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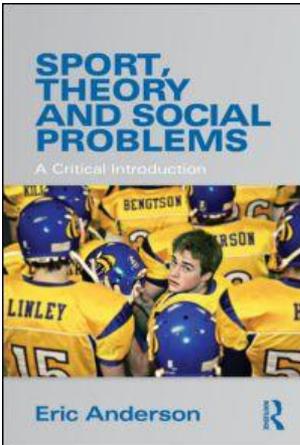
Book Review

Sport, Theory and Social Problems: A Critical Introduction (2010)

by Eric Anderson

[Routledge](#)

Reviewed by Michael Kehler
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Sport, health education and the sometimes uncertain terrain that defines it can be challenging. In his recent book, *Sport, theory and social Problems: A critical introduction*, Eric Anderson offers an accessible and inviting text that tries to make the theoretical and practical realm of sport and social issues palatable to those new to the field of study. As he explains, his goal is to help readers think more critically about the role sport plays in society and to contest deeply held beliefs about sport. He is clear about his position and his experiences within the domain of sport. He is a sociologist and as he further elaborates, he was a long distance runner in high school and had a “previous identity of loving youth sport” (p. 3). Readers are introduced to Anderson in an open,

honest, and compelling introduction that allows us to see how he experienced and now understands that “sport is both good and bad” (p. 14). Largely written as an introductory text, Anderson writes in a manner that makes this book easy to read with useful theoretical groundwork and intellectual maneuvering that is bound to be foundational for many students new to social theory.

This text is not intended for advanced level students or scholars in the field. It is a text directed at an audience for whom social theory may be new or challenging and as an attempt to “help you see problems associated with not so much the act of sport, but the way we play it and the problem of how we value it” (p. 5). (Emphasis in text) Anderson writes in a matter of fact, almost conversational manner that would appeal to undergraduate students because he genuinely “hope [s]to use theory in this book in a way that helps you realize that you too can understand, utilize, and comment on social theory” and moreover, he “hope[s] you feel less intimidated about the word ‘theory’” (p. 18). As such Anderson offers a text that is useful for developing insight into social theory. He

navigates between a smattering of ethnographic data in the form of stories from Jeff, Kallella, Ben, Jenny and others that are parsed out in the opening pages of each chapter but unfortunately they are left to allow him to define theories, theorists and insight from his teaching and past experiences. Rather than a rich theorizing of ethnographic data that he sparingly offers up, the reader is directed to Cognitive Dissonance Theory, Berger and Luckmann, Sigmund Freud, Goffman, Marx, Antonio Gramsci, Pierre Bourdieu and social identity theory. The theorizing and application to the data, namely the stories of various athletes, becomes tertiary. I am struck less by the power of the theory Anderson has showcased and more by a sense of the author and his position within the field. His navigation of data, theory, and historical development of social theories may be interesting to undergraduate students but might leave others requiring deeper sophistication and a more nuanced analysis of sport and social problems, unfulfilled. Anderson is clear about his audience suggesting that instead of reading “volumes of social theory”... “Wikipedia is a rather good place to start, and in many places, is all you need to know” (p. 17). There is an ironic anti-intellectualism in his position in which he claims academics “write in ways that are difficult for others to understand” (p. 17) but at the same time he positions himself as an authority identifying and offering up theories for the use of those not as well versed in the discipline.

Anderson did what he set out to do which was to provide a reasonable introductory text to social theory. He is ambitious in his attempt to make social theory less intimidating and in doing so, provide readers with a wide swath of theories to look at sport and social problems. In his final chapter Anderson reminds the reader that his primary purpose has been to “critically examine sport, and to put forth empirically supported, theoretically based arguments that highlight the ways in which sport reproduces a great deal of harm” (p. 151). He concludes his book as a “public sociologist” (which ironically, is never defined in the book) that “cannot feel good about myself if I leave this book as just a critique of sport” (p.152). He ends this book instead by “postulat[ing] ways upon which we can improve the socio-positive outcomes of sport, and reduce the socio-negative” (p. 152). His list of suggestions fills the final pages of his book and in large part, is worthy and indeed thoughtful. His closing is positive and forward looking as he continues recollecting classroom exercises he has done to help students think about sport critically and as he concludes, to encourage us to “return to a state of sporting play” (p. 165).