

## **Book Review. The Broadcasted Future of Sport Management. Branden Buehler's *Front Office Fantasies. The Rise of Managerial Sports Media***

ARTUR LÓRÁND LAKATOS

Affiliation: Faculty of Economics and Social Sciences  
Partium Christian University, Oradea, Romania  
Email: lakatosartur@partium.ro

Wittgenstein (1977) asserted that the world is a system of colors. According to the theoreticians of system theory, a system is formed of many components, and changes suffered by a component of the system can affect all the other components and regular processes. In such systems, components and processes are in dynamic interdependencies. Such can be said, in our opinion, about the world of sports media and management, and Branden Buehler's book is an illustration of this.

Sport, marketing, business, and politics coexist, forming a complex system of networks and phenomena, within certain boundaries but having their specific dynamics. As Buehler explains on p. 172 of his book, "the symbiotic relationship between sport and media is likely to grow even tighter." Managerial sport is a social phenomenon, as one of the subtitles of the introduction formulates. The dynamics often seem to be spontaneous, but they are rarely so.

Across platforms, these reporters almost exclusively focus on the minute details of the managerial moves, generally offering little critical commentary. Their reporting produces an endless stream of content that is likely appealing to sports media companies not just for its volume but also for its obsequiousness. Another suggestive illustration involves managerial sports films. (p. 190)

The entire volume is interesting to read but hard to understand for those unfamiliar with this world; on their part, a greater focus of attention is required. However, once the reader gets into the flow of the dynamism of this colorful and original text, it is harder to stop

until the whole volume is read. Also, the book's four chapters are delimited according to their subjects, but a certain line of thought is omnipresent throughout the volume, on which the judgments are built.

The bibliography is large, as a result of an extensive work of research, which started, according to the author, while he was in graduate school, and it was developed into the current volume due to the help and influence of a series of people. Each chapter has explanatory and bibliographic notes, while the general bibliography contains even more titles. The general bibliography is a clear reflection in the mirror of the author's personality, as it highlights the list of readings for realizing this project. At the same time, the bibliography is very variable in quality, from short articles to studies published in some of the most prestigious journals. The years of their publication also highlight the evolution of the author's interest in this specific subject.

The first chapter focuses on and starts by reflecting on the film *Moneyball*. To enjoy this chapter, the reader has to be familiar with the movies used as case studies by the author. The second chapter focuses on real-life coverage of sports administration, and the third chapter tackles the relationship of the sports industry with television and examines the specific industrial roots of this phenomenon. The fourth chapter scrutinizes the popularity of digital games, "both video games and fantasy leagues" (p. 47).

"The Managerial American Dream" deals with how the American Dream is realized through sport, in movies. It identifies some common patterns in Hollywood production, common for sports movies, like the rise of the underdog through hard training, and the way the role of management got more and more highlighted, starting with the eighties of the last century, and the way how the *Athletic American Dream* got replaced by the *Managerial American Dream* (p. 44).

Probably many readers will find the gender and race issues to be intriguing, as the author sublimely highlights certain aspects—the author of this current review finds especially interesting the contrast between "primitive" and "civilized" masculinity, expressed in the movies. Issues analyzed in this case are related to masculinity–femininity, and sport as a promotion of national propaganda (*Rocky IV*, *The Jump*, and others). The analysis performed on topics and archetypes leaves quite a few questions open for further interpretation. Such an idea is formulated, for example, in the following sentence:

Most obviously, if the traditional sports film suggests that athletic performance is key to obtaining the American Dream, then the managerial sports film, in deemphasizing athletic action, instead posits that a different sort of performance—administrative performance—is key to the American Dream. (p. 43)

The author proceeds to a reflection concerning the concept of what he calls to be the American Managerial Dream, stating that it is hardly a revolutionary vision and that certain representations are closer to the American Nightmare. To understand these critics is recommended to watch the *High Flying Bird* Netflix production movie, with a critical eye, and understand its racial dimension, especially in the mirror of the BLM protests.

