In 2017, Jeffrey Kidder from Department of Sociology at Northern Illinois University published Parkour and the City. The book gives a comprehensive and in-depth insight into the discipline of parkour as it is practice and has evolved in the United States. Kidder’s book thereby fills a need for studies in parkour to be sensitive to the local context. Furthermore, Kidder uses parkour as a sociological lens to zoom in on the conditions of postmodern urban life and the potential (bodily) responses to them, and thereby shows how sport always has broader social connections and significance. To show my respect for and appreciation of the book, I have chosen to do devote a full article to discuss and evaluate the book. The review is structured after the chapters in the book and rounded off with a call for culturally sensitive and comparative studies in parkour as well in lifestyle sports in general.

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In *Parkour and the City*, author Jeffrey Kidder gives an in-depth insight into the discipline parkour as it is practiced and has evolved in the United States. However, he does more than that. Kidder’s book also enhances our sociological understanding of the conditions of postmodern urbanism as well as the dialectic between the virtual and the real world in parkour. Just as Loïc Wacquant (2004) used boxing as a sociological lens to zoom in on the social lives of underclass black men, Kidder uses parkour to zoom in on the conditions of postmodern urban life and the potential (bodily) responses to these. These studies are both perfect examples of how sport always has broader social connections and significance. Kidder himself also makes a creative link to Clifford Geertz’s seminal work about the Balinese cockfight (1966) in relation to parkour’s social significance:

Thus, if as anthropologist Clifford Geertz suggested, cockfights teach the Balinese what it looks like for a man in a status-driven society to symbolically lose everything, maybe parkour provides young men and women with metaphorical displays of the caution and courage required to succeed in the neoliberal city (p. 127).

Two main arguments about parkour’s broader social connections and significance run through the book: 1) the essence of the discipline’s appeal is affective spatial appropriation and physical risk-taking, and 2) this corresponds to the postmodern setting and the hegemonic neoliberal discourse.

*Parkour and the City* consists of an introduction, four chapters and a conclusion, followed by a short appendix about his data and method and a dictionary of the parkour terminology used in the book. While the brief note about data and method is highly relevant for scholars doing ethnographic fieldwork and studying lifestyle sport, the dictionary is a necessary tool for people not familiar with the language of parkour. The study is based on participant observations among traceurs in Chicago and the surrounding suburbs and semi-structured interviews with 40 of them. Some parts of chapters two, three and four have previously been published in journals (2012, 2013a, 2013b). *Parkour and the City* is an impressive and comprehensive piece of academic work. To show my respect for and appreciation of the book, I have chosen to do an in-depth review of the book chapter by chapter.
Busting the myths

In the introduction, Kidder briefly describes parkour and outlines his theoretical framework and aims. Kidder’s introduction to parkour is highly valuable because he dispels some myths about this discipline and its practitioners (also called traceurs). According to Kidder, most traceurs describe parkour as: “…finding the quickest, most efficient way to get from point A to B, using only the human body” (p. 5). But, as Kidder argues, the actual practice seldom bears much resemblance to the rhetorical discourse describing parkour or the edited footage on YouTube. Kidder expected the traceurs to traverse distances containing all kinds of different obstacles in a fast and continuing “flow run”, but instead they gathered in an area well known for having obstacles conducive to parkour and trained there until they moved on to another area – walking in the typical fashion (p. 9). Later on in the book, he also describes how “… despite their discursive claims about the efficiency of movement, traceurs are really interested in finding the path of greatest resistance between point A and B” (p. 61).

There is, he argues, an important difference between the traceurs’ rhetorical discourse and their actual practice. Kidder’s ongoing comparison of skateboarding and parkour and detecting their similarities and differences is very informative in terms of understanding parkour. In an astute observation, Kidder points towards the traceurs’ rhetoric about parkour as training: “It is hard to imagine amateur skateboarders or snowboarders describing their routine activities as training” (p. 6).

Kidder also presents a short demographic of the traceurs. He describes the majority as white men, middle-class, in their late teens to early twenties with little or no athletic pursuits before parkour and especially clean-cut and mild mannered, in contrast to archetypical jocks in traditional sport or the stereotyped characters in extreme sport: the marginalized youth. Kidder describes how the original focus on lifestyle sports has tended to conceptualize these as forms of youthful resistance to the status quo, but also how more recent studies have been far more critical of the counter-hegemonic potential of lifestyle sports. Kidder follows this path, analyzing the traceurs as participants in lifestyle sports who simultaneously resist and embrace contemporary power structures and corporate influence. This is one of the great strengths in Kidder’s study. I will elaborate on this later.

