

Sport, Trust, and Social Capital

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Abstract

Research in social capital has appealed to the causal power of sport to generate the kinds of generalized trust, ties, and networks that make for more prosperous communities and more democratic societies. Indeed, Robert Putnam's *Bowling Alone* (2001) takes as the core of its argument the idea that participation in bowling clubs in the United States contributed, in no small way, to 'making democracy work' in America. In this way sport appears to be construed as a mechanism for the production of generalized trust and, more broadly, social capital. This study scrutinizes Putnam's understanding of sport in an effort to make explicit the limits of what participation in sport can be expected to contribute to the formation of generalized trust and social capital. In the context of sport, generalized trust and social capital, the author argues, are best understood in theoretical and empirical terms as stratified and stratifying features of human interaction. Sport does not produce generalized trust and social capital but rather re-produces and reinforces the presence of such resources along socioeconomic and ethnoracial lines.

Keywords

trust – social capital – sport – sociability

Introduction

Given the ubiquity of sports in contemporary urban societies across the globe, it is perhaps unsurprising that references to individual participation in sport and membership in sporting associations and clubs of various kinds have occupied a prominent role in wide-ranging discussions and debates about the

nature and functions of trust and, more generally, social capital. There is, *prima facie*, some plausibility to claims that the associational engagements and shared cooperative practices constitutive of sports foster the kinds of networks of social trust, norms and ties that enable a wide variety of collective actions.¹ For sport is defined and enabled by shared adherence to rules, cooperative interactions, mutual respect among competitors, and a reciprocal sense of “we” captured in notions of “team spirit” or “club loyalty,” among others. In no small way, the cultivation of such shared orientations and reciprocated norms makes competitive sporting endeavors and collective athletic excellence possible.

Sport would also appear to contribute, as Robert Putnam and many policy makers influenced by his work have maintained, to “making democracy work.” Indeed, far more than a title of a seminal study in social capital theory, *Bowling Alone* stands as an empirical account of the demise of bowling leagues in America and an explanatory critique of the decline of the normative stocks of social capital such associations (re)produced in the context of 20th century American life. In fact, for Putnam it is in bowling, among other cultural associational forms, that we humans are required to “transcend our social and political and professional identities and connect with people *unlike ourselves* ... Singing together (like bowling together) does not require shared ideology or shared social or ethnic provenance” (Putnam 2000: 411, emphasis added). Put simply, Putnam’s thesis is that insofar as it enables individuals to “transcend” the narrow confines of their respective life-worlds, bowling (or singing) together generates generalized trust (trust in “others”) and social capital within and across socioeconomic strata and ethnoracial hierarchies in ways decisive for the preservation of a vibrantly pluralistic democratic culture. Conversely, Putnam implies, when such context-transcendent forms of associational life vanish, democracy is imperiled.

Or so the argument goes. In what follows, however, I want to challenge such a straightforwardly normative claim about the causally transcendent “democratic” power of participation in sport and membership in sporting associations – especially in urban contexts. In today’s global “cities of walls,” to paraphrase Teresa Caldeira, most people are concentrated, divided, and segregated in walled-off ghettos and fortified elite communities among “others” very much *like themselves*.² To be sure, I shall not dispute the notion that

1 For a wide-ranging discussion of sport and social capital, see especially the contributions edited by Matthew Nicholson and Russel Hoyer (2008).

2 See Teresa Caldeira (2001).

both democracy and sport entail highly reflexive forms of social cooperation.³ Rather, what interests me here is how – and to what extent – sport functions (or fails to function) as a transmission belt for the (re)production of generalized trust and, more broadly, social capital within and across the geographies of urban landscapes where socioeconomic and ethnoracial strata and division are particularly pronounced. The overarching question I want to explore, in other words, is the complex empirical nature and normative functions of sport in urban contexts of ethnoracial division, segregation, socio-economic stratification, and inequality.⁴ Pace Putnam, the point of such an analysis is not to determine how sport-based associational forms transcend the oft-segregated urban milieu but rather to better understand the embeddedness of such forms in increasingly segregated urban contexts.

