journal. In their assessment, the reviewers and editor of our association’s journal found that the submission lacked
both substantive theorization and empirical rigor. There we have it, our flagship journal’s editor—corrupted as he is by Norman Denzin’s anti-foundationalism, CL Cole’s post-structural feminism, and Lawrence Grossberg’s New Left-inspired radical contextualism—and the assumedly grievance-oriented anonymous reviewers, were not suitably enchanted or interpellated by the muddled arrangement of feminist buzzwords, social justice subjectivism, and crass empiricism. So perhaps there is still some science left in us after all! But that is beside the point. The rejected manuscripts in SSJ and IRSS are a matter of concern for what they represent.

I am compelled, if not by the hoaxers then at least by Latour, to think about how the epistemological and political bases of critical theory, social justice scholarship, and postmodernism might be refashioned not to give in to conservative populism, or hackneyed foundationalist scientific orthodoxies, but to a more politically-disruptive modality. To slightly rephrase Latour, I wonder: Is it possible to transform the critical urge into something that adds reality to matters of fact rather than to subtract from reality? More to the point, I am interested in how the products of intellectual work can act anthropomorphically—not just in creating meaning, reality, scientific truths, but in incorporating—by virtue of design and execution—other actors within the state of affairs. My point here is not to suggest that sport sociologists change what they are doing, and certainly not to side with the Sokalists (or even Latour!), but to think about where in the field’s metaphysical boundaries scholars might look to add reality to matters of fact so as to refashion their work in an even more politically-evocative, social justice-oriented way; to let the statement speak for itself, so to speak. I will come back to this point later.

The Biopolitics of “Grievance”

My first matter of concern hinges on the notion of grievance. I found the Sokalists’ use of phrasing, grievance studies, curious. What, exactly, is this “grievance” in the Sokalists’ grievance studies? If we take a textbook definition, we might say that grievance is: “a cause of distress felt to afford reason for complaint or resistance.” What becomes critical for the argument at hand, then, is 1) what is the distress being identified, 2) who is feeling that distress, and 3) how is the complaint or resistance expressed? The Sokalists’ argument goes something like this: Why would we turn to Butler or historical materialism when we have rational choice theory to explain social outcomes, why turn to Fanon when we have Walter Williams to explain racial subjectivities, why turn to Marx when we have mathematics to explain income inequalities? Why look to theories of structure and articulation when we can clearly see the privilege, power, and politics of Peterson, Boghossian, or Shapiro is but the outcomes of agency and choice. Of course, the hoaxers and their critics agree, bringing Butler, Fanon, or Marx to the table is political. That to teach historical materialism or gender performativity is to subject the student to something other than “the facts.”

So the Sokalists might ask, “who are they, the scholars and the pedagogues, to be political”? To let “grievances” or the grievances of others guide teaching and research in the academy? On the one hand, there is a case to be made that many academics—myself included—hold positions of privilege. For some our privilege is imbedded in formations of whiteness and white privilege, patriarchy, heteronormativity, ableness, or social class strata. For others it might be rooted to the knowledge-power relations that Foucault and Freire made clear often operate over the state and its educational dispositifs. These are privileges we have to continue to wrestle with. However, if we believe that injustices and power relations exist—in government, in economy, in social practice, in discourse, in ideology, in history—who are we not to be political (Cooky, 2017). See also Boykoff, (2018)? I would argue that the most bankrupt state of affairs is not one where science is mediated by politics, but rather one where state-enacted violence, structural inequalities, social stratification, exploitation, and disenfranchisement are rationalized, naturalized, and enacted in dialectic cadence with science. Where the outcomes of such violence are reduced to numbers and facts divorced from the processes, systems, and relations from which they are sprung. Thus, if we are to understand the world and its problems, then we need a science which looks for articulations and associations between lived experiences and the structures to which those experiences are dialectically bounded.

