

Rassegna Italiana di Sociologia

Call for Paper – 2/2026

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Title: Sport in Europe: Sociological analyses and contemporary challenges

In recent years, the sociology of sport has gained increasing relevance within the European academic debate, offering critical insights into how sporting practices are deeply embedded in social, economic, political, and cultural dynamics. Sport— a “*total social fact*” (Mauss, 1950)—should not be considered a neutral arena. Instead, it represents a material and symbolic field in which social contradictions are inscribed, while contributing to the redefinition of collective and individual identities in contemporary societies.

When sport becomes an object of sociological inquiry, one must begin by acknowledging the conceptual complexity of the term itself. “Sport” is often used as an umbrella category, whose definition resists simplification. It may be approached as a set of activities centered on the body, involving physical effort, specific skills, and a certain degree of competition (Anderson & Magrath, 2022). However, contemporary sport culture has evolved beyond physical performance or competition alone. Today, it encompasses not only formally recognized disciplines such as football, athletics, or gymnastics, but also a wide range of practices that are socially claimed as sport, from chess to skateboarding, from fitness and aquagym to e-sports and urban walking (currently the most widely practiced physical activity among Europeans).

For this reason, the Council of Europe has adopted a broad definition of sport: “all forms of physical activity which, through casual or organized participation, aim at expressing or improving physical and mental well-being, forming social relationships or obtaining results in competition at all levels.” The *White Paper on Sport* (2007) and, subsequently, the *Treaty of Lisbon* (2009), officially recognized sport as an area of competence for the European Union. These documents encouraged member states to expand access to sports infrastructure, improve pathways to participation, and promote sport policies as tools to enhance general well-being. Sport has been positioned to address pressing social issues, such as racism, discrimination, and gender inequality, while also offering significant economic benefits and fostering relationships within and beyond EU borders.

Therefore, the EU has progressively developed a broader communication strategy to strengthen the European dimension of sport. Launched in 2011, this strategy has focused on employability, social inclusion, and public health. However, as Anderson and Magrath (2022) highlight, this approach has also exposed the many contradictions and ambiguities that characterize the sporting phenomenon. A telling example is the integration of migrant populations—a domain in which the EU has failed to adopt a unique policy of solidarity and reception, despite framing sport as a potential tool for the

integration of “youth in peripheral urban areas” (Gasparini & Russo, 2021), and as a vector for citizenship for foreign-born populations.

Although sport and physical activity (PA) have become increasingly normalized in everyday life, recent data from the European Commission’s *Eurobarometer on Sport and Physical Activity* (2022) reveal a more complex picture. Only 55% of Europeans engage in sport or physical activity, and just 38% do so regularly, at least once a week.

How can we explain the persistent inequalities in access to sport across different European countries? And how might we compare the trends that shape national contexts? These are among the key questions raised by Sociology of Sports that increasingly highlights how sporting practices are socially differentiated, more frequently adopted by young people, men, and those with higher levels of education. At the same time, sport and physical activity (PA) continue to be mobilized as responses to a wide range of “public problems” (Gusfield, 1981), which demand collective responsibility and vary according to historical and social contexts: chronic illness, sedentary lifestyles, exclusion, discrimination, disaffiliation, vulnerability, disability, and more.

Nevertheless, perhaps more than any other social object, sport and PA dominate public discourse and media narratives. This growing cultural centrality has, since the 1980s, fostered the development of sport sociology as a distinct area of scholarly inquiry. Research in this field is often grounded in a dual approach: on one hand, a critical deconstruction of the normative assumptions and ideological frameworks imposed by the worlds of sport, politics, economics, and media; on the other, empirical fieldwork guided by evidence-based analysis.

Over the past decades, the sociological literature has expanded significantly, exploring sport’s multiple dimensions—from inequalities in access (Bourdieu, 1978) to forms of exclusion and discrimination based on gender (Butler, 1990; Connell, 2009), and the political dimension of sport and the role of digital media (Boyle & Haynes, 2009) in shaping and reproducing discourses about it. Sport is a space where social hierarchies are reinforced and a potential site of emancipation, depending on the contexts and policies that govern it. Moreover, access to sporting activities is profoundly shaped by socioeconomic and cultural factors, which create either barriers or opportunities for individuals and groups.