The beginning of such an analysis entails, or so I want to suggest, a theoretical and an empirical reorientation in social capital theory and research. For much of what is contained in and purportedly measured by the notion of social capital suffers from empirical and theoretical shortcomings. At the empirical level, the *causal* force of social capital is difficult to chart with any analytic clarity.⁵ In fact, inasmuch as social capital can be said to “facilitate” or cause anything, its causal map is lined with arabesques, not arrows. At the theoretical level, claims about the causes and effects of social capital are characteristically dependent upon one of the two contrasting images of human actors – *homo economicus* and *homo sociologicus* – that have always polarized the social sciences. Here the extent to which actions facilitated by social capital are pulled by individual reason or pushed by shared social norms is presupposed in opposing but equally one-sided conceptions of human action.

Moreover, influenced by Putnam, sociologically vague metaphors have dominated the explanatory analysis of the forms and functions of social capital. In particular, the metaphors of “bridging” and “bonding” social capital are especially problematic. As is well known, Putnam suggests that bridging social capital is “inclusive” and thus “can generate broader identities and reciprocity”

3 Indeed, as I have elsewhere (Lewandowski 2015) argued, teamwork in sport undeniably entails forms of highly reflexive social cooperation. The “democratic” potential of such cooperation remains an open question, of course, and is the subject of the current inquiry.

4 Hence, following Eric Uslaner (2012), my focus here is on how urban segregation, stratification, and division – rather than diversity per se – calcifies trust and social capital along socioeconomic and ethnoracial lines.

5 Indeed, it very well could be argued that it is social capital – and not democracy – that is in need of democratization; on this topic, see Lewandowski and Streich (2007).

(Putnam 2000: 22-23), whereas bonding social capital is “exclusive” and hence “bolsters our narrower selves” (Putnam 2000: 22-23). For Putnam, bridging social capital functions as an out-group lubricant, while bonding social capital works as an in-group adherent. Such imprecise metaphors are better left aside in analyses of urban associational life, where *both* the “bridges” and “bonds” of social capital tend to be highly stratified along the ethnoracial and socioeconomic lines of segregated urban geographies.

Thus the discussion here is intended to provide both a critique of Putnam’s thinking, as well as an outline of a more analytically robust alternative account of the relationship among sport, generalized trust, and social capital. Indeed, inspired by Georg Simmel, I shall argue that social capital is best understood as the harnessing or capitalizing of a distinct form of social interaction or human association that Simmel called “sociability” (*Geselligkeit*). In the culturally diverse but deeply segregated urban milieu, sport clubs and associations function, or so I shall suggest, as *sites of sociability* – the loci of uniquely reflexive forms of cooperative human interaction that may (or may not) be capitalized by individuals for extra-athletic purposes. I shall argue that the embeddedness of sites of sociability in the stratified and segregated social geography of the urban milieu nevertheless tends to limit their normative or “democratic” potential. It is highly segregated urban social geography, in other words, that is most decisive for sport-based practices of sociability and the formation of social capital in city life.

The argument is divided into three sections. I shall begin with a brief summary of the main strands in contemporary social capital theory, and then move on to criticize Putnam’s account of social capital and understanding of the role of the sport of bowling in fostering social capital in American life (section I). From there I shall draw on Simmel’s work to argue that sport is best understood not as a causal mechanism for the production of a fungible social resource (social capital) but rather as a site for the reflexive engagement in sociability (*Geselligkeit*) (section II). I close with a brief treatment of a prototypically urban sport, that of boxing, to make explicit the relationship between sport and sociability in urban contexts and emphasize why it is that we should not necessarily look to the sociability of sport to “make democracy work” (Section III). In sum, the position to be pursued here is that sport is an embedded socioeconomic practice. Bowling alleys and boxing gyms do not escape the segregated and segregating geography of modern city life; on the contrary, such sites of sociability characteristically reflect and, indeed, reinforce the existing divisions and stratifications that persistently define the urban social milieu.