Consider the following example: In pledging his grievance to the flag, Colin Kaepernick sought to make an association (or series of associations) between the cultural politics of sport, hegemonic nationalism, dominant racial and political ideologies, structural inequalities, the struggles that define the lived experiences of many black Americans, and the incarceration, policing, and murder of too many of those black Americans (see, e.g., Walton-Fisette, 2018). Kaepernick’s praxical method is haunted by Latourian actor networks. He is an actor amongst actors. He gathers human actors such as Roger Goodell, Donald Trump, and Daniel Pantaleo as well as nonhuman actors such as the law, flags, burnt swooshes, death threats, and Twitter tirades. His grievance cannot be categorized, controlled, predicted, generalized, or rendered absolved from history, ontology, or epistemology. The hoaxers might have us think otherwise, but to teach and research embodied social movements such as this demands a politically-engaged science, politically-informed theories, and politically-entangled scientists. Hence, in the first instance, Kaepernick’s grievance by its nature summons “grievance studies”—with all its associated politics, intersectionalities, dialectics, intersubjectivities, and reflexivitys. It also demands a robust mode of analysis—something which, I would argue, extends beyond the representationalism that pervades in these disciplines. If we only reduce to discourse Kaepernick’s humanness, practices of police brutality, white nationalist football culture (see Hawzen & Newman, 2017), lived social inequalities, and a mode of social reproduction which privileges the Trumps, Goodells, or Bob McNairs are afforded, then we have in some ways deceived the associative complexities of these matters of fact. Human lives have been lost, and others made vulnerable. Power has renewed not just in language and signifiers but in broken bones and FedExed pipe bombs.

To do the opposite, as the hoaxers might have us do, and only look at that which is scientifically objectifiable and proveable could prove equally if not more problematic. As many feminist, critical race, and indigenous scholars have made clear, to turn power into a statistic or privilege into a scale presents a slippery slope—and often means dissociating or reducing intersections, conjunctures, experiences, structures, histories from lived experiences and social outcomes therein.

So on the one hand, this is an issue of the role politics plays in constructing research and on the other on the politics of ontologic-association. The associations Latour would have us make are not that dissimilar to those for which Kaepernick would seek. His act of resistance, as an expression of grievance, brings into association policy and policing, Eric Garner, football culture, and white nationalism. Of course, we should look to performance, discourse, mass media, texts, representations, and the politics of meaning to
make sense of this protest and the counter-protests that followed. However, like Kaepernick, social scientists should also look to root our modes of inquiry in space and time—in materiality and non-discursive actors. In our scholarship, this means adding reality to matters of fact. Matters of fact are being organized in the public and scientific spheres, and who are we to stand quietly and let those seeking to reproduce the dominant order of things to sing alone?

First, the public sphere: In 2017, U.S. President Donald Trump stirred an Alabama crowd into a frenzy by explaining that the NFL should eliminate all workers who express political disquiet on the field, famously calling for the league to: “Get that son of a bitch off the field right now. Out!” We need to think about the incorporations and excorporations Trump is seeking to make, in “making America great again.” Footballing bodies, it seems, need only be associated to this “re-greatened America” when standing at attention or speaking as Patriots. Let us hold not only vitriolic speech accountable, but also the actors who gather and come to be gathered. Let us teach our students democracy and labor laws. Let us look to history and see where this incendiary and divisive populism will take the nation, its football labor, or any social actor. Let us listen closely to the banjos playing through the broken glass. But to make such associations, we need to re-envision the politics of both the social and the science in social science.

Yes, Kaepernick’s kneeling body is symbolic and ideological. He meant for it to be. But he also meant for it to be kinetic, nay associative. It is located in time and space: as physics and as corporeality. He embodies a politics of resistance, one intended to set in motion new matters of concern—but simultaneously to embody the association between living human-ness and the biology which helps us understand it. We know this because Kaepernick reminds us that his life occupies the state of affairs biology which helps us understand it. We know this because his protests as social phenomena also need to be understood based on what is being incorporated or excorporated (see McLeod & Hawzen, 2019). We need a science that summons the multitude of actors being “gathered” around Colin Kaepernick. The assembling is happening whether we remain steadfast to Foucault or not (see Latour, 2005). Trump assembles white nationalism, troops, ‘Back the Blue’ movements. He speaks for Colin Kaepernick, for America and Americaness, for the social. Science is being incorporated as well. For example, Representative Peter King (R-NY) spoke for a matter of fact: stating that, if Garner had been healthier, he would not have died after a police officer placed him in a chokehold: “If he had not had asthma, and a heart condition, and was not so obese, almost definitely he would not have died from this.”