In the introductory section, Kidder also zooms in on the focal interest in the book: the affective appropriation of space in parkour, in relation to which he makes two essential points: 1) parkour is not only happening at
some place: it is enacted through space, and 2) spatial appreciation must be understood as an embodied practice. Kidder’s theoretical and empirical emphasis is on the traceurs’ bodily actions and lived experiences within space. He contrasts this interest to the typical sociological interest in place (which is about the cultural significance attributed to spaces). Kidder’s primary focus is on how traceurs come to re-imagine what type of movements the city affords. He describes the practice as an affective appropriation of space characterized by an engrossment of flow, drawing on the concept developed by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (1975). The introduction is completed with a theoretical description of postmodernity as a general incredulousness toward meta-narratives, an increasing exposure to mediated images and the breakdown of stable identities, as well as being characterized by a hegemonic neoliberal discourse (p. 15).

The cultural history of parkour

In the first chapter, Kidder delivers a rich description of the history of parkour, focusing especially on the community in Chicago and the surrounding suburbs. As Kidder writes, Parkour originates from a group of friends from the French suburbs Lisses, Evry and Sarcelles. Parkour evolved from their adolescent physical games in the so-called banlieues inspired by the French military obstacle course training parcours du combattant and the méthode naturelle of the French naval officer George Hébert. The méthode naturelle was based on Hébert’s educational idea that training in natural environments and using basic, functional movements would foster physical and emotional development, human virtue and reconnect people with nature. Although the young men were inspired by the utilitarian and altruistic purpose of the training regimes, they were also deeply affected by youthful fantasies influenced by comic books and superheroes (p. 19). Together they created a sporting practice characterized by athletic skill, spatial appreciation and kinetic style. Their practice produced an image of personal freedom and self-expression which the media wanted to cover. Because of the originators’ different subjective motivations and a growing interest in parkour from outside, relationships within the group became frayed and the group split into three different franchises with different names for their activity: parkour, art du placement and freerunning (in his book, Kidder uses parkour as a generic reference to all variations stemming from the group’s practice). All these franchises battled for public recognition and roles in advertise-
ments and movies. As well as other lifestyle sports, parkour became a battleground for authenticity and legitimization.

Since the turn of the century, parkour has been rapidly spreading across many countries because of its use as a performance art in popular media and the extensive use by its practitioners of 2.0 social media. Kidder describes the BBC’s use of parkour in one of its station promotions, which gained widespread public interest. This promotion was followed up by two British documentaries, *Jump London* and *Jump Britain*, which had an immeasurable impact on the popularity of parkour across the world (p. 26). Kidder also argues that this documentary series marked the end of parkour as primarily a French discipline. Kidder presents the growing interest in parkour in Great Britain and the United States and describes how the spread of the discipline was related to the Internet and especially the English-language website Urban Freeflow (UE). Because of the language barrier between the American youth and the French originators, as well as a perceived hostility from the French traceurs on their Internet forums, the website UE helped more than anything else to shape parkour in the United States. In just a couple of years, and especially with parkour featuring in the opening scene of the James Bond movie *Casino Royal* in 2006, “…parkour and freerunning became household words the United States – at least among homes with teenage boys” (p. 27).

What I really did enjoy was Kidder’s cultural history of the dissemination of parkour in the US. He tracks different trends that have not been described before, such as the use and popularity of screen/personal nicknames and how they have waned in recent years, as well as the distinction between parkour and freerunning that was once very important to traceurs and created a lot of disputes. He also presents an interesting analysis of the “sportization” and commercialization of parkour. Besides the early commercial interest in parkour from outside (moviemakers and companies), Kidder traces two business models that evolved from inside the discipline, as well as three generations of traceurs with different attitudes towards the commercialization of parkour. The first business model consisted of entrepreneurial traceurs selling performance and apparel and opening parkour gyms. The so-called ‘new business model’ includes the development of sportive competitions and teaching certifications. As Kidder argues, the parkour-specific gyms and certifications represent the primary focus for traceurs trying to make a living from the activity (p. 45).

This chapter is a very important and valuable contribution to the history of parkour. Most studies are limited to relating the French origins of
Parkour and often ignore the commercialization of the discipline, since it does not fit with the idea of parkour being a social and cultural phenomenon (Atkinson 2009, 2013; Daskalaki et al 2008; Geyh 2012; Guss 2011; Marshall 2010; Mould 2009; Ortuzar 2009). The chapter offers insight into the commercialization and institutionalization of the practice, as well as the social world of parkour in the United States and the global ethnoscape. It enables international comparison and thereby the possibility to create more knowledge about how lifestyle sports evolve in a globalized and mediated world. Furthermore, it gives the reader important background knowledge about the social world of parkour that the traceurs of Chicago are taking part in, and how the ideas and images circulating within this social world are in a dialectic connection to their real-world local practice.