1

What, precisely, is social capital? The answer to such a question is not as readily apparent as it might appear.⁶ At one level, we can think of social capital rather straightforwardly as the value accumulated or stored between and among individual human beings – social connections, norms, ties and networks of trust that facilitate individual and collective action in a given context or structure. And, indeed, it is often said that social capital is merely a social scientific development of the old saying that it is “not what you know, but whom you know, that matters.” This is both true and imprecise. For the central objective of the study of social capital is to measure and explain the *effects* that social connections, ties and trust have on specific individuals and their behaviors, the behaviors of others to whom such individuals are connected, and the society in which all those individuals are embedded. In one way or another, nearly all social capital research programs aim to examine the nature and functioning of such effects.

Of course they do so in different ways. Yet for all their diverse theoretical origins and empirical applications, I have argued elsewhere that it is possible to identify three prevalent strands in contemporary work in social capital theory.⁷ First, there is an economic or rational strand of social capital, found most notably in the rational choice theory of Gary Becker and James Coleman, and central to policy-oriented theories of growth and economic development such as those pursued at the World Bank. Second, there is a critical or Marxist strand of social capital theory, exemplified by the work of Pierre Bourdieu, in which theories of social groups, power, and class conflict are applied in the empirical study of cultural practices. Finally, as already alluded to above, there is a political or democratic strand of social capital, developed most prominently by Robert Putnam, which is one of the hallmarks of contemporary neo-Tocquevillean political science and democratic theories of associations. In light of its prominence in many disciplines, and ostensible relevance for sport studies, it is Putnam’s account that I shall concentrate on here.

While clearly aware of work in the rational and critical Marxist strands, Putnam’s articulation of the relationship among social capital, sport, and

6 Perhaps the best single volume treatment of the question of social capital can be found in Baron, Field, and Schuller (2000). For a comprehensive conceptual history of the origins of social capital theory, see Farr (2004).

7 See Lewandowski (2006), Lewandowski and Znoj (2008), and Lewandowski and Streich (2012).

democracy runs tangentially to research programs in those areas. Where Coleman focuses exclusively on the utility-maximizing potential of the action-facilitating resource of social capital within particular structures, and Bourdieu explores how social capital, along with other forms of capital, inform social practices and class divisions, Putnam has followed Tocqueville in arguing for a more generic *causal* link between reciprocal networks of trust and social norms and the practical realization of democracy. Indeed, for Putnam the Tocquevillean image of the voluntarily associated *citoyen* of 19th century American townships serves as the model for vibrant civic participation and collective identity at the core of democracy in America. It was in such townships, after all, that Tocqueville claimed to have observed first-hand the democratic effervescence unleashed in the habits of individuals voluntarily acting together in the affairs of daily life. What impressed Tocqueville was the way in which Americans so readily and so frequently practiced the “technique of association” (Tocqueville 1969: 522). For Tocqueville, such well-practiced associational forms created normatively thick, and indeed, sticky, *intersubjective moral obligations* – what Tocqueville called “mores.” For a neo-Tocquevillean such as Putnam, social capital is constituted precisely in and through the (re) production and circulation of such associational “mores” inasmuch as they generate the normative glue, as it were, that is a necessary condition of collective democratic self-rule.

Deeply influenced by this Tocquevillean reading of associational life in America, Putnam views networks, ties and connections not merely as facilitating the efficient individual realization of particular ends within a given social structure. Rather, such reciprocal networks, ties and connections contain the universalizing core of a democratic ethos. Indeed, to the extent that social capital is the repository of reciprocated social norms – what Tocqueville called “self-interest rightly understood” – Putnam links them directly and causally to a democratic existence. It is for that reason that Putnam finds a numerical decrease in associational memberships so alarming, as his early thinking about bowling and democracy already illustrates:

The rise of solo bowling threatens the livelihood of bowling-lane proprietors because those who bowl as members of leagues consume three times as much beer and pizza as solo bowlers ... The broader social significance, however, lies in the social interaction and even occasionally civic conversations over beer and pizza that solo bowlers forgo. Whether or not bowling beats balloting in the eyes of most Americans, bowling teams illustrate yet another vanishing form of social capital.

