

Gender and sports in the Brazilian historiography: overview and potentials

Silvana Vilodre Goellner[1]

Abstract

This paper analyzed the emergence of the gender category as an analytical tool whose use has enabled the expansion of subjects, objects, and problems in the academic production of sport historiography field. It developed a brief review of that production, as well as pointed to the existence of thematic and analytical tools that are still poorly investigated, mainly in studies performed in Brazil.

Keywords: gender; sport; history.

Gênero e esporte na historiografia brasileira: balanços e potencialidades

Resumo

Este texto analisou a emergência da categoria gênero como ferramenta analítica, cuja utilização possibilitou a ampliação de temas, objetos e problemas na produção acadêmica do campo da história do esporte. Foi desenvolvido um breve balanço desta produção, bem como foi apontado à existência de temáticas e ferramentas analíticas ainda pouco investigadas, sobretudo, nos estudos desenvolvidos no Brasil.

Palavras-chave: gênero; esporte; história.

Género y deporte en la historiografía brasileña: equilibrios y potencialidades

Resumen

Este texto analizó la emergencia de la categoría género como herramienta analítica, cuya utilización permitió la ampliación de temas, objetos y problemas en la producción académica del campo de la historia del deporte. Fue desarrollado un breve diagnóstico de esta producción, bien como fue apuntado a la existencia de temáticas y herramientas analíticas aun poco investigadas, sobre todo, en los estudios desarrollados en Brasil.

Palabras clave: genero; deporte; historia.

Genre et sport dans l'historiographie brésilienne : enquête et potentiel

Résumé

Ce texte retrace l'émergence du « genre » comme catégorie d'analyse dont l'emploi a permis l'élargissement du champ de l'historiographie du sport à de nouveaux thèmes, objets et problèmes. Il fait un bilan de cette production académique et indique des thématiques et des outils d'analyse qui demeurent toujours peu investigués au Brésil.

Mots-clés: genre; sport; histoire.

In the scope of sports history, research on gender has been shaping itself, since the mid-1970s, as a possibility of investigation of diverse authors in different cultural contexts, especially in Europe and the United States. In Brazil, its largest dissemination occurred in the 1980s, initially through research conducted in graduate programs, fundamentally in the area of education.

More than outlining the state of the art of this production, it is worth highlighting some movements whose academic and political ramifications made possible the emergence of new approaches in the field of sports history by contemplating objects, problems, analytical tools, and sources rarely analyzed until then. In this sense, the role played by the 1960s and 1970s feminist movement¹ stands out, with the elaboration of theoretical and epistemological contributions capable of subsiding practices and discourses that sought to value the commonly neglected feminine experience. The academic field named *Women's History*² results from this movement and intentionality.

It was in those years that previously "silent" groups, defined by differences in race, sex, sexual preferences, etc., were recorded in history.

In the 1960s, many [...] questions were abruptly brought to the surface, when the political and aesthetic spheres merged in the so-called counterculture [...]. Blacks and feminists, ethnographers, gays, native and "third world" cultures did not form monolithic movements, but constituted a diversity of reactions to a situation of marginality and eccentricity perceived by all.³

Historiographical production, above all American and French, designed the first contours of women studies, thus delimiting an academic and political territory necessary to the desired pursuit of visibility. This scenario suffered an alteration with the publication of *Gender: a useful category of historical analysis*,⁴ written by North-American historian Joan Scott. In this essay, the author proposed to use gender as an analytical tool, therefore shifting the centrality from the identity category *woman* to the relational aspect between the sexes, emphasizing "the social connotations of gender as opposed to the physical connotations of sex".⁵

¹The feminist movement cannot be understood as a homogeneous block. Since its origins, it presented a series of nuances and dissonances, and the very term feminism is not univocal. Authors such as Janet R. Richards (1994) and Judith Evans (1995) analyzed and classified different groups and ramifications. Richards identified two major strands: liberal and radical feminism, and Evans presented a broader network with emphasis on the liberal, radical, cultural, socialist, and post-modern directions. Ana Macedo e Ana Luisa Amaral, *Dicionário da crítica feminista*, Porto, Edições Afrontamento, 2005.