The field of science is thus also implicated in this associationism. Eric Garner, in death, is made into actor. King’s biopolitics are more than rhetoric or hijacking of medical discourse and need to be understood as associations of polity and bios. Eric Garner is incorporated by King within a broader assemblage, one that includes: enacted legislation to detain Muslims for suspected “radicalization,” calls to “clean the streets” of Occupy Wall Street protestors, policies to curtail immigration into the United States from Muslim-majority countries, a Human Rights Campaign score of 4/100 for his voting record on LGBTQ rights issues, and recent claims that protests by NFL players were akin to “Nazi salutes.” Why then did the medical science community stay silent with respect to King’s asthma claim? The coroner’s report that brought these conditions into public consideration as a matter of fact was explicit in declaring Eric Garner’s death a result of homicide.

Why let Peter King or Donald Trump speak on their behalf? On behalf of the dead? Is this silence political or merely neutral? Is non-associative science political? What should “real” scientists do with Colin Kaepernick’s kneeling body?

Social Science as Transformation-Performance

Hence, my second matter of concern is about science. I want us to think about how we might better use science to form associations. The hoaxers would have us “get right” by science by looking for “apolitical” associations; to squeeze the dynamic and chaotic social world into sociological test tubes. Step one, it seems, would be to create facts. This means to transform the messiness of the social into objective data and the truths only “real science” can reveal. Step two, we would need to orchestrate those facts within the frameworks of only modern positivism and the mutations it can conjure up. If we are to understand the social, we need to create variable and conceptual frameworks to look for patterns amongst individuals, they tell us. We can then look at certain personality characteristics or stimuli that might tell us about why the world is the way that it is. We can then implement step three: prediction and control. We can remake the world based on our best categories, our best forms of surveillance and control!

But they don’t get to define science for us . . . unless we let them.

Let us for a moment take a step back. These associations change that world—and not in the ways foundationalists or Sokalists might consider. Tangentially, I always liked the way Marx explains the capitalist mode of production. He makes things quite simple for a novice economist like me when he associates M-C-M. M is money, the capitalist’s money that he or she put to use to make more money. That money is given to labor, and labor makes the commodity (C). The C then hits the marketplace, and is sold—and produces the money (M) comes back to the capitalist. But that second M is not simply M, now is it? M when it comes back to the capitalist has been transformed. First, there’s more of it than the original M—an M greater than M (thanks, surplus value!). That M is also a gaslighter. That M manipulates and deceives. This was the point Marx was making when he used the symbol Delta in M-C-ΔM. This M is both referential and tautological. M leads us to believe that it (money) is the best measure of labor. It operates both symbolically, as a lubricant in the social reproduction of capitalism, and also materially—the natural and labor-wielding biological world is contoured to its excess.

I would like for us to think of social science in much the same way.

The social world exists, though never in the ways that science renders it. Nonetheless, in its complex, fluid, contingent, indeterminably structurated ways, the social world exists. We have been taught that scientists, through mimetic forms of inquiry drawn from the natural sciences transform the world into something it is not. By way of a strategic mode of association, connecting only parts of the whole, the world as rendered in science is also a false representation. As Latour might say, science mediates the world. Social science operates in much the same way as M-C-M. Through such scientific transformations, an attitude is changed into an attitude by science by looking for associations; to squeeze the dynamic and chaotic social world into sociological test tubes. Step one, it seems, would be to create facts. This means to transform the messiness of the social into objective data and the truths only “real science” can reveal. Step two, we would need to orchestrate those facts within the frameworks of only modern positivism and the mutations it can conjure up. If we are to understand the social, we need to create variable and conceptual frameworks to look for patterns amongst individuals, they tell us. We can then look at certain personality characteristics or stimuli that might tell us about why the world is the way that it is. We can then implement step three: prediction and control. We can remake the world based on our best categories, our best forms of surveillance and control!

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networks that constitute any given intersectionality and subjectivity are reduced and made categorical and categorizable.

Enter the problem of ideology. We have been very good at explaining how modern science mediates the world, and hence why we should reject such things as positivism, generalizability, numbers, etc. But what if we instead look to how such scientific modalities might complement the political aims of sociological inquiry; that is, to use science to intermediate (Latour’s terms) the state of affairs. I think most readers would agree that just as research on the cultural politics of neoliberalism and the reproduction of white privilege at NASCAR events is inherently political (see Newman & Giardina, 2011)—and ideological—so too is the type of research that aligns itself with dominant logics of marketization, rationalization, competition, prediction, and control. Indeed, studies on brand communities or those that look to predict consumer behavior are indubitably ideological as well.