PUTNAM 1995: 70

Putnam's implicit claim here is that bowling is much more than a working-class sport. It is also a social practice laced with "interactions" and "conversations" that form the generalized trust, social ties, and reciprocal networks that constitute the preconditions of a democratic society.

As the abbreviated summary above already suggests, there are a variety of historical, causal, and normative issues raised by Putnam's claims about the sport of bowling, social capital, and democracy in the US. Let me take up each of these briefly in turn.

Bowling emerged as a popular leisure pastime in America with the invention of automatic pinsetters in the 1950s. It was only then, thanks to this technical automation, that bowling became a widespread (and competitive) sport. By the mid-1960s it is estimated that there were more than 12,000 bowling centers in the US. At that time nearly all individual bowlers competed on teams in established local leagues whose seasons involved weekly competitions over the course of at least 30 weeks of every year.

In the decades that followed, bowling also began to enter American popular culture, as evidenced by the frequent prime time television broadcasts of professional bowling competitions and the emergence of a popular situation comedy, *Laverne & Shirley*. The show, which aired from 1976-1983, chronicled the madcap life of two working-class single women in the city of Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Both worked in a brewery and spent much of their free time bowling. In this regard the television series very much expressed the historical reality and rhythms of working-class life, with long days spent laboring on the assembly line of the brewery, punctuated by the proletarian pleasures of beer, pizza, and bowling.⁸ In fact, during that time the sport had already become so iconic in American culture that bowling team shirts, complete with personalized monograms, were frequently part of everyday casual wear for youths and adults, as well as mainstays in the costuming worn by characters featured in the broadcast.

Yet even then, participation in the sport of bowling was changing, and the sport eventually came to occupy a different place in American social life. Indeed, while the total number of bowlers in America increased by 10% between 1980 and 1993, league bowling decreased by 40% during that same period. That trend continued in the years to follow. The United States Bowling Congress reported 4.1 million members in league bowling organizations in

8 As a child who came of age in Milwaukee during the heyday of the *Laverne and Shirley* series, I can readily confirm the working-class cultural familiarity of the show. The Oriental Theater and Landmark Lanes bowling alley was not far from my home, and several of my friends' fathers worked in the city at the Pabst Brewing Company.

1997-1998. Nine years later that same organization counted only 2.6 million members in those same league organizations – a 36% decline. Clearly, league bowling was in retreat, while recreational bowling by individuals was on the rise.

Now, as we know, according to Putnam such a precipitous decline in league bowling tracked broader declining trends in civic associations, as well as voter participation, generalized trust in neighbors, and institutional trust in government in the US. On Putnam's reading, the absence of those bowling leagues means that Americans were not transcending their social and political and professional identities and connecting with people unlike themselves ("others") as they once were.

But such a claim begs both empirical and normative questions about the extent to which involvement in sport and/or participation in sporting associations "*transcends*" social and political and professional identities, linking individuals to "*others*" *unlike themselves*. For even during the historical period on which Putnam focuses his research, bowling in the US was very much an ethnoracially stratified and segregated sport. This fact was reflected clearly in episode after episode of *Laverne & Shirley*. Indeed, while the main female protagonists were depicted – with bowling shirts on and beer mugs in hand – in thoroughgoing working class milieu, there were no African-American characters to be found in the production, despite the fact that African-American residents constituted nearly 33% of Milwaukee's population during the period the show aired on television.⁹

Alongside such contradictory images manifest in popular culture, even a casual glance at the history of bowling in America confirms the persistent embeddedness of that sport in segregated socioeconomic forces and structures.¹⁰ As is well-known, the American Bowling Congress did not allow black teams to join and compete in the organization until 1951. Yet in the post-segregation era that followed the demise of the color line in bowling in the US, the sport remained very much a *Laverne & Shirley* kind of segregated social practice. That is to say that bowling did not function as a locus of cross-racial interaction and association. On the contrary, African-Americans (like their white counterparts) continued to bowl with others like themselves in bowling alleys located in their segregated neighborhoods. This was (and remains) the case in a place like Milwaukee, which US census bureau statistics have consistently revealed to be one of America's most ethnoracially segregated cities. Moreover,

