



Book Reviews

Cultural Sociology

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Neil Baxter

Running, Identity and Meaning. The Pursuit of Distinction Through Sport Emerald Publishing, Bingley, UK, 2021 (ISBN: 978-1-80043-367-0), 216 pp.

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Neil Baxter's book is a comprehensive sociological study of the sport of running that applies Bourdieu's field analysis tools (2005) to identify styles of running analogous to the social characteristics of different types of runners. This informative and accessibly written book uses the field of running in order to examine issues such as gender, class, taste and social identity. Structured across eight chapters, the book utilises a mixed methods and relational ontological approach 'to identify significant structural associations between ways of running and runners' social backgrounds' (p. 24). Significantly, while drawing on Bourdieu, Baxter's study differs from his by conceptualising running not as one practice within a wider field of lifestyles but by viewing running as a field in its own right.

At the centrepiece of the study and the primary source of data is the author's own Big Running Survey (BRS), with significant additional data coming from the Active Lives 2018 Survey from Sport England. Through the statistical technique of multiple correspondence analysis (MCA) the study identifies specific social variables such as ethnicity, age and gender, disability and mental health, occupation and education. Subsequent qualitative depth interviews with survey respondents are then used to complement the quantitative data by exploring cultural orientations and, how runners' 'past experiences may have shaped the habitus in specific ways to inform position-takings in running' (p. 29).

The book begins with a robust defence of running for sociological research. It lays out how from its beginnings as a jogging craze that was imported from the USA to Britain in the 1970s, through its evolution to a conventional leisure activity or lifestyle sport, running provides an important resource through which to explore key contemporary cultural concerns. Whether running on a treadmill in a gym setting, taking part in a charity fundraiser, or competing in an ultramarathon or a rural fell race, Baxter highlights the relationship between the heterogenous field of running and the neo-liberal discourse of 'healthism' in which responsibility for achieving a healthy society is delegated from the

state to the individual. In this way, Baxter is able to assert that running actually represents 'a near-perfect example of Foucault's 'technology of the self' (1997).

Particularly enjoyable was Chapter 3's historical perspective which drew on Elias' notion of the civilising process to chart the changes to running that have taken place in Britain over the last 400 years. Tracing back a British history of running to the rustic festivals and fairs such as the 'Cotswold Olimpicks' of 1612, the book conveys how these raucous and rowdy events were an ideal opportunity for rural labourers of both sexes to display those forms of physical capital most used and prized within rural communities. The chapter also captures how wider societal changes directly impacted the practice of running, moving it from a mixed-sex participation event to a spectator sport. While originally a predominantly working-class pastime that both men and women would compete in for prize money, the gradual imposition of Victorian values is shown to have brought about changes to the ways in which running was practised and who could practise it. Colonised by the amateur ethos of the British public-school system and marked by a strong eugenicist strain, the book highlights how running would become a predominantly upper-class male domain right up until the neo-liberal democratisation of the sport towards the end of the 20th century.

The book's findings are significant in revealing the overwhelmingly gendered and classed nature of running in Britain today. 'Feminised running can be understood as organised around the accrual of aesthetic capital, whereas masculinised running centres more on the achievement and display of sporting, athletic capital' (p. 107). The findings also highlight a strong relationship between a runner's overall volume of economic and cultural capital and race length, with shorter-distance races attracting those with less income and education while longer distances attract those with higher levels of resources. The study reveals how this individualist's sport par excellence retains a strongly traditional middle-class profile with ultramarathon and fell runners being the most predominantly male, most high status, educated and 'white' of all the forms of running covered in the study.

Overall, the book is a highly informative study that links forms of running to societal changes, notions of individualism and the disciplined body, as well as to issues of gender, identity and class. Unlike other sociological books on running, Baxter's study conceptualises and examines running not as a unitary domain, but as a set of diverse and specific forms each with their own characteristics and participants. The book will be of particular interest to Bourdieusian scholars, those interested in the sociology of sport and multi-discipline scholars interested in issues of gender, identity and class.

References

- Bourdieu P (2005) *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (trans. R Nice). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Foucault M (1997) *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*. New York: The New Press.