Hence, the problem with ideology may very well be a problem of association. Ideology is in some regards another form of gathering. Hypotheses, theories, methods, scales, and whatnot—the so-called techniques of “real” science—are incorporations made on behalf of the researcher or the scholarly community. Just as Likert-scales are summoned for truthness, interpretivism or ontological concerns might be excorporated to keep the science intact. My colleagues have argued elsewhere that this type of science—that fetishized by Sokalists—is a form of performativity. This notion of performativity is derived directly from the work of Latour and his colleague Michel Callon (see Callon, 2007). I will rephrase McLeod’s (2017) explanation of performativity this way: scientists performat, shape, and formulate the world, rather than observing how it functions (p. 2). As McLeod suggests, a scientist “performs when she projects a statement about the world and tools to create a reality in which that statement is true” (p. 2). It is similar to performing in theater; on the stage, an actor possesses a character, idea, or script, and she attempts to make that character, idea, or script a reality for the audience. Performances are different from performativity, however, because in performation special attention is paid to things and the arrangements among things that make reality. To stick with the analogy of acting, in performance it is not enough to have props on stage to make the world look real; the world must be created functionally, materially, and objectively.7

My point here is not that we should embrace foundationalism just for the sake of aligning with institutional doxa or hoaxers. As Latour might say, this is bad science. It does not mean, however, that the prevailing modes of inquiry should be avoided by the critical sociologist. Against the trends of neoliberal performativity, I believe we as an intellectual community are moving in important and exciting new directions with respect to scientific associations. By associations in our theories and interpretive practices from food science, geography, environmental sciences, physics, and kinesiology with the prevailing praxes of sport sociology, we are creating new lines of flight8 from which to better know and confront the politics and injustices of our day. This might not be seen by our peers or hoaxers as cutting-edge science, but I believe as we look to incorporate discursive and non-discursive actors, identities, and experience, we will generate a more efficacious sociology of sport (cf. Fox & Allred, 2016). By looking to old problems and new modes of empiricism (and vice versa), those which best intermediate lived realities and as such the political associations incorporated therein, we can move the sociology of sport forward in exciting new directions (see Fullagar, 2017; Giardina, 2017).

In some ways, we might see the Sokalists submissions to SSJ and IRSS as attempts to infiltrate an existing field, or research assemblage. Their assumption was that, as an arm of ‘grievance studies,’ the sociology of sport is rife with identity politics, Marxian determinists, and postmodern nomenclature. Their experiment was, at its most basic level, an associational exercise. It was also deeply political. If by creating a scientific product—which in their view failed to incorporate the key actors necessary for “good science”—and by associating this incomplete aggregation with a journal, or a field of inquiry writ large, they could expose the biases and politics that hold sway within said field.

Conversely, we might see their efforts as a way of incorporating sport sociology—an assemblage which itself was always already in flux—into a new political assemblage. That is, they sought to pull our field of inquiry into the public sphere and by so doing position it as radical, political. But what did they pull in? Our response to the hoaxers, and indeed to Latour, might very well be unintentionally collective. If we look beyond the discrete or individual contributions to the sociology of sport, and toward the aggregate, we might find that a plurality of scholarship contributing to, and adding to, an already robust (new) empiricism. Of course, contributions to the sociology of sport are indeterminably heterogeneous: paradigmatically, the field gathers work derived from positivism, post-positivism, constructivism, pragmatism, and critical camps (to name but a few); methodologically, the sociology of sport assembles numbers, scales, surveys, interviews, observations, deduction, induction, nomothesis, ideography, etc.; representationally, the field affectively draws upon writings about observations, descriptive poetics, narratological imagery, numbers that stand in place of things, relations, or events, numbers that stand for themselves; pragmatically, the field interpolates social justice work, interventions into public policy and pedagogy, and disruptions to our collective modes of inquiry and thinking.