9 Milwaukee census data (2017).

10 As is apparent in a Doug Schmidt's (2007) lively historical account of the history of bowling in Milwaukee.

today bowling is also increasingly stratified by class in the US. In fact, the sport has more recently become primarily an upper-middle class form of individual recreation. In 2007, 42% of bowlers had household incomes of \$75,000 or higher, while more than 25% of bowlers are from households with earnings of \$100,000 or higher.¹¹

Thus it is not at all empirically obvious how sport-based associational forms and practices – “bowling together” in America – can be said to transcend stratified and segregated urban geographies and connect individuals to others unlike themselves. On the contrary, it would appear that sport is very much embedded within the wider urban habitus of socioeconomic relations and forces. Bowling may not *require* shared social or ethnic provenance, to borrow Putnam’s phrase, but neither does it *inherently serve to diversify such provenances*. In fact, it would appear that the connections, ties, and norms cultivated within bowling tend to foster, augment and reinforce existing networks that define and enable particular positions consistent with patterns of urban segregation and stratification. Put bluntly, mere engagement in sport is, contra Putnam, not readily reducible to a voluntary form of associational practice that characteristically enables individuals to transcend the contexts of their social, economic, political, and cultural milieu. Quite the opposite: sport characteristically lodges individuals more firmly within such contexts – just as it did in the glory days of US bowling leagues – by creating venues for individuals to extend and deepen ties and “generalized” trust with others *like themselves*.

2

While Putnam is misguided in his attempt to attribute a causal relationship between sport and the production of the generalized trust and social capital essential to the promotion of democratic life, it would be equally misguided to dismiss the powerful role of sport in associational life. Yet the lesson to be learned even from a brief critical engagement with Putnam’s account of bowling is that sport does not transcend social relations but, more narrowly, establishes what I want to call “sites of sociability.” In order to sketch a theoretically robust account of such sites we need to look beyond Putnam’s neo-Tocquevillean thinking and draw instead on a very different model of action and interaction – one that has, or so we shall see below, important ramifications for rethinking the relationship between sport and social capital.

11 White Hutchison Leisure and Learning Group (2011).

Such a model can be found in Georg Simmel's illuminating exploration of the concept of sociability (*Geselligkeit*), in which Simmel explores the features of sociability inherent in certain forms of anodyne human interaction and association by highlighting social arts (such as the art of conversation), social games (such as coquetry), and social forms of play (such as gymnastics and other sports). In this section, I want to outline the main contours of Simmel's thinking about sociability, and then make explicit the significance of such thinking for the current discussion.

The model of action that underlies Simmel's sociology of sociability shares little with the action-theoretical presuppositions that inform the dominant strands of contemporary social capital theory. In fact, Simmel's thinking on social interaction and association explicitly rejects the kind of reduction of human action to rational individual action that is the universal assumption upon which the rational strand in social capital theory is based. It is also cautious not to over-inflate the normative potential of human interaction and association in the Tocquevillian-inspired ways characteristic of Putnam's work. Instead, in his discussion of the sociability of human interaction Simmel foregrounds the embedded reflexivity of action. Sociability is thus an immanent and aesthetic action-theoretical model of human association that provides a useful corrective to Putnam on social capital and, at the same time, contains within it the possibility of unique applications in the study of sport.

Indeed, this insistence on the bounded reflexivity of human interaction and association allows Simmel to address the question of what happens to individuals engaged in such associational relations unhampered by the kinds of appeals to transcendence characteristic of Putnam. For Simmel, the formal character of sociability means that sociability's only content is individuals, or what Simmel calls "personalities"; in fact, Simmel says that insofar as sociability has "no ulterior end, no content, and no result outside of itself, it is oriented completely about personalities" (Simmel 1949: 255). And yet it is precisely because of its formal dependence on its individual elements that the personalities that comprise the content of sociability "must not emphasize themselves too individually" (Simmel 1949: 255). Those individuals who present themselves unreflexively as holders of privileged social positions, cultural prestige, and/or economic power, have no place in sociability because they destroy the reflexive character of sociability with the concrete weight of their determinate content and specific aims.