²Some feminist historians adopted a particular denomination within the field of *Women Studies*: the term *Herstory*, which was initially used to draw attention to the universal use of the generic masculine implied in History (his-story). The motivation for this criticism is founded on the poor adjustment between language and the reality it refers to, which ends up omitting women's role as social subjects in history. With the proposal of the term *Herstory*, these feminists intend to secure a place for women and, at the same time, give history back to them in that this term refers to the theorization and registering of their experience, life, and language. Maggie Humm, *The Dictionary of Feminist Theory*, Columbus, Ohio State University Press, 1996, p. 35. About this topic see: Ana Macedo e Ana Luisa Amaral, *op. cit.*, p. 23.

³Linda Hutcheon, *Poética do Pós-Modernismo*, Rio de Janeiro, Imago, 1991, p. 32.

⁴Published in 1986, this essay was translated by the magazine *Educação & Realidade* (Education and Reality) in 1990, based on a French version. In 1995, the same periodical published a new version translated from the original text in English. Joan Scott, "Gênero: uma categoria útil de análise histórica", *Educação & Realidade*, vol. 20, n. 2, Porto Alegre, 1995, p. 71-99.

⁵Joan Scott, "O enigma da igualdade", *Revista Estudos Feministas*, vol. 13, n. 1, Florianópolis, 2005, p. 11-30.

Although there is consensus in refuting the idea that anatomical sex determines the differences between men and women — that is, that these identities are not biologically given but constructed socially and culturally — the term *gender* has not been adopted homogeneously in feminist theorization,⁶ including in historiographical studies.

Initially, its use motivated studies that proposed to denounce the quasi invisibility of women both as subjects in the grand narratives about humanity's history, and as protagonists in historiographical production. Such studies claimed of history the task of stressing the importance of women's participation in the constitution of societies and cultures, recognizing them in the public and political spheres, as well as in daily life. In the academic production on sports history, especially in English-speaking countries, these studies also allowed the category *gender* to be aggregated to the analyses undertaken. In this way, they introduced the assertion that sport is a not only sexual, but also generic social practice:⁷ sexual, because people of both sexes practice it; gendered, because masculine and feminine identities are constructed in and expressed through it.⁸

Such studies inaugurated the identification of sport as an important space in the construction and incorporation of masculinities and femininities.⁹ In addition, they broke off from the naturalized acceptance that different sporting experiences lived by men and women were justified by their bodies' different biology.

Sports histories: gender as an analytical category

The insertion of theoretical and epistemological contributions arising from feminism into the field of historiographical research made possible the emergence of objects of investigation that were once interdict, many of them analyzed from gender relations. If, on one hand, this insertion fomented a vast production about the construction of masculinities and femininities in several academic fields, on the other, it became restricted in the specific scope of sports history.

⁶According to Linda Nicholson, although the word *gender* has a meaning quite clear to feminism, it is used in two different, and, in certain measure, contradictory manners. On one hand, it is always used in opposition to sex in order to describe what is socially construed as opposed to what is biologically given. This understanding is more visible in the first feminist theorizations. On the other, it has been used increasingly in reference to any social construction that rely on the distinction male/female, including the constructions that separate feminine bodies from male bodies. Here, there is a perception "that society not only shapes personality and behavior, but also the ways the body appears". Linda Nicholson, "Interpretando Gênero", *Revista Estudos Feministas*, vol. 8, n. 2, Florianópolis, 2000, p. 9-42. About this topic, see also: Verena Stolke, "La mujer es puro cuento: la cultura del género", *Revista Estudos Feministas*, vol. 12, n. 2, Florianópolis, 2004, p. 77-105; Silvana Aparecida Mariano, "O sujeito do feminismo e o pós-estruturalismo", *Revista Estudos Feministas*, vol. 13, n. 3, Florianópolis, 2005, p. 483-505.

⁷Jennifer Hargreaves, "The Social Production of Gender Through Sport", *Theory, Culture and Society*, vol. 3, n. 1, 1986, London, p. 114-119; Ian Wellard, "Able bodies and sport participation: social construction of physical ability for gendered and sexually identified bodies", *Sport, Education and Society*, vol. 11, n. 2, p. 105-119; Michel Messner, "Sports and Male Domination: The Female Athlete as Contested Ideological Terrain", *In: Susan Birrell; Cheryl Cole (eds.), Women, Sport, and Culture*, Champaign, IL, Human Kinetics, 1994, p. 94-112.

⁸Paula Silva, *A construção/estruturação do gênero na educação física*, Lisboa, Comissão para a Igualdade e para os Direitos das Mulheres, 2007.

