

Routledge Research in Sport, Culture and Society

SPORT MIGRANTS, PRECARITY AND IDENTITY

**BRAZILIAN FOOTBALLERS IN CENTRAL
AND EASTERN EUROPE**

José Hildo de Oliveira Filho



Sport Migrants, Precarity and Identity

This book takes a close look at the experiences of migrant athletes, their precarious careers, and at what this can tell us about wider themes of globalization, identity, race, gender, and the body.

Based on in-depth ethnographic research on male Brazilian footballers and futsal players working in Central and Eastern Europe, this book helps to fill gaps in previous research on sports migration and global sports labor markets. This book uses life-history interviews to reveal how race, gender, and class are articulated in the everyday experiences of migrant athletes; how they express their religious affiliations; and how they navigate the relationships with injuries and pain that are characteristic of precarious athletic careers. This book considers the transnational networks that are essential in sustaining international athletic labor flows and the role that borders and emotions play in the lives of sports migrants and also the agency that migrant athletes can have in issues such as player development and retention.

Presenting a more nuanced, ground-level perspective on sports migration and the sociological dialogue between identity, culture, and the body, this book is fascinating reading for anybody with an interest in the socio-cultural study of sport, migration, globalization, or global inequalities.

José Hildo de Oliveira Filho received his PhD from the Faculty of Social Sciences at Charles University in Prague (CUNI). He is a member of ISA (International Sociological Association), ABA (Brazilian Anthropological Association), and the AAA (American Anthropological Association).

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Foreword

Perhaps one of the oldest questions to ponder in social science is: “Why do we do what we do?” At the first instance it may appear straightforward to formulate an answer to this question, but the more we think carefully, the more complex our answer becomes. We may initially respond that “We do things because we have always done them”, which signals some sense of history, identity, and tradition. This is a sensible response and does indeed address some aspects of the question. However, it misses references to other potential dimensions of the question such as power relations, individual circumstances, geo-political shifts, and motivational factors, to name but a few. In other words, this seemingly simple question, when considered in-depth, will generate (and has generated) complex, multi-factor responses, which has both fascinated and occupied the minds of social scientists who have filled numerous volumes with their responses to that very question. Yet, we have not bottomed out all the possible answers to “Why do we do what we do?” and, thus, we continue with our examination of societies and individuals within them.

This monograph embraces this fundamental question in relation to examining a specific aspect of sport-related global human movements. This is of importance as migrations have been at the forefront of political agendas and multiple academic investigations, all of which have wrestled with the question: “Why do we migrate?”. I don’t think many people today would dispute the claim made by Castles and Miller (2009) that we live in an era of migration. In fact, in recent decades we have witnessed a range of local and regional events which generated numerous, oft controversial, global migration trends. For instance, at the time of writing, one of the key priorities for the Rishi Sunak-led conservative UK government is to “stop the boats”, i.e., to control illegal migrations. The question of migration was also at the forefront of the Brexit referendum (2016) which led the UK out of the European Union (EU). Ironically, years after leaving the EU, migrations are at an all-time high in the UK, and controlling a country’s borders appears to be much easier when the country has well-working relations with its neighbors.

Nevertheless, in the majority of political debates and statistical figure-driven macro-narratives, migrants are represented en masse as faceless, dehumanized bodies whose presence or absence is simply a matter of adjusting net migration numbers. This dehumanizing approach to understanding and representing migration reveals very little about the personal circumstances of migrants, the reasons why they decided to uproot their life in their country of origin, and what they are hoping to gain and achieve by undergoing an oft-perilous journey to reach their terminus. Indeed, the numbers and statistics say nothing about the hopes and dreams of migrants and the personal realities of migration. To explore them, we need to follow a different mindset and approach and focus on the human side of migration, i.e., on individual migrants, their families, and their experiences of cross-cultural journeys.

This monograph by José Hildo de Oliveira Filho offers such an approach, which provides centrality to migrants, their experiences, and voices. By honing on individual migrants and their experience of migration, de Oliveira Filho expertly engages in a human-centered undertaking and replaces the number-based statistical narratives with stories. However, to collect and centralize stories is intellectually, emotionally, and sometimes, physically demanding. The monograph at hand clearly illustrates how demanding such an endeavor can be and how important such research is. In this study de Oliveira Filho skillfully pulls together different theoretical threads to examine the complex tapestry of Brazilian football migrations in Central and Eastern Europe. The arguments and stories that unfold on the pages are a testament to the immense emotional and intellectual labor that became part of the research undertaking, in addition to the physical demands of managing a multi-site ethnography. Furthermore, it is refreshing to read a sport migration-focused work that deviates from the usual theoretical “suspects” and advocates an approach that has had limited use in sports studies.

I think it is important to note the power and significance of the stories presented within this work. The accessible writing style and the general readability enliven the narratives of migrant players, and although they are reported in black and white their complexities radiate through the pages. Throughout the manuscript, de Oliveira Filho does an excellent job at preserving and conveying participants’ complex football migration-related realities in an authentic fashion.

Furthermore, the monograph provides ample evidence to indicate the successful collection of rich primary data that took place through extensive and immersive fieldwork. In particular, I think the reader will appreciate the dedication that “lurking” in and around football venues required. The “lurking” was also connected to serendipity. Fortuitous events, encounters, and constellations are part and parcel of ethnographic fieldwork. De Oliveira Filho has successfully harnessed such events to the benefit of this monograph, which includes rich data generation and interpretation.

Serendipity, along with extensive emotional and intellectual labor invested in the production of this research, allowed insights into many aspects of the lives of migrant Brazilian football and futsal players in Central and Eastern Europe and helped formulate a multifaceted response to one of the main questions considered in the monograph: “What comes after hope?”. By developing a strategic and targeted response to this question, this monograph by de Oliveira Filho reveals that sport-related migrations can be (and indeed are – as the reader will see) precarious undertakings where glamor, oft-associated with elite football migrants, is far on the horizon. José Hildo de Oliveira Filho’s excellent work is underpinned by extensive ethnographic fieldwork and a carefully crafted theoretical lens, all of which combined make a significant contribution to knowledge on sport-related migrations. This study is thus essential reading for anyone interested in the intersection of sport, migration, ethnography, and anthropology.

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Reference

Castles, Stephen, and Mark J. Miller. *The Age of Migration: International Population in the Modern World*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009.



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