

Sociology 117 Sport as a Social Institution

Spring 2024 | UC Berkeley

Instructor: Professor Linus Huang, Lecturer

Office Hours:

- *in-person, strictly drop-in:* Mondays, 10:00-11:45 AM, 487 Social Sciences Building
- *Zoom, appointment needed:* Tuesdays, 1-3 PM, sign up on Google Calendar

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Graduate Student Readers: Paige Barrella, Benjamin Fields

Final Exam: online, as bCourses quiz, May 8, 2024 3-6 PM

What will this course be about?

A sociological investigation of sport involves, to paraphrase the late Pierre Bourdieu, explaining the *supply* of sports that exists at a given time—e.g., what sports we play; who plays them and who doesn't; where sporting venues (stadiums) come from—and the *demand* that exists at a given time—e.g., who does and does not watch sports; which sports are popular and which aren't; what makes a sport popular; whether sport is a “religion” or just another form of entertainment we pay for. The premise of this course is that we tend to misunderstand these processes of supply and demand, instead attributing the ordering of the world of sport to socially neutral, and/or universal truths (“that’s just the way sports is”). Instead, a sociology of sport seeks to identify and expose the inequalities through which the supply and demand of sport are *socially constructed*.

Our overarching consideration of the social constructedness of sport will revolve around four mid-level themes: 1) gaps in meritocracy in sport (e.g., how race and gender shape participation, but also things like why we don't always choose the best tactical strategy on the field of play); 2) the tensions created by the commercialization of sport (e.g., the Olympic Games, but even more familiarly college sports in the U.S.); 3) a critical examination of deviance in sports; and 4) the social geography of sport.

Readings

All readings for this course will be available on the course website in PDF format. There are no textbooks or paper course readers to purchase.

In an effort to keep the amount of required reading contained, I have both (a) made an effort to identify excerpts from longer articles and books to assign; and (b) in some cases assigned a shorter, accessible reading (think: a newspaper article) that summarizes a longer, technical reading, instead of assigning the latter. (Having said that, for some topics the reading volume will be longer than for others.)

The required readings are designed to give you an accessible, basic story. Additional, more technical material will typically be left for presentation during lecture. On exams, you will

be responsible for both the content in the readings as well as the supplemental content presented in lecture.

Grading

Your course grade will be determined by the following components:

A sports fandom survey (5%), administered as a bCourses graded survey. This survey will ask questions about how you go about being a sports fan (including if you're not a sports fan at all). There are no right or wrong answers here, except for not filling out the survey at all. Your responses will remain anonymous to others in the course and anyone outside the course. We will use this data throughout the course to illustrate sociological ideas about the social nature of sports fandom.

The survey will become available on bCourses early in the course. It must be completed by Friday, February 2, 2024 @ 11:59 PM.

Two take-home midterm exams (15% and 20%, 35% total). These exams will come at roughly the one-third and two-thirds marks of the semester. Each will be a take-home-, "short answer"- (think: 4 questions, each 1 or 2 pages) style exam. More information on the format and content of these exams will be given as the semester progresses.

A Religion/Commodity/Escape analysis brief (20%). For this assignment, you'll be asked to reflect on and describe the social bases of an apparently purely individual/personal thing: the nature of your sports fandom. You will identify whether sports fandom for you is a religion, commodity, or escape (there will be a couple of other options available to you, if none of these fit your individual case), and then describe how social, as opposed to solely individual, factors pushed you in that direction.

In terms of written work, my philosophy is to favor shorter, concise writing assignments rather than term paper-type assignments. I will explain this in further detail at the beginning of the semester. But, this is why I am calling this assignment a "brief" as opposed to a "paper", the latter of which might trigger a mode of writing I would like people to avoid for this course.

A College Athletics analysis brief (20%). For this assignment, you'll again be asked to consider the social constructed-ness of sports, this time in conjunction with college athletics in the United States. Further details will be given later in the semester.

A final exam (20%). The final exam for Soc 117 will be 100% multiple choice and cumulative. It will be administered during the University's officially scheduled timeslot of **Wednesday, May 8, 2024, 3-6 PM**. However, it will be administered online, as a bCourses/Canvas quiz.

The course grading scale is as follows:

A+	97+	A	93-96	A-	90-92
B+	87-89	B	83-86	B-	80-82
C+	77-79	C	73-76	C-	70-72
D+	67-69	D	63-66	D-	60-62
		F	0-59		

When it comes time to compute overall course grades, I will round to the nearest whole number using standard rounding conventions—89.49 rounds down to 89 and a B+, 89.50 rounds up to 90 and an A-, etc. It doesn't really matter what the letter grade on the individual assignments are.

There are no other discretionary considerations, nor opportunities to earn extra credit on an individual basis, that will factor into your grade. I will not entertain any requests for such opportunities.