⁹Nancy Theberge, "Toward a Feminist Alternative to Sport as a Male Preserve", *In: Susan Birrell; Cheryl Cole (eds.), Women, Sport, and Culture*, Champaign, IL, Human Kinetics, 1994, p. 181-192.

This affirmation can be identified in the scarce attention that feminisms have given to this bodily practice,¹⁰ especially in Portuguese-language academic production.¹¹ Likewise, studies on sport, including those of historiographical nature, have ignored the very gendering that structures it.¹²

In spite of this double marginality, it is necessary to highlight that several objects currently investigated in the field of sports history were only possible due to the contribution made by feminisms, and because of their political and academic propositions.

Upon deconstructing the naturalized representation that men and women are formed male and female due to bodily differences, that these justify certain inequalities, attribute social functions, and determine roles to be performed by one sex or the other, feminist and gender studies enabled other viewpoints on sport. They allowed, for instance, the identification of bodies, gestures, representations of health, beauty, and performance as historical constructions, which, in different times and cultures, have been associated with men and/

*Bodies, gestures, representations
of health, beauty, and performance
as historical constructions*

or women. They made visible the gendering processes that constitute sport by highlighting that masculinities and femininities are produced and reproduced in it, and that these are always historical, mutant, and transitory.¹³

Therefore, these studies were determinant in the deconstruction of many discourses and practices that affirmed the hierarchies and powers¹⁴ of certain individuals and groups. In this process, it was evidenced that the naturalized acceptance of sport as a field of “masculine reserve”¹⁵ is justified not by the distinct biology of men’s and women’s bodies, but by social, cultural, and historical aspects.

Owing to formulations similar to the aforementioned, feminisms reclaimed to women their status of individuals in sport, analyzing it as a political space, and, consequently, as a place of resistance and transformation of gender relations.¹⁶

¹⁰Jennifer Hargreaves, *Sporting females: critical issues in the History and Sociology of women's sports*, London, Routledge, 1994; Anne Flintoff; Sheila Scraton, “Feminist research and Physical Education”, In: Andrew Sparkes (ed.), *Research in Physical Education and Sport Exploring Alternative Visions*, London, Falmer Press, 1992, p. 167-187; Ann Hall, *Feminism and Sporting Bodies Essays on Theory and Practice*, Illinois, Human Kinetics, 1996.

¹¹Paula Botelho-Gomes, Paula Silva, Paula Queirós, *Equidade na educação. educação física e desporto na escola*, Lisboa, Associação Portuguesa Mulher e Desporto, 2000; Paula Silva; Paula Botelho-Gomes; Silvana Vilodre Goellner, “Masculinities and sport: the emphasis on hegemonic masculinity in Portuguese physical education classes”, *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, vol. 25, 2011, p. 1-23.

¹²Paula Silva, *A construção/estruturação do género na educação física*, Lisboa, Comissão para a Igualdade e para os Direitos das Mulheres, 2007.

¹³Silvana Vilodre Goellner, “Feminismos, mulheres e esportes: questões epistemológicas sobre o fazer historiográfico”, *Movimento*, vol. 13, n. 2, Porto Alegre, 2007, p. 123-135.

¹⁴Power, here, is taken from Michel Foucault’s theory; he perceives it as diffuse, decentralized and horizontal. Michel Foucault, *Microfísica do Poder*, Rio de Janeiro, Graal, 1992.

¹⁵Eric Dunning, “O desporto como área masculina reservada: notas sobre os fundamentos sociais da identidade masculina e as suas transformações”, In: Norbert Elias, *A busca da excitação*, Lisboa, Diefel, 1992, p. 145-156.

¹⁶Ann Hall, “From pre to postfeminism: a four-decade journey”, In: Pikko Markula (org), *Feminist sport studies: sharing experiences of joy and pain*, New York, State University of New York Press, 2005, p. 56-67.

In Brazilian historiographical research, the first investigative focus was placed on women. Such production, clothed in political nuances, put the representation of feminine fragility under suspicion, with the discovery that women have been present in different dimensions of this cultural practice since its beginning, despite their absence from official discourses.

Investigations on femininities and, in infinitely less quantity, on masculinities emerged as results and complements to this focus. Two strands can be identified in this direction: one whose studies reaffirm the identity categories man and woman, nullifying the differences present at each pole of this representation; and another that, on the contrary, emphasizes the divergences inherent to each of these binary categories, thus evidencing the impossibility of generalizing *the woman* or *the man*.

