

Corte, Ugo

Dangerous Fun. The Social Lives of Big Wave Surfers

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Ugo Corte presents an outstanding ethnographic account of big wave surfing. Not only because of the quality of the research but also because of the literary quality of the whole piece. The book achieves an excellent balance between scholar discussion and adventure chronicle that would appeal both to academics and surf aficionados.

Dangerous fun provides significant insights on the related topics of fun, risk-taking and identity through the experiences and life courses/careers of big wave surfers of the North Shore of O'ahu in Hawai'i, especially Waimea Bay.

The theoretical ground of the book discusses and expands Randal Collins's theory of interaction ritual chains; Stephen Lyng's concept of edgework; and Michael Farrel's interpersonal group dynamics. Corte integrates the precedent analysis with his own on the sociology of fun (jointly developed with Gary Fine) to refine and qualify concepts that better transmit the kind of activity big wave surfing is. For example, the author expands Collins's interaction rituals, including not only mentors but also peers to produce emotional energy that can boost self-confidence during the "fateful moments" in which identity transitions for big wave surfers can occur (p.46). Also, Corte enhances Lyng's notion of edgework by adding the interactional side of the risk-taking activity; and analysing changes to risk-taking along the life courses of athletes and along the broader changes of the activity itself (p.178).

Talking about methodology, the ethnographic approach of the study is sound and solid. Being Corte a surfer himself, he stayed in the field during "one fall, four winters and one spring" (p.5) Taking the enterprise of a serious carnal ethnography to catch the *ache and taste* of the action (Wacquant, 2004), he even dared to face some of the gigantic waves, lured/motivated by Phil, one of the old mentors from the big wave crew. He shared time in and off the water with some of the great figures in big wave surfing of Waimea Bay (a small and tight community) and gained acknowledgement and respect from them.

The quality of the field notes and interview excerpts is quite high. They truly evoke the thrill of the action in the water: sometimes the sheer joy of having a good ride or just surviving it; sometimes the anguished experience of being held underwater *forever* during a disastrous wipeout. They also perfectly characterise individuals (not simply generic types) and their personal approaches to surfing: Phil, Keala, Uncle Clyde are true people, not anonymised figures for the sake of analysis. Moreover, Corte succeeds in proposing the experience of different surfers at different stages of their life course (rookies, experts, retired surfers). By doing that, the author also shows the processual development of an activity that is quite young; it only gained some public exposure and professional format since the 1990s. Thus, the socio-historical scope appears in the book through

the ethnographic material from key figures in the activity.

The structure of the book is divided in seven chapters plus an introduction and epilogue. A core message travelling along the whole book is that big wave surfing is a much more collective achievement than regular surfing. Instead of a (more) selfish search for personal pleasure, a central feature of big wave surfing is fun, understood as a social group pleasure, as a kind of collective effervescence filled with emotional energy (p.81). Nonetheless, fun in big wave surfing always relates to matters of safety and risk taking. Corte advances that the collective side of the activity in comparison to regular surfing has a lot to do with the need of potential security provided among friends in life-death situations.

Nonetheless, the book also clarifies how the approach to risk-taking (and fun) shifts along the career of big wave surfers within an activity that is becoming more and more professionalised. As surfers grow older and/or become professionals they are much more selective on the waves they surf. Their experience of the sessions on the water also changes as they age. Besides age and career, gender plays an important role too. The case of Keala shows how discriminatory a male-dominated culture such as big wave surfing can be. Women are still in many cases excluded from the collective joy and fun of the big rides, even though the struggle of pioneers such as Keala have paved the way for female big wave surfing.

Overall, the book is an impressive contribution to the sociology of sport. It provides great insights in the relationship between risk-taking, fun, professionalisation, identity, and status. These insights can be useful not only for big wave surfing but for other activities, especially play-like activities or life-style sports (Wheaton, 2004) such as skateboarding, climbing, BMX, parkour, etc.

Moreover, the book provides a helpful comparative example on the relationship between risk and safety measures as discussed in activities such as martial arts and combat sports (Sánchez García, 2020). The book renders visible the paradox surrounding the recent development of safety measures (the inflatable vests, rescue jet-skies): it makes possible to ride bigger, stronger waves but it does not necessarily make the activity more secure. On the contrary, such measures could create a "false sense of security" that increases the risk of those involved in the activity (see Sheard (1997) for a similar argument on the introduction of safety measures -e.g. gloves and helmet- in boxing). Such debate is not foreign to a broader professionalisation pattern that celebrates newcomers to push things forwards even though it means changing the whole *essence* of the activity in the process.

Taking into account the quality of the whole volume, I would consider Corte's book as one of the best ethnographic studies of sport so far. It definitively constitutes a milestone in any future research on life-style sports.

References

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