At the same time, the relationship between sport and collective identities is evident in the construction of national and local narratives. International sporting events often function as instruments of *soft power*, strategically deployed to reinforce a nation’s image on the global stage. Local sports dimensions contribute to the formation of community belonging and shared cultural references. Yet sporting competitions can also become sites of tension, conflict, and symbolic representation—spaces where social asymmetries are reproduced, particularly for ethnic and racial minorities within national contexts (Hylton, 2014). In this regard, sport operates as a key arena for the racialization of bodies, where physicality and identity intersect through processes of representation, surveillance, and symbolic control. Within the Italian context, several studies have examined how racialized and migrant athletes navigate inclusion and exclusion in both institutional and media discourses (Valeri, 2006; Allievi, 2014; Kyeremeh 2018), highlighting how sport simultaneously reflects and reinforces racial hierarchies, often under the guise of meritocracy and integration.

One area that has gained growing sociological attention in recent years concerns identity and gender dynamics within sport. The body in sport is simultaneously subject, object, and instrument (Tuselli & Vingelli, 2019), serving as a terrain upon which norms on gender and sexuality are articulated and contested. From this perspective, the sporting world reveals its ambivalent nature: a space of spectacle and visibility, or a site of discrimination and stereotype reproduction (Appleby & Foster, 2013). This tension positions sport as a field where regressive trends may be reinforced, and as a potential arena for resistance and redefinition of identity categories (Miller, 2015). The sporting women’s bodies remain subject to various forms of scrutiny, marginalization, deprofessionalization, and hypersexualization (Reale & Tuselli, 2022; Messner, 1992; Scraton & Flintoff, 2013).

Another dimension to investigate is the ongoing digital transformation of sports. The widespread use of social media has reshaped how athletes construct their public personas and engage with fan

communities, contributing to new forms of self-representation in line with broader cultural shifts. Simultaneously, the rise of *gamification* and e-sports is challenging traditional definitions of what constitutes sporting practice (Hutchins & Rowe, 2012). These developments raise ethical and social issues concerning performance monitoring, biometric data collection, and the growing role of artificial intelligence in refereeing and organizational decision-making.

In addition, sport plays a pivotal role in the Sustainable Development Goals, as outlined in the 2030 Agenda. It contributes to healthy lives and well-being, promotes equal opportunities, strengthens urban resilience, and encourages peaceful and inclusive societies (Sobry & Hozhabri, 2022; Giulianotti & Armstrong, 2013). Sporting practices address a wide range of health and well-being determinants through the collective promotion of cultures and behaviours that enhance physical, mental, and social conditions, contributing to what some scholars have described as the emergence of a “wellness society” (Russo, 2018). Beyond the benefits, the normative push toward physical activity in the name of health can also become a mechanism of bodily governance, often targeting individuals with sedentary lifestyles or bodies far from the dominant corporeal norms. This dynamic is visible among working-class populations, where both epidemiological and sociological literature highlight strong correlations between chronic illness and social precarity.

Grounded in these theoretical and empirical considerations, this call for papers invites critical sociological contributions that explore Sport and PA, and their social implications within the European context. We welcome empirical research grounded in fieldwork, original theoretical or methodological reflections. Contributions may address, but are not limited to, the following topics:

1. Sport and Social Inequalities

- Unequal access to sport according to age, gender, and social class
- Economic, political, and cultural barriers to participation
- Sport and social mobility: between reproduction and transformation of social hierarchies
- Ableism in sport: asymmetries and practices of resistance

2. Sport, Identity, and Discrimination

- The role of sport in shaping national and local identities
- Sport and socialization processes
- Discrimination in sport: forms, dynamics, and actors
- Sport between intercultural dialogue, integration, and community retreat

3. Sport and Gender Issues

- The social construction of the sporting body: sex, gender, and gender identity
- Homophobia, lesbophobia, biphobia, and transphobia in sport: exclusion, inclusion, resistance
- Gender relations and male dominance in sporting contexts

4. Sport and Politics

- Sport and international relations
- Sport, international relations and conflicts
- The politicization of local sport and mega-events
- Sport, fitness and public health
- Sport and social movements

5. Digitalization and New Frontiers of Sport

- The impact of digital media and social networks on the perception and practice of sport
- The evolution of e-sports (including the role of AI) and their social and academic legitimization
- Wearable device and body governance
- Technology and data analysis in sport: ethical and social implications

6. Sport, Health, Environment and Well-being

- Wellness practices and health devices: between fitness and wellness cultures
- Sport and active mobility
- Sport, outdoor practices and the environment: toward sustainable cultural models
- Environmental impact of mega-events

Submission Guidelines

- **Abstract submission deadline:** 30 June 2025
- **Notification of acceptance:** 7 July 2025
- **Full paper submission deadline:** 15 October 2025

Submissions are accepted in **English**. Please send abstracts to giovanna.russo6@unibo.it, william.gasparini@unistra.fr, alessia.tuselli@unitn.it, with the subject line: *Call for Papers – [Title]*. **Abstracts (in English) should be no longer than 500 words and must include 2 to 3 keywords.**

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