Now, what prevents actors from such individualist over-determining of their sociable interactions is a constraint that emerges *within* sociability itself. Simmel calls this situationally emergent constraint on individualism "good form" and a "sense of tact" (Simmel 1949: 255-256). Good form "is mutual

self-definition, interaction of the elements, through which a unity is made" (Simmel 1949: 255). While tact is that which "guides the self-regulation of the individual in his personal relations with others where no outer or directly egoistic interests provide regulation" (Simmel 1949: 256). Put somewhat differently, sociability cultivates and relies upon autonomous individuals' mutual exercising of a highly reflexive sense of context-specific appropriateness. Such a reflexive sense marks out not only what is fit for a particular individual but also circumscribes for that individual "those limits which the rights of others require" (Simmel 1949: 256).

Along with its cultivation of reflexively constrained individuality, Simmel's conception of sociability also retains in its very features the non-outcome oriented social norm characteristic of shared cooperative action. Simmel calls this the "principle of sociability" and, paraphrasing Kant, formulates that principle in the following way: in sociability "everyone should guarantee to the other that maximum of sociable values (joy, relief, vivacity) which is consonant with the maximum of values he himself receives" (Simmel 1949: 257). Or, as Simmel puts it a bit later in his essay, the "free interaction and equivalence among the elements ... is the fundamental condition of sociability" (Simmel 1949: 258). Yet for Simmel such a principle is not an *a priori* ethical duty applied by a rational will in itself, as it is for Kant. The cooperative principle of sociability is not generated by a dissociated mind engaged only in rational justification. Instead, the transcendent social norm of cooperation is *immanent* in the very reflexive activity of sociability itself (Simmel 1949: 257). In the context of sport, it is precisely in this Simmelean sense that the expression "teamwork" takes on a particular relevance and meaning as a reflexively acquired shared sense of identity and purpose among athletes.

The effects of sociability may be productively distinguished from Putnam's appeals to the socioeconomically transcendent power of "bowling together" to generate social capital. Simmel's account allows us to better understand and yet distinguish sociability from social capital, and to consider the embeddedness of sport-based sociability in specific sites (such as bowling allies). Admittedly, with its anodyne character, Simmel does allude to the "democratic structure of all sociability" (Simmel 1949: 257). But such an allusion must be taken with a measure of caution. For sociability practices in sport are themselves embedded in segregated and segregating sites of sociability. As we have seen, bowling in the US *horizontally* linked people more or less like one another and not *vertically* to "others" socioeconomically and/or ethnoracially unlike themselves. Drawing on but extending Simmel what is thus needed is to conceptualize and scrutinize sites of horizontal sociability and vertical sociability in

the urban milieu. Sites of horizontal sociability are accessible and appropriable by reflexive actors from within a specific socioeconomic, cultural, and/or ethnoracial stratum – think here of a “white” or “black” bowling alley. This is a site of sociability in its commonly segregated and segregating homologous urban form. Sites of vertical sociability, by contrast, would be accessible and appropriable by actors from up and down existing socioeconomic, cultural, and/or ethnoracial strata. This would be a sociologically exceptional site of desegregating and de-stratifying sociation.

In sum, the account of sociability offered here provides an alternative framework for theorizing the relationship between sport and social capital. Following Simmel, we can say that: a) sociability is reflexive human association and interaction in its formally concentrated state – it is anodyne and inchoate social energy; b) sport clubs and practices can and characteristically do function as sites of horizontal sociability; and c) that the social energy generated in sporting sites of sociability can be harnessed or capitalized to create generalized trust and the fungible resource of social capital. The central advantage of such an account is that it maintains crucial distinctions among the anodyne reflexive cooperative actions and associations of actors, the embedded loci of such actions and associations in wider socioeconomic and ethnoracial forces and structures, and the converting or capitalizing of trust, networks and ties generated by practices of sociability. Maintaining such analytic distinctions allows discussions of sport and social capital to more adequately scrutinize the diverse and complex effects of sport practices, sporting clubs and associations, and the broader empirical relations and socioeconomic conditions in which all those are situated.