By universalizing representations of men and women, attributing distinct, innate and immutable characteristics to each, the first of these strands suggests that aspects of one's character and personality, social functions, spaces of belonging, and possibilities of socialization can be determined for all by relying solely on these characteristics. It operates with the concept of stereotype from which standards of masculinity and femininity are constructed based on biological sex. In this sense, the studies undertaken have hardly problematized the different insertion, adhesion, and permanence of men and women in the cultural universe of sport, reaffirming, in a certain measure, the representation that adventure, power, challenge, and strength are destined for men; for women, contained adventure, controlled power, measured strength, and smooth challenges.¹⁷

The second strand, in turn, points that social markers — for instance, race/ethnicity, generation, sexuality, religion, social class, etc. — cause distinctions between women and men, which implies the acceptance of diverse ways of being one or the other pole of this relation. This assumption is present in research that focuses on women's participation in sports represented as masculine, and on men's participation in those considered feminine, pointing that different ways of living and producing femininities and masculinities are formed in sports.

It is worth noting that a large part of the inaugural production on sport and gender in Brazil maintained a strict relation with education historiography, whose investigative locus was the Physical Education practiced in schools. Such studies conferred visibility to the topic, causing commotion within the academic fields of Physical Education and Sport Sciences. If, on one hand, these areas already display a renown trajectory in gender studies, on the other, they remain in need of a larger investment, given that some topics and methodologies are still to be discovered.

Gender and sport: thematic and analytical potential for Brazilian sports historiography

The late insertion of gender as an analytical tool in historiographical research on sports may suggest an implicit understanding that it represents a field strongly associated with thoughts and actions that symbolize what is

¹⁷Silvana Vilodre Goellner, "Entre o sexo, a beleza e a saúde: o esporte e a cultura fitness", *Labrys. Estudos Feministas*, vol. 10, Brasília, 2006, p. 6-15.

masculine, and, as such, could be more resistant to change.¹⁸ As mentioned, feminist studies have rarely focused on sport as a legitimate and pertinent object of investigation, neither have they highlighted the importance of sporting practices as a form of empowering men and women.¹⁹

Even though it is possible to visualize an academic production oriented in this direction, studies on gender and sports produced in Brazil still need higher potentiation in comparison to the international production in this area.

Studies on masculinities, for instance, are still incipient, and the existing ones are directed towards an hegemonic masculinity,²⁰ in which virile attributes are recognized and encouraged. Analyses that point to sports that are potential producers of other ways of being masculine, such as rhythmic or aerobic gymnastics and figure skating, modalities in which men's bodies seem incapable of leading a performance of bodily aesthetics traditionally associated with an exclusively feminine practice, are nonexistent.

Likewise, studies that thematize issues related to homosexualities are still hardly visible. The principle of heteronormativity²¹ reigns in the field of historiographical research, practically rendering invisible the individuals who do not fit in it.

In this sense, a great potential for studies on sport, observed from its historical dimension, resides in the incorporation of analyses that break free from the binary categories man-woman, femininity-masculinity, heterosexuality-homosexuality, given that these terms do not make visible the "paradoxes of difference",²² even if they are used in the plural.

In this way, *queer* theory²³ has revealed itself a fruitful possibility of theoretical anchorage, insofar as it operates with the deconstruction of binary structures, including those present in gender studies. By eliminating biological determinism and binary categories from the analytical horizon, such studies favor the acceptance of the profusion of femininities and masculinities, of the permeability between bodily borderlines and the non fixation of identities. According to Judith Butler,

Identity categories are never merely descriptive, but always normative, and, as such, exclusivist. This does not mean that the term 'women' must not be used or that we must announce this category's death. On the contrary, if feminism presupposes that 'women' designates a field of non assignable differences that cannot be totalized or summarized by a category of descriptive identity, then the very term becomes a place of permanent openness and re-signification.²⁴

¹⁸Roberta Bennett, Gail Whitaker, Nina Jo Woolley Smith, Anne Sablove, "Changing the rules of the game: reflections toward a feminist analysis of sport", *Women's Studies Int. Forum*, vol. 10, n. 4, 1987, p. 369-379.

¹⁹Ann Hall, *Feminism and sporting bodies essays or theory and practice*, Illinois, Human Kinetics, 1996.

²⁰Robert William Connell, *Masculinities*, Beverly, University of California Press, 1996; Miguel Vale de Almeida, *Senhores de si: uma representação antropológica da masculinidade*, Lisboa, Fim de Século, 1995.