There are no surprises in how I calculate course grades. The GRADES section on bCourses will incorporate the weightings above and will accurately keep you apprised of your course progress.

Late grade policy: Work submitted late will be marked down 20% for each 24-hour period the assignment is overdue.

Disabled Students Program

DSP students should have their arrangements made by the third week of instruction. The DSP office will automatically send me a digital copy of your letter, with explanation of your accommodations. It will not be necessary to also provide me with a physical copy of the letter.

Recommendation Letters

Writing recommendation letters is part of an instructor's job and one which I embrace readily. However, it is difficult for me, and unhelpful to all parties involved, to write letters for students I do not know very well. I can and have exercised the discretion to decline to write letters when I don't know students beyond what grades they've earned in the course. If you anticipate asking me to write a letter, it is in your interest to participate in class discussion, visit me during my office hours, etc., and let me know what your plans and interests are above and beyond course material.

Academic Honesty & Classroom Conduct

The UC Berkeley Honor Code states that “As a member of the UC Berkeley community, I act with honesty, integrity, and respect for others”

(<https://teaching.berkeley.edu/berkeley-honor-code>). I expect you will follow these principles. You may not copy specific text or ideas from others, whether from fellow students, from authors of our readings or other material you find, without specific attribution. To do otherwise is to plagiarize. You may not cheat on any of the exams by bringing in illicit outside material, copying from fellow students, or engaging in other dishonest practices. Violation of these rules will result in an immediate **-0-** on the assignment in question, plus a report to the Office of Academic Affairs at my discretion.

You may of course discuss the lectures and readings with your fellow students. Forming studying groups on your own is encouraged, especially as there are no discussion sections to accompany this course. If these groups are used to struggle through ideas or debate topics (both are also good uses of class time, by the way!), then the effort expended can be very rewarding. However, if groups are used simply to “free ride” off a classmate’s work, **this is effectively another form of plagiarism** as far as I am concerned.

Study group meetings should be suspended during periods where a take-home exam is active. They can begin again after the exam due date has been reached.

Use of generative AI (e.g., ChatGPT) is RESTRICTED.*

*Guidelines and language adapted from Professor Heather Haveman in the Department of Sociology, UC Berkeley.

Generative AI has earned a lot of attention since ChatGPT was released just over a year ago. You may *not* use any generative AI app or tool to compose any of the assignments for this course, including the exams. If the readers and I suspect that submissions were illegitimately composed, whether detected by Turnitin and/or our own judgment, we may ask you to complete a short oral examination consisting of questions similar to the ones that we suspect were written with the help of AI.

That said, there are a wide range of uses of AI tools by students, such as:

- correcting grammar
 - Though, note that you will not be graded for spelling or grammar *per se* on any of the course assignments, unless they are so incoherent that we cannot understand your argument.
- explaining unfamiliar terms found in readings
- generating practice quiz questions

I encourage you to explore these tools, at least the free versions of LLMs. They are becoming more prominent in the “real world” outside academia, so you will undoubtedly encounter them wherever you work after graduation.

Reading, Assignment, and Exam Schedule

All readings listed below are required unless otherwise noted, and should be completed prior to the first meeting of the associated topic.

Part I: Introduction

Introduction: What is a sociology of sport?

Jan 17, 19, 22, 24

Optional reading: David Karen & Robert E. Washington (2015), *Sociological Perspectives on Sport: The Games Outside the Games* Section I introduction, “Sport and Sociology: Meanings and Dimensions”

Is elite athletic performance simply about genetics?

Jan 26, 29

Read: David Epstein, *The Sports Gene* ch 1 “Beat by an Underhand Girl” & ch 9 “We Are All Black (Sort Of)”

Sports Fandom Survey due on bCourses Friday, February 2, 2024 @ 11:59 PM

Part II: Gaps in meritocracy in sport

How does race shape perception of athletes?

Jan 31, Feb 2

Read:

- Jason Reid & Jane McManus, “The NFL’s Racial Divide” *The Undeclared* Apr 26 2017
 - Steven Foy & Rashawn Ray, “March Madness and college basketball’s racial bias problem” *Brookings* Mar 6 2020
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Who gets to play a sport?

Feb 5, 7

Read:

- Andrei S. Markovits & Lars Rensmann (2010), “A Silent ‘Feminization’ of Global Sports Cultures?”
 - Douglas E. Foley (1990), “The Great American Football Ritual”
 - “Martina Navratilova: The rules on trans athletes reward cheats and punish the innocent” *The Sunday Times* Feb 17 2019
 - “Megan Rapinoe: Transgender kids should be allowed to play sports like all other children” *The Washington Post* Mar 28 2021
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Is cheerleading a sport?