The chapter "He's Looking like a Depressed Asset. The Financial Logic of Managerial Sports Talk" expands the analysis to real-world sports events and their managerial aspects. Especially the Sport as "Investment" subchapter is of striking interest, where in the high-light of some specific sources of literature, the investment character of the sports media is analyzed. The conclusions are rather suggestions. I will highlight in this sense the last idea of the chapter:

One can view, then, managerial sports talk not just as further ensconcing investment as the dominant metaphor for understanding the world but also offering investor exemplars to help audiences grapple with that transformation. (p. 78)

Almost equally intriguing are the rest of the subchapters, including the one dealing with the aspects of risk management in sports media.

The chapter "Datavisuality. The Quantified Aesthetic of Managerial Sports Television" deals with data, numbers, and quantification. This chapter is the most illustrated one with graphics and photos. At the same time, tables, diagrams, and figures characteristic of econometric analysis are missing. This will probably be the subject of another volume.

The fourth chapter deals with sports games and their complicated relationship with neoliberal capitalism.

The goal of this chapter has not been to challenge or rebut the existing work of managerial sports games, but rather to add new layers to this work in further examining how managerial texts fit into everyday life amid the rhythms and imperatives of neoliberal capitalism. (p. 167)

Says a fragment of this text which is speaking for itself. The author openly suggests that managerial sports games are framing society through neoliberal values. The text is not simply about gaming, even if the author expresses a certain level of knowledge of the evolution of fantasy sports computer games, it focuses on their role in modeling managerial culture in sports. The chapter will be pleasant to read for those who enjoy playing *Football Manager* and similar games.

The “Conclusions,” while highlighting how easy it is nowadays, due to technology, to stream and record podcasts, are leaving a question open, with all its affirmations. For example, “Within the world of managerial sports media, administrators—mostly men, mostly white—are often the true protagonists of sport in wielding special expertise and skills to shrewdly manage these athletes- cum- investments-cum-data” (p. 171). It is hard to deny the truthfulness of this statement; it is a phenomenon we all perceive.

In addition, managerial sports media blocks out alternative methods of interpreting and understanding sports. If managerial texts are primarily centered on a conception of sport as rigidly hierarchical and highly rational, one might imagine a radically different version of sports media that rejects this orientation—perhaps, for instance, centering the “aesthetics delights” mentioned in the third chapter and, in the process, further highlighting qualities like creativity and playfulness. (p. 172)

This affirmation is also true, due to the nature of managerial communication, which has to be direct and efficient, and this is hard to change; at the same time, we have to agree with Buehler that alternative approaches are available, possible, and beneficial. An alternative approach to the rigid system of “traditional” relations among sports, managerial practice, and media is suggested:

Similarly, with a relatively inexpensive camera and web streaming account, anyone can live stream a sporting event across the world. Indeed, communities surrounding amateur and minor sports have begun taking advantage of these possibilities, in the process creating a new form of sports media outside the traditional sports media apparatus. The question becomes, then, if this new “independent” sports media content will challenge the managerial mode or if, instead, managerial logics have become so ingrained in the presentation of the sport they even come to dominate this new realm. (p. 173)

May the future of the amateur broadcasting (see the example of Tiktok) and AI be an alternative for the traditional sports media apparatus, as Buehler formulates? Probably partially “yes,” but I have doubts that much can change in the near future in this aspect.

Overall, this book in general received positive words by the anonymous authors of short reviews on different bookselling sites, and a thorough reading can confirm that it has lots of qualities. Its text, however, inspires mediation and contemplation over its affirmations rather than reproducing its content, similar to the character of an article from an encyclopedia. It is also leaving open certain directions for research, like the issue of masculinity–femininity in sports media, or the proportions of sports media like business reported to amateur, often underground broadcasting. The *Front Office Fantasies* can become a source for future research of great social impact. And, at the same time, it represents pleasant reading.

## References

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