²¹By heteronormativity, I understand the social system of gender and sexuality organization that defines heterosexuality as the norm, and homosexuality as deviation. Miguel Vale de Almeida, *A chave do armário: homossexualidade, casamento e família*, Florianópolis, Editora da Universidade Federal de Santa Catarina, 2010.

²²Joan Scott, "O enigma da igualdade", *Revista Estudos Feministas*, vol. 13, n. 1, Florianópolis, 2005, p. 11-30

²³The English word *queer* is related to something weird, uncanny or eccentric. For a long time, it was used as a way of scolding homosexuals, and was later incorporated by the gay and lesbian movement to represent the difference that does not want to be assimilated or tolerated. About this topic, see Guacira Lopes Louro, *Um corpo estranho: ensaios sobre sexualidade e teoria queer*, Belo Horizonte, Autêntica, 2004.

²⁴Judith Butler, *Problemas de gênero*, Rio de Janeiro, Civilização Brasileira, 2003, p. 22.

Published in 2006, the book *Sport, Sexuality and Queer*,²⁵ organized by Jayne Dauwell, deserves highlighting for being considered the inaugural work of these analyses. It gathers articles that seek to reflect about *queer* in the field of sports, also pointing to the theoretical unfolding in research on this bodily practice.²⁶ Considering that the *queer* concept may be used in different ways with the purpose of analyzing the relation between sport and sexuality, the book makes it possible to reflect on the fluidity, multiplicity, and ambiguity of sexual and gender identities present in the universe of sports, thus favoring the emergence of analyses rarely approached in its historiographical production.

As a thematic possibility, studies that analyze the issues of sport gender in interrelation with social class, religion, race/ethnicity, sexuality, and generation are still incipient, which, in a certain way, indicates that the categories *man* and *woman* are still primarily circumscribed to urban, Christian, white, heterosexual, and young contexts.

Investing in such themes implicates not only academic proximity with international literature, but, above all, a political stance, insofar as studies in this direction will remove bodies and individuals that cannot be categorized from shadow zones.

In this sense, the theoretical and methodological approach of Oral History may be a useful tool, given that many of these bodies and individuals dwelling in the shadow zones of sport historiography are placed there for the lack

*Studies on masculinities are still incipient,
and the existing ones are directed towards an
hegemonic masculinity, in which virile
attributes are recognized and encouraged*

of registering. Understood as a technique of production and conduction of interviews, a method of investigation, and a research source,²⁷ Oral History became one of the favorite methods of feminist researchers in the last decades of the 20th century, who used it under the understanding that:

[...] it allows us to listen to stories of individuals and groups that would otherwise be ignored; it allows the expansion of the horizons of our knowledge about the world; and it stimulates the questioning of our own hypotheses in regards to the experiences and viewpoints of other people and cultures.²⁸

However, this enthusiasm did not find correspondence in Brazilian sport historiography, even when the *gender* category was central. It has been, moreover, a *possibility for*, and something yet to come.

²⁵Jayne Dauwell, *Sport, Sexuality and Queer Theory*, London/New York, Routledge, 2006.

²⁶Wagner Xavier de Camargo, "Sexualidades, esportes e teoria *queer*: inter-relações", *Revista Estudos Feministas*, vol. 13, n. 3, Florianópolis, 2008, p. 1130-1133.

²⁷Paul Thompson, *A voz do passado: história oral*, Rio de Janeiro, Paz e Terra, 1992; Marieta de Moraes Ferreira; Janaína Amado (org.), *Usos e abusos da história oral*, Rio de Janeiro, Editora da Fundação Getúlio Vargas, 1996.

²⁸Daphne Pathai, *História oral, feminismo e política*, São Paulo, Letra e Voz, 2010, p. 124.

Final considerations

Studies on gender and sports in the field of history have hardly evidenced their relation to the theories that sprang from feminisms. In spite of this lack of explicitness, such investigations have been possible due to the undeniable contribution provided by feminist theory, without which the analytical category *gender* would not even exist.

The different epistemological dimensions of *gender* cause ruptures in the official tone of many discourses that used to narrate sport, its emergence, and legitimation without considering the gendered and gendering processes that structure it. Finally, these strands were imperative in the deconstruction that represents sport as a naturally masculine field, by showing that, as any other social sphere, this is a gendering space. Such fact does not occur because it reflects the inequalities and differentiations of society in general, but, fundamentally, because it produces and reproduces them instead.