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Research Paper

The extraordinary development of sport for people with dis/abilities. What does it all mean?☆

L'extraordinaire développement du sport des personnes ayant des in/capacités : mais qu'est-ce que tout cela signifie ?

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ABSTRACT

Physical and sports practices represent a dimension of the social history of people with impairments that has become progressively visible, yet still little studied. Through the reading of socio-historical and sociological research on these practices, the author defends her contention that the development, recognition and social visibility of these individuals having been obtained by the sphere of “disability sport” are based on the convergence of two “tool boxes” for innovation: the organization of athlete classification and the “technologization” of the impaired body. Both of these innovatory mechanisms are controversial and subject to continuous experimentation in “sport for the disabled”. The social world of “disability sport” having been decoded, it comes across as a practical utopia, a heterotopia.

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☆ In this paper, we will use “people with dis/abilities”, and “people with impairments” or “athletes with impairments” in reference to the international classification of functioning, disability and health (WHO, ICF, 2001), and to imply that adapted sports for people “with impairments” are social activities in which, “athletes with impairments” are no more people with disabilities, but people with “abilities”.

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Les pratiques physiques et sportives sont une facette de l'histoire sociale des personnes ayant des déficiences, devenue progressivement visible, mais pourtant encore peu étudiée. Au travers d'une relecture de travaux sociohistoriques et sociologiques menés sur ces pratiques, l'auteur défend la thèse selon laquelle le développement rapide, la reconnaissance et la visibilité sociale acquise aujourd'hui par le monde du « sport-handicap » repose sur le croisement de deux dispositifs d'innovation qui habitent le monde du sport des personnes ayant des in/capacités. Il s'agit d'une part, d'un ingénieux dispositif de classification des sportifs, et d'autre part, d'un dispositif de technologisation du corps atteint, ces deux dispositifs étant souvent controversés et en expérimentation permanente. Le monde social du « sport-handicap » ainsi décodé, apparaît alors comme utopie réalisée, une hétérotopie.

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Since the 1980s, we have been conducting research on sport practises and sports organizations of/for people with impairments in France and other European countries. As developing social activities, sports seem to increasingly challenge society as they repeatedly create, and more than occasionally in a conflictual way, the conditions for an encounter between two social worlds, which historically were not expected to meet, those of disability and sport.

In this paper, we would like to trace and question the origins and the widespread and rapid developments in sports for people with impairments, whether they be hearing, visual, physical and/or intellectual. Proceeding with a socio-historical approach (Noiriel, 2006), we will focus this review on the socio-historical process of development of sports for people with impairments since the 1980s. With this socio-historical literature and the scattered existing data on this topic, we will address an apparently simple question: “how are we to explain and interpret the ‘extraordinary’ changes, developments and successes of sports for people with impairments over the last few decades?”

Norbert Elias (2016) said “history is the laboratory of the sociologist” (p. 44). We shall attempt to demonstrate that the history of sports for people with impairments can be viewed as a telltale laboratory for the sociologist interested in differences, diversity and social innovations elaborated by people aiming at learning to live with others.

In the first part, we shall summarize these extraordinary developments by citing some examples serving as landmarks in their respective phases. In the second part, we shall focus on two processes centrally involved in the development of the competitive forms of these sports practices: classification, and technologization. We shall conclude this article by showing how the institutionalization process of the sport competitions for people with impairments helps to explain the success of this specific sport, “our sport”, as these athletes would say.

1. Benchmarks and examples of development of sports for people with impairments during the 20th century

As we know then, modern sports as such began to develop in the 1840s. About a century later, in the second half of the twentieth century, sports activities for persons with impairments were distinctly and progressively organized, in addition to the precursor example of silent sport, which appeared earlier in the century. The International Committee for Silent Sports [Comité international des sports silencieux (CISS)] was founded in 1924 in Paris, France and held the first Silent Games that summer (Séguillon, 1998). By the beginning of the twenty-first century, sports for persons with dis/abilities had become highly visible and diversified.

The notion of a universal, integrative essence of sport may be viewed as a fable, and most sociologists now consider that integration through sport is a politically generated collective belief

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