

The introduction of Sport Climbing at Tokyo 2020's Olympic Games : analysis of the controversy in France.

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Abstract :

While Sport Climbing will enter the Olympics for the first time at Tokyo 2020, its integration seems to be not fully accepted by the members of the climbing community. Two delicate points emerge : the fact to become an olympic sport (due to climbing's value and history) and the compromise about competition format to enter the Olympics (the combined event).

This study focus on the controversy in France around this topic. In a pragmatic sociological approach (Barthe & al, 2013), the purpose is to study the establishing dimension of this controversy (Lemieux, 2007). Considering olympic climbing event as an innovation, we have used Actor-Network Theory (Latour, 2006), to enlighten about context, actors and network. How did the controversy structure in France, and what elements lead this innovation to success ?

This study propose an overview of the controversy about olympic climbing in France. We have used writing sources to have a global overview of the topic. We also have lead interviews, using joint analysis (Chateauraynaud, 2007) to confront speech with concrete action of the key actors. Our goal is to better understand how the olympic topic has been considered in French climbing community and its consequences.

Keywords : innovation ; pragmatic sociology ; sportivization, Actor-Network Theory

Résumé :

Alors que l'escalade sera olympique pour la première fois aux Jeux de Tokyo 2020, son intégration ne semble pas pleinement acceptée parmi les grimpeurs. Si l'olympisme apparaît bien souvent comme un aboutissement dans le processus de développement d'un sport (Guttmann, 1978), le cas de l'escalade suscite des controverses, car les pratiquants sont partagés sur les effets de la mise en forme olympique et sur les fondements tant techniques que culturels qui se retrouvent impactés.

Cette étude porte sur la controverse sur le sujet en France. Dans une approche sociologique pragmatique (Barthe & al., 2013), l'objectif est d'étudier la dimension instituante de cette controverse (Lemieux, 2007). En considérant l'escalade olympique comme une innovation, nous nous appuyons sur la sociologie de l'acteur-réseau (Latour, 2006) pour mieux comprendre les rôles du contexte, des acteurs et des réseaux. Comment cette controverse s'est-elle structurée en France, et quels éléments expliquent sa trajectoire ?

Nous proposons un panorama de la controverse sur l'escalade olympique en France, en s'appuyant sur des sources écrites pour avoir un éclairage large et varié sur la question ; et sur des entretiens avec des acteurs-clés de la controverse, en menant une analyse conjointe (Chateauraynaud, 2007) pour confronter leurs discours avec leurs actes. Notre objectif est alors de mieux comprendre comment a été appréhendée l'escalade olympique en France et ses conséquences.

Mots-clés : innovation, sociologie pragmatique, sportivisation, sociologie de l'acteur-réseau

On the third of August 2016, International Olympic Committee (IOC) has formalized the integration of Sport Climbing at Tokyo 2020 Olympic Games. While this temporary integration – as there is no certitude about Sport Climbing’s participation at Paris 2024 Olympics – seem to fulfill the Federation Française de la Montagne et de l’Escalade (FFME)¹, one of the most active national federations on the olympic topic, this news don’t satisfy the whole community of french climbers.

Raised against mainstream sport model during the seventies, sport climbing is considered in the litterature as a highly distinctive – because of its difficult access and its important codification – activity. Free climbers have developed their own system of values and rules, against normative forms of competitions, based on sharing and originality (Aubel, 2005). Climbing mediatic system is weak and mostly internal (Aubel, 2000 ; Dumont, 2016), as its economic system (Aubel & Ohl, 2004). Further than free climbers climbing mostly outdoors, competition climbers seem also to be attached to this singularity of their sports (Guérin, 2013 ; Rogeaux, 2015). But the process of sportivization of climbing (Aubel, 2005) requires to step back about these cultural specificities, that seem to fade over time while Sport climbing is structing itself as a mainstream sport. Nowadays Sport climbing owns the same attributes as any modern sports (Suchet, 2011) and would be at a decisive transition period, due to its « mainstreamization » (Gagnon & al., 2016) that could be empowered by its enter to the Olympics. Then the singularity claimed by climbers would only maintain an alternative and distinguished identity in front of an unaccepted sporting reality (Soulé & Walk, 2007).

This study focus on the controversy in France, which has emerged due to the increasing of this topic the last twenty years, as the French Federation of Moutain and Climbing² is one of the most active national federations to promote the olympic climbing bid. In a pragmatic sociological approach (Barthe & al., 2013), the purpose is to study the establishing dimension of this controversy (Lemieux, 2007), to understand how social is reorganised by it. Considering the olympic climbing trial as an innovation, we also use the Actor-Network Theory (Latour, 2006) to have a better understanding of the the successful process of this innovation, focusing on the context, the actors and their networks. We centre around the FFME as this federation appears as a key promotor of the integration of Sport climbing at the Olympics.

We propose to consider the integration of Sport climbing at the Olympics as an innovation, defined as something new (it may be a technique, an event, an organization, and so on) that become accepted and used by the people to whom this novelty is designed to. Comparing to current Sport climbing competitions, Olympic Climbing trial represents a novelty on various sides : the size of the event (Müller, 2015), the mediatic visibility (Aubel, 2000 ; Dumont, 2016), the public (Wheaton & Thorpe, 2016), the values (Aubel, 2005 ; Guérin, 2013 ; Rogeaux, 2015), and the competition format (with the creation of the combined event). The issue is to study social reception of this novelty throught the controversy about this topic.

The analysis consists in drawing an overview of the controversy in France. We analysed a corpus of writing and internet sources, from specialised and non-specialised medias, to have a wide understanding of the structure of the controversy. We also lead interviews, with some of the key actors that corpus analysis has enabled to identify. We have lead a joint analysis (Chateauraynaud, 2007) of their speech to confront it to their concrete actions.

First, some criticisms focus on the Olympic movement. Many climbers seem to fear the lost of climbing essence, unwished changes in the rules, standardization and merchandization of the activity – such as some climbers during the eighties facing the emergence of climbing competition – with the integration at the Olympics. Second, the combined competition format chosen for the Olympics is strongly criticised, as it consists in a mix of the three disciplines (lead, boulder and speed), to the point that some athletes think about boycotting the trial³. The obligation to compete in Speed climbing seem to discourage many athletes to train, and many people to support Olympic climbing.

¹ <http://www.grandvoix.fr/quel-format-pour-l-olympisme>

² Fédération Française de la Montagne et de l’Escalade (FFME)

³ <https://planetgrimpe.com/2016/08/lopinion-critique-dadam-ondra-jakob-schubert-lescalade-aux-i-o/>

What's more, drawing an overview the controversy about Olympic climbing in France enlightens that there is no network clearly structured against this innovation, while there is a strong network supporting it, composed of athletes, trainers, federations and mainstream medias. This results help to understand how the innovation of olympic climbing has been developed and accepted in France, and illustrates the key role of the French Federation in the international process of olympization of Sport climbing.

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