Feb 9, 12

Read: Laura Grindstaff & Emily West (2006), “Cheerleading and the Gendered Politics of Sport”

Midterm Exam #1 distributed on bCourses Wednesday, February 14, 2024

What strategies do we employ on the field of play?

Feb 14, 16

Read: Malcolm Gladwell, “How David Beats Goliath” *The New Yorker* May 11 2009

Midterm Exam #1 due on bCourses, Sunday, February 18, 2024 @ 11:59 PM

Part III: The commercialization of sport and its tensions**Sports fans: members of a community, or purchasers of goods?**

Feb 21, 23, 26

No class on Monday, Feb 19 2024.

Read:

- Richard Giulianotti (2002), “Supporters, Followers, Fans, and *Flâneurs*”
 - Ben McGrath, “When Fantasy Sports Beat Real Ones” *The New Yorker* Apr 13 2015
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College sports, Part I | The rise of the NCAA

Feb 28, Mar 1

Read: Taylor Branch, “The Shame of College Sports” *The Atlantic* Oct 2011

College sports, Part II | The business-ification of college sports and the myth of the student-athlete

Mar 4, 6, 8

Read: Ben Strauss, “College sports was once ‘the scandal beat’. Then amateurism became the scandal.” *The Washington Post* Jul 1 2021

Religion/Commodity/Escape Analysis Brief due on bCourses Tuesday, March 5, 2024 @ 11:59 PM

College sports, Part III | The continued liberalization of college sports: the dissolution of the Pacific 12 Athletic Conference

Mar 11, 13

Read:

- “Everything you need to know about USC and UCLA’s move to the Big Ten” *The Washington Post* Jul 1 2022
 - “What the Big Ten’s seismic move means for college football’s TV future” *The Athletic* Jul 5 2022
 - “How Rich Donors and Loose Rules Are Transforming College Sports” *The New York Times* Oct 21 2023
 - “Will Cal, Stanford face sports cuts after making big sacrifices to join the ACC?” *The San Francisco Chronicle* Sep 2 2023
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When do sports NOT become commercialized?

Mar 15

Read: Jason Kaufman & Orlando Patterson (2005), “Cross-National Cultural Difference: The Global Spread of Cricket”

Midterm Exam #2 distributed on bCourses Monday, March 18, 2024

Part IV: A critical examination of deviance in sports

Should politics be kept out of sports?

Mar 18, 20

Read:

- Michael Serazio & Emily Thorson, “Sports were already politicized. And sports culture is deeply conservative.” *The Washington Post* Oct 2 2017
- Kenneth Cohen, “The Forgotten Origins of Politics in Sports” *Slate* Jan 2 2018

Midterm Exam #2 due on bCourses Thursday, March 21, 2024 @ 11:59 PM

What are the rules against PEDs protecting us from?

Mar 22

Read: Bryan Sluggett (2007), “WADA Anti-Doping Policy and Education”

SPRING BREAK: March 25-29

What are the rules against PEDs protecting us from? (cont'd)

Apr 1

No new readings.

Is violence in sport deviant, or normal?

Apr 3, 5

Read:

- Randall Collins (2010), “On-Field Player Violence”
 - Michael Messner (2002), “Male Athletes, Injuries, and Violence”
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Part V: The social geography of sport

Where does the institution of the home team come from?

Apr 8, 10, 12

Read: Eric Leifer, “Introduction” to *Making the Majors*

College Sports Analysis Brief due on bCourses Tuesday, April 9, 2024 @ 11:59 PM

Should cities subsidize professional sports teams?

Apr 15, 17, 19

Read:

- Andrew Zimbalist & Roger Noll, “Sports, Jobs, & Taxes: Are New Stadiums Worth the Cost?” Brookings Jun 1 1997
 - Kevin J. Delaney & Rick Eckstein (2003), *Public Dollars, Private Stadiums* ch 1 “Local Growth Coalitions and Publicly Funded Stadiums” & ch 8 “Public Dollars, Private Stadiums, and Democracy”
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Does *nation* still matter in sports?

Apr 22, 24, 26

Read:

- Jeré Longman, “A Parade with a Point: Soccer Is Best Avenue for Patriotism” *The New York Times* Jul 10 2015
 - Naftali Bendavid, “Soccer Violence Escalates in Europe” *The Wall Street Journal* Apr 29 2015
 - Andrew Bertoli, “World Cup participation increases state aggression” *The Washington Post* Jun 3 2014
 - Raffaele Poli (2007), “The Denationalization of Sport: De-ethnicization of the Nation and Identity Deterritorialization”
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Reading, Recitation, and Review (no class): April 29-May 3

Final Exam: online, Wednesday, May 8, 2024 3:00-6:00 PM