Amidst such cacophony, what are our associations, our politics? Reviewing the past few years of scholarship in the forum the hoaxers sought to undermine is revealing: we find a research assemblage constituted by multi-vocal, multi-perspectival, trans-methodological tracings of sport-based formation(s) of power, performance, politics. The field is comprised of multiple actors and multifarious “situated knowledges” (see Hinton, 2014): human writers and researchers, a cacophony of paradigms, methods, and theories, and—most importantly for our purposes here—a dizzyingly complex range of connections and affects being exposed, explored, problematized, or (re)formed. Bodies are linked to structures, identities to institutions, language. And we are just studying that most trivial of subjects: sport! Indeed, the sport-research-assemblage itself is radically inconsistent, incomplete, contingent, and polyvocal. However, it is by virtue of that which is associated therein, political. Our texts, tools, and theories once associated lay bare these intra-active affects (as Barad might say). In some studies, we found things, identified causes or effects, established relations between sport and its network dialectics. In others, we speculated or theorized. But in so doing, in the aggregate, sport sociologists assemble a complex and constitutive hermeneutics of relationships that matter. Rather than demonstrate as much by reviewing each study published in the SSJ over the past few years, I instead offer the following visualizations and summarization of a field’s (very partial) representational actor-network9:

Figure 1 represents only a fraction of the more than 13,000 actors pulled into association through sociological inquiries of sport as published in the Sociology of Sport Journal in 2017.10 This research-assemblage incorporates an immeasurable range of human-related actors (attitudes, embodiment, muscles, body politics, actions, identities, movements, etc.) and non-human actors
Where other fields of inquiry might look to isolate variables, the questions that haunt sport sociology are by nature often ideographic—incapable of assembling all variables, factors, orders of influence, and so on within a given 8,000-word publication. However, this small sample of 28 research articles in the year of one journal illustrates that the journals’ content represents a complex scientific corpus—pulling together objects and actors that help us better understand the social and political complexities of sport and physical culture.

Consider further the publications featured in the Sociology of Sport Journal in 2018. Again, we find a near infinite number of associations being made in the scholarship featured in these pages. In trying to explain the sporting social, contributors to this journal draw into analysis thousands of actors and millions of interactions. Any given study might be discrete—perhaps linking a sport (basketball, baseball, football), a person or group of people to a choice (an athlete training, a fan buying a ticket, etc.), conditions of choosing (global markets, Trump-era conservative...
America, etc.), identities (national identities, race-based identities, gender identities, etc.), a national context (South Korea, China, United States, United Kingdom, New Zealand, Australia, etc.), institutions (media, university, league), or material conditions (environmental decay, labor conflict, geopolitical imbalances). In any given study, messy relations get organized and scholars usually do their best to make sense of where boundaries might be drawn and relations might be interpreted. In the aggregate, however, inquiry in the sport sociology is broad reaching, polyvocal, multitudinally complex.

By drawing into association these actors, in charting realities or speculative realities, sport sociologists are indeed engaged in political work—performating a rich striation of innovative and politically-responsible research that implicates a range of actors: from ideas and texts, to structures of capital and patriarchy, to camps, leagues, schools of thinking, to water, wind, muscles, and food. To characterize the research assemblage as forged in the pages of the Sociology of Sport Journal over the past two years as anything other than dynamic, contingent, multi-perspectival, pluralistic, and unorthodox would be intellectually dishonest. That which the Sokalists sought to enter into, expose, and caricature through their hoaxical intervention is both constituted by and constitutive of politics, to be sure. The scholars within the field bring their politics to their research and teaching just as do all scholars—even those who in the public sphere came to value-free expositions into a given field of inquiry. Their issue, I suppose, is not that sport sociologists of other grievances scholars are assembling things—looking or associations or influence between like and differing variable (actors). Rather, it is that in those lines of flight in between and toward science and reality
where moderations/meditations of power, history, privilege, etc. take up a new life. To design research—ontologically and epistemologically—that seeks to examine power might be, for the Sokalists and their confederates, where things run amok. If the scholar comes to the study of bodybuilding or skateboarding with a political sense of, theoretical base for, and vocabulary to articulate issues of patriarchy, heteronormativity, or class conflict (as examples) then the research is producing a false reality—mediated by politics of the researcher and the social justice orthodoxies supposedly prevailing across the academy. Hence, the sociology of sport presents a two-fold problem: the politics of assembling and the politics of interpreting associations. Both, it seems, come back to how the social scientist is seeking to construct reality.

Coda

By way of a conclusion, I would like to briefly revisit what I meant, and take Latour to mean, in looking to add reality. To add reality is not necessarily to present one’s politics as science. Rather, it is to dig deeper and to reveal new associations—to produce new gatherings—which might reveal how old associations are at work in the social world; to reveal the political physics of the hyper-object that is sport. That is, to gather actors endogenous to sport which 1) transcend their aggregated (or “gathered”) components and 2) lose their fundamental qualities without sport. In this society of the spectacle, defined as it is by more—more spectacles and spectators, more speed, more violence—sport is a thing that is incorporated into the political realm in ways like never before. At its existential level, sport embodies the logics of individualism, competition, populism, and violence—given to a natural association, if you will. Virilio (2006) was right: politics is physics; physics is violence; violence is speed and scale. Sport is undeniably political, and certainly physical, and these days transcends the metonymic and microcosmic explanations put to use in the public and instead is both the network and actor through which these politics are expressed.

