

Michael Sam & Steven J. Jackson (Eds.). (2017). *Sport policy in small states*. London: Routledge. 137pp. ISBN: 978-0-3670-2886-2. pbk: US\$52.95; ebk: US\$47.65.

This book consists of eight chapters. Its geographical scope is partially global in character since it deals with nine “small states” across Europe (Sweden, Denmark, Norway, Finland, Ireland), the Caribbean (Antigua and Barbuda), Oceania (New Zealand) and Asia/Middle East (Singapore, Lebanon). Its small size might be consistent with its subject matter of small states but it still “punches [way] above its weight” as it offers a veritable one stop shop in the study of the changed role of the state in the development of sport and the sport policy process, conceptually, theoretically, methodologically as well as empirically, in several “small states” across the world. In the latter regard, it offers an extremely useful source of policy learning based on the lessons that can be drawn from the various country cases examined in relation to the major dimensions of the [sport] policy process that include notably, agenda setting, policy development/formulation, implementation as well as evaluation. Consequently, it is just what the doctor ordered (to use an old cliché) for a still nascent sub-field of public policy whose growth and sustainability, like any other, would depend on the creation of a body of knowledge that can service the needs of students, teachers, researchers, policy makers as well as the various stakeholders in the sporting community. This gives the book added appeal and value as a resource for research, teaching and learning in relation to sport policy.

Understandably, the problématique of defining small nations in terms of various demographic, economic, political and even cultural criteria (e.g., “personal ties,” “trust”) due to its relativist, subjectivist or even constructivist character (see Chapters 1, 2 and 6 in particular) receives prominent attention in the book. In the context of sport, smallness, however conceived, is seen as both a liability and an asset, at the same time, although more of the former. This liability expresses itself in relation to various resource constraints (human, lack of research data, infrastructural), the depth or scope of athletic talent production and sporting results which might be summed up in the statement that “When it comes to sport, size matters.” (p. 1) This statement however, captures a fundamental and all-pervasive myth that runs through all the Chapters of the book that there is some necessary or isomorphic relationship between the geographical or population size of a nation and sport results or performance when the very evidence both within the book and outside of it contradicts or challenges this. For instance, the success of New Zealand in rugby (ranked number one in the world), cricket (ranked number one in Test and One Day Internationals) and netball (ranked 2nd in the world), all in the latest 2021 rankings); Jamaica in men’s and women’s sprinting; the previous dominance of world cricket by the West Indies for around 15 years in the 1980s and 1990s; as well as Finland’s early success in long distance running and the summer Olympics in general: these offer relevant examples to contradict this performance myth surrounding smallness. Conversely, the smallness thinking also cannot explain why Nigeria or Brazil, with populations of over 200 million, are not producing world class athletes in sprinting, comparable to much smaller Jamaica with a population of 2.9m. Of course, rankings and performance in the world of sport fluctuate; but the real question then becomes: size matters for exactly what, when and where [in sport]?

As an asset, smallness is seen as helping to facilitate the mobilisation of resources and policy making by helping to limit dissent and legitimize sport policy initiatives, particularly in relation to spending on elite sport, given its importance to national identity, nation building, the international image and visibility of small states in particular (see Chapter on New Zealand for this asset-based view of smallness). In the case of Antigua and Barbuda, however, smallness was seen as more of a liability than an asset as it did not help in any significant way to enhance

the relationship between policy makers and the sport community in their involvement in the sport policy process, which still assumed a top-down character. This served to contradict further the supposed “close knit” nature of small societies and the benefits it purportedly provides to consensual policy making in sport.

Another major value of the book relates to the application of qualitative data collection methods (documents, interviews and observation) to the study of sport in general, and the sport policy process in particular although two of the Chapters (4 and 5) adopt more of a mixed methods research design while the others are based primarily on documentary research. However, except for the two mixed methods Chapters, there was no rigorous and critical treatment of the methods of data collection and analysis. In addition, while the authors of the Antigua and Barbuda study were rightly at pains to warn against the adoption, if not imposition of any Eurocentric developed country framework to understanding sport policy development on the island, as part of the “decolonization of knowledge,” they still seem to end up falling on their own ontological and epistemological sword by appearing to suggest what is best for the island in particular relation to the pursuit of elite sport, given its resource requirements. And, this in a country which has produced some of the finest “elite” or professional cricketers in the world in the person of West Indian cricketers Vivian Richards, Richie Richardson, and fast bowlers Andy Roberts and Curtly Ambrose who, almost single handedly, bowled out big country England for 46 runs in a Test match in 1994. Resource constraints notwithstanding therefore, the production of “elite” athletes is not foreign to Antigua and Barbuda.

In addition, while these country profiles did not use the particular language of case study, they serve to reflect the advantages of the case study approach in relation to: (a) confirming certain generalities (e.g. the increased interventionist role of the state in sport around the world for similar reasons linked to national identity, economic and social development, the neo liberal character of this intervention and the tensions between elite and mass sport); (b) contradicting generalities (e.g., the irrelevance of notions of “deliberation,” “aggregation” and “enforcement” associated with small states/societies to understanding the sport policy process as shown in Antigua & Barbuda); and (c) directing attention to particularities or specificities of certain sporting realities (e.g., the more “autonomous” or “decentered” approach to elite sport in Scandinavian countries due to their strong tradition of voluntarism and community involvement; the role of “confessionalism” in Lebanese sport).

Relatedly, the cases draw on general theories or concepts from a range of fields to help explain particular experiences or processes dealing with human actors, the workings of the state, the use of sport (for “domestic and diplomatic” reasons) and the sport policy process. To that extent, most of these country cases can be seen as explanatory in nature (as opposed to being mere descriptive or exploratory) since they are structured around the application of general theories or concepts to understanding the state-sport nexus in small states. These include theories or concepts drawn from international relations (notably soft power, realism, neo-liberalism, constructivism and “norm entrepreneur”; autonomy, isomorphist/ imitative; isolationist, collective and camp follower); political theory (e.g., social, organizational, input and output legitimacy); sociology (structure and agency, individual and social actors); public policy (“policy agenda expander” and “container”; top down/bottom up, conflictual approaches to policy making and implementation, network governance or decentered governance). In this context, the book reflects very much the multi-disciplinary character of public policy which serves to give it greater theoretical richness. In addition, this application of theories to the study of particular cases offers several excellent examples to illustrate the workings of “analytical generalization” (using cases to support or contradict theories as well as highlight lessons learnt)

as opposed to statistical generalization (making inferences about a population based on a randomly drawn sample from that population).

This book shows the tremendous conceptual, theoretical and methodological value of qualitative research in general and case study research in particular, to the study of sport development, sport policy and the role of the state in this process. In general however, it is a welcomed addition to the emerging literature in this relatively recent area or addition to the menu of public policies but, even more so, in particular relation to small states where the pace and extent of research on sport still lags behind global trends.

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