**Parkour as an embodied, spatial practice and a global ethnoscape**

In the second chapter, Kidder focuses on how virtual worlds become emplaced in the real world in the practice of parkour. Thereby he delivers important knowledge about the intertwining of the real and the virtual in relation to bodily practice in parkour.

Kidder shows the ways in which the traceurs’ use of new media influences their perceptions of the physical environment. His argument is that by conceptualizing the social world of parkour with Arjun Appadurai’s concept of *global ethnoscape* (1993), we can better grasp how diffuse, globalized interactions become realized in specific locales by unique actors (p. 48). Regardless of the popularity and spread of parkour-specific gyms and teaching, most beginners still learn about parkour through the screen. New media are crucial for the transmission of parkour skills and styles for beginners as well as for the experienced traceurs. Parkour knowledge is produced, altered and consumed online. As Kidder argues: “…parkour – as a local practice – derives from knowledge filtered from across the globe” (p. 51).

Kidder argues that fantasy plays an important role in parkour, and the videos and pictures online continually provide “new prisms of the possible”. The videos redefine what the traceurs believe is physically possible. As I have also argued elsewhere together with Aggerholm (2017), the border between the possible and impossible is attractive to the traceurs and perceived as always dynamic and temporary. What seems to be an impossible movement can suddenly be brought into the realm of possibility if someone else
does it, and this then functions as a catalyst for the future perception of other movements that are not yet possible (Aggerholm and Larsen 2017, p. 76).

Kidder goes on to describe how the traceurs are also producing their own videos. The videos play a significant role in the traceurs’ social interaction with each other, not only as instructive tools (i.e., how to learn a manoeuvre), but also as a part of their online identities (p. 52). Kidder uses Jean Baudrillard’s (1981) concept of *simulacra* to describe how the real events can sometimes become secondary to the interplay of signs and how the videos are a hyperreal version of the world that traceurs confront in their training. Parkour videos are supposed to convey a “sense of urgency and pace” and in order to achieve that, the manoeuvres are filmed repeatedly until the traceurs are satisfied with how they look on the screen. When filming and producing videos, the parkour manoeuvres are thereby reduced to objects for consumption – not real life but the interplay of signs. As Kidder explains, disjointed tricks are edited into an approximation of reality, pseudo-events, that never actually existed (p. 56).

In the middle of the chapter Kidder turns his attention towards the appropriation of the real world. He starts by arguing that parkour, as well as other lifestyle sports, is meaningful to the participants because the physical exertion required and the potential for bodily harm demand that they are engrossed in their movements, whereby the optimal experience of flow in Csikszentmihalyi’s terms is possible. In the subsequent pages, Kidder argues that the traceurs’ experiences in parkour can be understood as flow and that jams (where traceurs meet and train together) are a ritual that generates a collective sense of flow (p. 59). Flow has been influential in descriptions of the playful aspects of parkour (Saville 2008; Atkinson 2009; Angel 2011; Clegg and Butryn 2012) and while flow is certainly a relevant descriptive concept to grasp some of the subjective experience and meaning in parkour, I find it difficult to follow the argument about a collective sense of flow. There is no doubt about excitement and fear being something experienced in conjunction with others in parkour. But I do question whether the experiences that the traceurs describe about being more motivated and creative when training together can be understood and grasped as a collective sense of flow. There is, however, no doubt that jams are significant to the traceurs’ group experience as well as highly important to the contextualized and collaborative acquisition of skills, as O’Grady (2012) has argued in her article on collaborative learning in parkour.

To understand the traceurs’ appropriation of urban space, Kidder also introduces James Gibson’s concept of affordance (1979). He uses this concept
to explain why the traceurs prefer certain sections of the city to others (p. 61). The traceurs are especially attracted to objects and structures that afford a route of challenging obstacles to be overcome with difficult manoeuvres. The continual personal progression of the traceurs’ movement ability is very important to them. To train their movement ability in the urban environment, the traceurs must learn to perceive possibilities for manoeuvres. This ability is described with the emic concept of PK vision. This concept has been well described in existing literature and studies on parkour. Quite a few scholars have emphasized how parkour develops an altered perception of urban space (Ameel and Tani 2011; Angel 2011; Atkinson 2009; Bavinton 2007; Brunner 2011; Chow 2010; Clegg and Butryn 2012; O’Grady 2012). As with flow, Kidder argues that PK vision is experienced collectively and must also be understood as something trans-local (pp. 64-65). In the virtual world, the traceurs discover new movements and new prisms of the possible, which they try to replicate in their own local environment. As Kidder writes: “Without the virtual world of parkour, the imagined possibilities of the traceurs would be truncated” (p. 65).