To make sense of and confront these matters of science and politics, I am siding with Latour in trying to imagine a mode of inquiry where politics is not the immanent platform from which sociological inquiry into sport is based, but where we look naively to the world as it is assembled to better understand its political configurations. He calls for:

...an entirely different attitude than the critical one, not a flight into the conditions of possibility of a given matter of fact, not the addition of something more human that the inhumane matters of fact would have missed, but, rather, a multifarious inquiry launched with the tools of anthropology, philosophy, metaphysics, history, sociology to detect how many participants are gathered in a thing to make it exist and to maintain its existence. (Latour, 2004, p. 246, emphasis in original)

We might benefit from asking, how many participants are gathered in sport to make it exist and to maintain its existence? Many in the room where this article was first delivered, we were of this sport gathering. We also gather more participants, at least through our teaching, often through our writing, and for the best among us, our advocacy and action. Given this, our special role, I have elaborated on Latour by asking: what participants could we add to this gathering to make sport better? To again quote Carrington: “All scholarship should be mindful not to over claim beyond the available evidence, even as we interrogate what constitutes and qualifies as evidence in the first place.” My skill is adding textual participants. Regardless of how much I write about bodies, it is probably up to others to take up my texts, and incorporate them. I am not a quantum physicist. I am not Neil Bohr, Rosi Braidotti, or Karen Barad. But I, like many of you, am a scholar of associations and transformations. Like Pasteur and the microbes that made him scientific, Latour would have us collaborate with corporeal actors—big and small such as body politics and physiologic components—to create in our science a less intermediated and more political science. If we can find better ways to let things in—gathered are the are in such problematic ways—then we might rediscover the social world that we have helped to construct in new ways. New problems might be revealed and old ones cast in new light.

I believe we should always be looking to tools that will help us better associate lived experiences, identities, discourses to the material and physical world and the scientific representations thereof (see Keller, 2017). What I am saying is in some ways the opposite of the Sokalists, and likely betrays Latour. I believe, however, that we should look to strategically mobilize science to fortify the important work being done in the name of sociology, cultural studies, women’s studies, critical race studies, queer studies, anti-colonial studies, indigenous studies, critical theory, and the sociology of sport. Our prolific teachers add contentious athletes, managers, and journalists. Our advocates add protests and public statements. For those of us claiming to be scientists, let us make use of tools which will best let the world and its problems speak loudest so as to bring about positive social change. Sport sociology, this thing, is ours to build. As Latour might have once said, it is ours to socially construct, which means to fabricate, to hold up, to maintain.

Let us, socially, construct it well.

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Notes

1. A previous version of this article was delivered as the 2018 NASSS Presidential Address in Vancouver British Columbia, November 6. It has been updated and expanded for publication.

2. The body of scholarship to which I am referring here focuses on the ontological relations of scientific inquiry, technology, actor networks, and what Latour might critically refer to as “the social.” These considerations are perhaps most pronounced in a) his anthropological collaboration with Steve Woolgar on the constitution of scientific praxis at the Salk Institute (Latour & Woolgar, 1979/2013); b) in his textbook-style treatise on the value of empiricism (Latour, 1987); c) in his political biography qua social inquiry into the life and science of Louis Pasteur (Latour, 1993); and d) in a series of philosophical texts intervening into the epistemological bases of contemporary social inquiry (Latour, 1991/2012, 1999, 2005).

3. As a point of reference, the ideas they viewed as harmful specifically included “white fragility,” “microaggressions,” “cultural appropriation,” and “toxic masculinity.”

