

The discourse of the trickle-down effect: an assessment of the consequences of hegemonic closure in sport

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Aim of paper

Politicians and sport leaders around the globe often argue that elite sport has a positive effect on mass participation. The idea of the so called 'trickle-down effect' (Green, 2007, p. 942; Hogan & Norton, 2000), seeing international pride gained through medals won in the Olympics or other prestigious sporting events as a major catalyst for mass participation, is widespread (De Bosscher & Bottenburg, 2011, p. 581). Typically the concept is used strategically to push for large public investments in elite sport facilities or to justify the use of money to attract major international sporting events, cups, etc.

It is also used as an argument to support elite athletes and specific elite sport initiatives because it is thought that international athletic success stimulates and motivates children, youth, adults and older people to take part in sport themselves (Murphy & Bauman, 2007, p. 193).

However, this idea of a trickle-down effect is as equally unclear, problematic and vaguely documented as it is widespread (Grix & Carmichael, 2012, p. 74). It has become an established truth, a dominant discourse, without any underlying or further detailed analysis to back it up. But does the promise of enhanced mass participation as a result of elite sporting success call for closer enquiry? And what are the consequences of this hegemonic idea?

The paper seeks to shed some more light on the matter by asking the question: What do we know about the alleged relationship between elite sport and mass participation? Is it actually present, and what are the consequences if political decisions are directed by such (mythical) ideas?

Taking these questions as the point of departure and seeing the myth of the trickle-down effect as a hegemonic discourse which includes certain elements of knowledge while excluding others, the paper argues that such myths can have inverse effects on the goals they claim to foster.

Structure of paper, findings and conclusion

The paper is structured as follows: First, I give a short sketch of the extent to which the discourse of the trickle-down effect is diffused internationally in order to illustrate its persistence. Second, I review literature on the question showing that empirical findings cannot confirm any casual relationship between elite sport and mass participation.

Third, I point to the consequences of persistent myths using a discourse theory perspective capable of illustrating how blind spots established through hegemonic horizons of meaning block alternative paths of development.

This leads to the final part of the paper which applies the analysis to practice by concluding that if the discourse of the trickle-down effect is not challenged, this dominant discursive horizon might even lead to a decreasing level of mass participation that stands in sharp contrast to the beliefs it has reinforced through its global dissemination and institutionalization. In order to support the conclusion, several national examples of how the focus on elite sport has had negative impacts on mass participation are given.

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