3

Though not developed within the framework of social capital theory, a potential model for what a Simmelean informed study of sport and social capital might look like can be found in portions of Loci Wacquant’s fine-grained participant-observer account of boxing clubs in the United States. Wacquant (2004) shows how boxing gyms function as sites of sociability or, as he says, the loci of “forms of social interaction devoid of significant purpose or endowed with socially anodyne contents, processes of pure sociation that are their own ends” (Wacquant 2004: 37). Yet Wacquant’s work also makes clear how and to what extent boxing gyms – like bowling alleys, as we have seen – are not disembedded from the wider segregated and segregating social geographies



FIGURE 1 *Gym entrance.*

of modern American urban life. Indeed, in Wacquant's study, US boxing clubs are very much sites of horizontal sociability – the homologous loci of reflexive action and interaction.

This kind of dynamic of horizontal sociation and embeddedness is of course not limited to boxing in the US urban context. Indeed, Boxing Club Žižkov, located in what was once a predominantly Roma district in Prague, Czech Republic, stands as a kind of object lesson and foil to Putnam-like claims regarding the “democratic” potential of sport clubs. In the remainder of this section, I should like to make explicit how and why this is the case.

Boxing Club Žižkov was founded by Stanislav Tišer, a once successful amateur Roma boxer whose 1984 Olympic prospects were cut short by Czechoslovakia's boycott of those games.¹² Like most urban boxing gyms, Boxing Club Žižkov was established and functioned as a site of sociability to which local urban neighborhood youths (in this case, Roma) were drawn for a variety of socio-

12 The brief analysis that follows is the result of a series of ethnographic interviews and training sessions conducted with Mr. Tišer in June 2009. I am grateful to him for his time and insight. In this context I would also like to thank Martin Bednář for assistance in transcribing and translating the texts of the interviews. Additional information regarding the club can be found on the gym's website: <http://www.boxclub.cz>.



FIGURE 2 *Gym interior.*

economic reasons. In contexts of profound social anomie and disrespect, boxing gyms in such neighborhoods – not merely in Prague but throughout the world's cities – characteristically appear as islands of stability, sociation, and recognition.

Moreover, the gym was economically accessible to local youth: entrance into the sport of boxing requires virtually no financial resources. Indeed, there are essentially no economic entry barriers to overcome to gain admission to Boxing Club Žižkov. For, like many boxing gyms across the globe, the club requires only a nominal fee (and then only for those able to pay it), and provides its members with equipment and coaching at no additional costs.

Now, on the face of it, one might be inclined to see the location and function of Boxing Club Žižkov within a dilapidated (but steadily gentrifying) Roma neighborhood as a rich site to demonstrate Putnam's thesis about the democratic potential of sport participation and social capital.¹³

Indeed, consistent with Putnam's view, a sporting association such as Boxing Club Žižkov – founded by a prominent local Roma resident – might very well be expected to contribute, however indirectly, to fostering generalized trust

13 For a helpful discussion of segregation and gentrification patterns in Prague, see Marieke Verwaaijen (2013).



FIGURE 3 *Housing complex near gym.*



FIGURE 4 *Advertising for new housing development.*

and the creation of social capital among the socially and economically impoverished Roma of Žižkov.

Yet in the course of training at the gym and a series of ethnographic interviews with the gym's founder, the complexities and elusiveness of confirming such an expectation become abundantly clear. On the one hand, in reflecting on the diversity of his gym's current fighters, coach Tišer indeed expresses some of Putnam's sense of the power of boxing to function as a site of sociability:

Our club is different. Here we have Slovaks, Hungarians, English, French, Venezuelan, Canadian, Irish, Ukrainians, Russians. Many nationalities and no problems. The key is that these people come to my gym and they want to learn something, they communicate with each other. As the time flows by, they get to know each other, they talk to each other and get along. When you close the door of that club racism does not exist.

Here we see how the gym's established reputation has attracted boxers of various *nationalities* to train as Prague has become a more cosmopolitan city. In this regard, the gym became a horizontal site of sociability where boxers from various nations train, interact, and reflexively cooperate in anodyne ways that enable them to "talk to each other and get along". Inside this boxing club, a "united nations," as it were, congeals – one in which there are "many nationalities and no problems".