4. The “Sokal Affair,” also referred to as the “Sokal Hoax,” was a scholarly publishing exposé created by Alan Sokal, a physics professor at
New York University and University College London. In 1996, Sokal submitted a hoax article titled “Transgressing the Boundaries: Towards a Transformative Hermeneutics of Quantum Gravity” to the cultural studies journal Social Text. According to Sokal, the submission was an “experiment” intended to test the journal’s intellectual rigor and, specifically, to investigate whether a leading journal of cultural studies would publish an article “liberally salted with nonsense if (a) it sounded good and (b) it flattered the editors’ ideological preconceptions” (Sokal, 1996). Once revealed, the hoax generated widespread debate across the academy with respect to academic integrity, research ethics, and the place of critical inquiry (and postmodern theory) within the scholarly realm.

5. A skeptical Wall Street Journal editorial writer, Jillian Kay Melchior, began raising questions about some of the papers in the summer of 2018. [It should be noted that Melchior is also skeptical of those fields, though]

6. The grievance studies hoaxers have gained considerable notoriety amongst the libertarian and white nationalist Right in North American in the six-months following.

7. So if a scientist seeks to understand how to make “ethnic-themed” minor league baseball games more lucrative, for example, he might design a research project which: 1) instrumentalizes racial and ethnic categories as to name the population; 2) ascribes essential cultural characteristics and practices which she (or her colleagues) deem to be culturally- and scientifically-associative; 3) develop an instrument which when wielded upon the population can “measure” how elements of material and performance culture might increase positive attitudes about, or purchase intention toward, such a thematized baseball commodity-spectacle. Such “value-free science” would utilize classic social-psychology to strip the context, the participant, or the instrumentation of an imbeddedness—imbedded in the social structures that frame lived experience, in epistemological messiness of the science, or in the subjectivities of the researcher and the paradigms that serve his interests.

8. My use of the term “line of flight” here and elsewhere is inspired by Deleuze and Guattari’s (1980/2000) use of the same term in A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia where they discuss the conceptual linkages between a line of flight and the rhizome.

Multiplicities are defined by the outside: by the abstract line, the line of flight or deterritorialization according to which they change in nature and connect with other multiplicities. The plane of consistency (grid) is the outside of all multiplicities. The line of flight marks: the reality of a finite number of dimensions that the multiplicity effectively fills; the impossibility of a supplementary dimension, unless the multiplicity is transformed by the line of flight; the possibility and necessity of flattening all of the multiplicities on a single plane of consistency or exteriority, regardless of their number of dimensions. (pp. 9–10)

More simply, Massumi (1992) and DeLanda (2002) have made the case that a “line of flight” is an operator which transforms (territorializes) the actual into the virtual—the liminal gateway from which a think appears as here and elsewhere is inspired by Deleuze and Guattari’s (1980/2000) use of the same term in A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia where they discuss the conceptual linkages between a line of flight and the rhizome.

9. In order to construct these representations, I utilized NVivo software to scrape the Sociology of Sport Journal for text frequency across all articles published in the respective year. I then categorized each text element as a nodal actor. For 2017, there were over 13,000 nodes (actors) entered into the visualization software. For 2018, there were well over 18,000. Owing to space and imagining limitations, the figures presented here show those (~150–200) most prevalent actors involved in this line of sociological inquiry. This is not intended to be a systematic or comprehensive network analysis, on the contrary. The point to these two illustrations is merely to show the breadth and variety of actors and constructs incorporated into the scientific field’s discursive products over a given year’s period. Additionally, the two years—2017 and 2018—were specifically chosen because they align with the arc of the hoaxers’ project. I intentionally sought not to look at effects or relations, but rather merely to visualize a small percentage of the prevalent actors pulled into sociology of sport analyses. In so doing, I want to let the analyses/authors themselves speak for method, for how they were trying to analyze relations, what effects they found. Here, I wanted to show that the actors sport sociologists bring into scholarship are multitudinous, broad, complex, etc. and that in trying to study something (sport) so heterogeneously and broadly entangled, sport sociologists can always be accused of being ‘political’ based on the parsing out that has to be done at the level of “the study.”

10. Regarding both Figure 1 and Figure 2, I have for purposes of readability omitted from the main body of the text the references for all of those research articles collated in this analysis; rather, I have included 2017 within this endnote and the 2018 citations in the endnote that follows. The articles cited for 2017 are: Butler, 2017; Carr, 2017; Caudwell & Sugden, 2017; Cooky, 2017; Cooper, Davis, & Dougherty, 2017; Dziuk, Smith, & Evans, 2017; Fry & Bloyce, 2017; Gareity & Metzger, 2017; Haslerig, 2017; Hayton, 2017; Hawzen & Newman, 2017; Hickey & Roderick, 2017; Kim & Park, 2017; Kossakowski, 2017; Love, Gonzalez-Sobrino, & Hughey, 2017; Lund & Soderstrom, 2017; MacArthur, Angelini, Billings, & Smith, 2017; McCormack, 2017; McMahon & McGannon, 2017; McMahon, McGannon, & Zehnter, 2017; Parker & Manley, 2017; Roderick, Smith, & Potrac, 2017; Rubin & Moses, 2017; Sanchez, 2017; Sandvik, Strandbu, & Loland, 2017; Schimmel, 2017; Sherry, Schulenkorf, Seal, Nicholslon, & Hoye, 2017; and Van der Meij, Darby, & Liston, 2017.

11. The articles cited for 2018 were: Boykoff, 2018; Bunds & Casper, 2018; Comeau & Martin, 2018; Crockett & Butryna, 2018; Darnell, Giuliantoti, David Howe, & Collison, 2018; Dickerson, 2018; Esmonde & Jette, 2018; Forde & Wilson, 2018; Hatteberg, 2018; Hayhurst, Sundstrom, & Arksey, 2018; Henne & Pape, 2018; Johnson & Ali, 2018; Kim & Chung, 2018; King-White & Beissel, 2018; Klein, 2018; Lamont & Fairley, 2018; MacDonald, 2018; Malcolm, 2018; Markula, 2018; Martin, Spencer, & Bruce, 2018; McGuire-Adams & Giles, 2018; McLeod, Pu, & Newman, 2018; McMahon, Knight, & McGannon, 2018; Millington, Darnell, & Millington, 2018; Oseguera, Merson, Harrison, & Rankin, 2018; Oxford & McLachlan, 2018; Parvainen, 2018; Ratna, 2018; Ronkainen, Shuman, & Xu, 2018; Seal & Sherry, 2018; Segura Millan Trejo, Norman, & Jaccoud, 2018; Silva, Bower, & Cipolli, 2018; Stevenson, 2018; Thomas & Cardinal, 2018; Thorpe, Hayhurst, & Chawansky, 2018; Tofloletti, Palmer, & Samie, 2018; Vertinsky, 2018; Walton-Fisette, 2018; Yu, Xue, & Newman, 2018.

12. I would like to give some thought to violence—in sport and as dialectically-superstructural—as a matter of fact. As I write this I am troubled by news that a coalition of Right-wing political actors has looked to materialize the violence evoked in President Trump’s stage stumping vitriol, sending armed bombs to many of the President’s most vocal opponents or carrying out a mass shooting at Pittsburgh-area synagogue. Indeed, these acts of terrorism come only days after Trump praised Montana politician Greg Gianforte—at a campaign rally on his behalf—for assaulting a member of the media who had been critical of the Trump regime. Of course, I am not alone and my ‘concern’ is certainly nothing worth quoting and giving much merit to—such violence is very serious and demands more than a mention here. Nonetheless, I am troubled by how such violence seems to be increasingly naturalized not just in politics but in everyday life. As we reflect on our challenges with association, it is nearly impossible to make certain links that are inevitably there. Links such as those between masculinity, ideology, political paranoia, guns, bombs, and say, sport. My point here is not that violence
in sport is the cause of populism (though many of us have empirically demonstrated how spectator sport has long been an important apparatus for manufacturing consent and promoting hegemonic ideology). My point is not that the prevalence of military machines and pro-war rhetoric on the sidelines and in the grandstands leads to more support for such killing machines. And my point is not that the physical, emotional, and social abuse endemic to many sports might lead to anger, less mentally healthy, or adults. Real scientists have made it clear that many of this links are just too hard to prove. My point is that there is not necessarily no association—or correspondence, as some might say. As such, we can pull in those actors in both science and sport who make sport a matter of concern. For example, we might gather the relations of the concession: the relationship between brain matter, collisions, speed, cultural politics and sporting masculinities, performance training, fast capitalism, societies of the spectacle, and the kinetics of embodied violence. In football, the concussed brain is an actor which brings into association medical science (both in the production of the event and in the treatment of its consequences), strength and conditioning, neoliberal rationalities of choice and individualization, and so on. For I would argue sport has in our time increasingly become a matter of concern. Whether we measure that concern in terms of culture, mass media, calories expended, economics, political ideology, golf-course pesticides, or mined body data, sport and physical culture are things that matter in the world.

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