Yet Tišer's claim that "racism does not exist" in the gym is not to be mistaken as a reflection on the vertical relationships of his current stable of *international* fighters to the Roma of Žižkov. As it turns out, the comment about the absence of "racism" in his gym indicates Tišer's perception of this internationally diverse group of fighters' recognition and acceptance of *him* as a skilled trainer and individual within the fairly narrow ethnoracial horizon of the club.

Indeed, as the conversation continues we learn that in fact the number of Roma boxers training at the gym has dwindled considerably.

Tišer: In the beginnings [of the club] I had only Roma kids. Forty of them – boys and girls – and I started with them. Two years after that there was the first white boy. And after that things began to change. More white guys and less blacks [Roma].



FIGURE 5 *Tišer at work.*

And when asked explicitly about the broader issue of Roma ethno-racial identity and the ability of the boxing club to generate social ties among local residents, Tišer adopts a rather wistful tone.

JL: Why so? Why are there so few Roma kids?

Tišer: Roma kids don't have the will. They cannot stick with something. They try it and then go somewhere else. No one from these gypsy kids I used to train stayed on [in the club].... Our people just do not have the will, the responsibility. Not yours: whites. Ours: Roma.

Here we see how the putatively “transcendent” function of sport – to connect with people unlike our selves – is profoundly absent in this gym. In fact, the ethnoracial history of Boxing Club Žižkov as a site of sociability is one that runs directly counter to Putnam. Rather than generate ethnoracially “transcendent” networks and ties for local Roma residents and the wider urban community of Prague, a once all “black” boxing club quickly became an all “white” one under the pressures of gentrification and re-segregation. In the end, the membership of Boxing Club Žižkov merely horizontally augmented and extended the (changing) demographic divisions and stratifications of its milieu.

The general point to be emphasized again here is that while urban sporting associations may appear to connect those from different positions and geographies within the urban milieu, what they in fact typically end up doing over time is simply expressing and (re)producing hierarchical patterns of division and segregation. Sport associations in the urban milieu – be they bowling clubs in the US or boxing gyms in the Czech Republic – characteristically form sites of horizontal sociability that connect individuals to others *within* their own ethnoracial and socio-economic stratum and corresponding geographic location.

Conclusion

This study has sought to examine and outline an alternative framework for understanding the relationship among sport, trust, and social capital in segregated and segregating urban contexts. It began with a critique of Putnam's attempt to attribute a causal relationship between sport practices and clubs and democracy. Against Putnam, I argued that participation in a sport such as bowling does not enable individuals to transcend their identities and connect with others unlike themselves. On the contrary, especially in the urban

milieu, bowling in the US has always been a ethnoracially and socioeconomically segregated and segregating sport – as revealed in historical data as well as popular culture from the sport's heyday in America. In a second move, an attempt was made to outline a more robust analytic framework for studying sport, trust, and social capital in ethnoracially and socioeconomically complex contexts. Drawing on work by Georg Simmel, I sought to demonstrate the richness of the concept of "sociability" for analyzing sport practices and their loci – what I characterized as "sites of sociability" – in cities. The basic argument was that sport practices entailed reflexive anodyne interaction and cooperation, and that urban sport clubs, associations, and gyms functioned as empirical sites in which sociability is typically cultivated horizontally. In a final move, I briefly suggested how an account of sociability and its sites might explain the changing composition of an urban boxing. Such a suggestion is not intended to settle the question of the relationship among sport, trust, and social capital in the urban milieu. Instead, it hints at the need for two intertwined avenues of research: on the one hand, macro-level structural explanations of the multiple ethnoracial and socioeconomic forces and structures that contribute to the demise (and, at times, creation) of sites of horizontal and vertical sociability in urban contexts; and, on the other hand, meso-level ethnographic accounts of practices and practitioners of sociability within such sites. Sport may indeed have very little to do with "making democracy work," but more robust explanations of sport-based sites of horizontal and vertical sociability and their embeddedness in the wider structures and forces of the urban milieu are essential to our understanding of both sport and the role sport associations continue to play in city life.

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