Parkour as a risky practice of manhood acts

Chapters 3 and 4 are both about the traceurs’ affective appropriation of urban space and how urban space is used as a structural resource to express masculinity in the postmodern. In chapter 3, Kidder’s primary theoretical concept is that of manhood acts, drawn from sociologist Michael Schwalbe (2005). According to Schwalbe, masculinity is not something inherent or innate in the individual, and it is not limited to males. It is something asserted through one’s actions: “By behaving in certain ways, an individual can make claims to the “appropriate” gender identity” (p. 73). Two primary arguments are presented in the subsequent pages of the chapter: (1) the city can function as an environment with the potential for experiencing adventure. Here Kidder also draws on George Simmel’s concept of adventure: a symbolic break with the mundanity of modern life where it is possible to experience risk and develop skills to cope with it (p. 70); and (2) participating in parkour allows traceurs to transform such environments into structural resources for assisting gender identities culturally coded as masculine (p. 73).

According to Kidder, male traceurs use the discipline to bolster their masculine identities, but at the same time they cannot be characterized as stereotypical jocks (p. 75). Parkour is characterized by adventurous actions,
with both corporal and social risk. When the traceurs propel themselves through the urban environment and show mastery over their bodies as well as the material world, they appear to have control of it. This risk-taking and demonstration of power and control must be understood as a masculine practice. As Kidder writes: “This underscores the performative aspect of their masculinity. The parkour community provides an opportunity to see and be seen by one’s peers in the midst of conducting manhood acts” (p. 82).

The traceurs Kidder follows in his study find great joy in being able to do things that other people in the streets cannot do. They also desire attention and recognition from passers-by, despite the fact that this goes against the ascetic philosophy and rhetorical discourse in parkour (pp. 86-90). Kidder’s analysis of parkour as a practice of manhood acts offers an interesting explanation to the question of why the social world of parkour is dominated by men. Through demonstration of power and control, they show themselves to be in possession of the cultural values and attributes of manhood. While male traceurs affirm the stereotype, female traceurs are challenging the gender norms.

Kidder also presents some interesting observations of differences between male and female traceurs, albeit based on limited empirical data. He describes how female traceurs seem to be generally more reserved and methodological in their approach to training; that is also my own experience. I am more sceptical about the following quote: “Even the most dedicated female traceurs are unlikely to do the fast, powerful, and risky stunts that tend to capture the attention of onlookers and the praise of other practitioners” (p. 72).

I do not agree. Take a look, for example, at Katie McDonnell1 from England or Luci Romberg2 from L.A. It is also relevant to keep in mind that there are traceurs who put creativity above risky and powerful moves. Based on my own research and experiences in parkour, I am also sceptical about the conclusion: “…seeing and being seen by other traceurs as one acts in a ‘manly’ way is an essential part of what gives parkour its meaning” (p. 83).

While it is very stimulating and not least important that Kidder touches upon some themes that have previously been ignored because of their unsympathetic or even illegal nature (such as the traceurs’ interest in showing off as well as their teasing of security guards), I believe that it is difficult to assign such a crucial role in parkour to the desire for attention and recognition. Although most traceurs are happy to show what they have accom-

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1 https://www.instagram.com/katiemcdonnell/
2 http://www.luciromberg.com
plished, there are – at least in my own research – many traceurs who prefer to train without spectators. In relation to this, it is also important to remember that the videos they post online are not only narcissistic products for creating and maintaining their online identities, but also a way of being a member of a community and developing the prisms of the possible.

Hedgework – rites and rituals in parkour

In the last chapter, Kidder addresses the meaningful frameworks given to the traceurs’ risky adventures in the urban environment. He describes how the traceurs conceptualize risk and the symbolic practices they associate with it and contextualizes the risk and practices in postmodern culture.

Kidder opens the chapter with four narratives of fateful moments in parkour. The narratives represent the bodily practice of parkour as potentially dangerous, but Kidder argues that it would be a mistake to assume that parkour is inherently more dangerous than other sports. Research shows that injuries may actually be less likely to occur in activities like surfing and skateboarding than in traditional team sports (p. 99). Kidder describes how assessing risk and managing fear is a core motivation for traceurs in parkour. He draws on Stephen Lyng and David Snow’s classical sociological study about motivational orientation in skydiving and their concept of edgework (1986). Edgework describes the practice whereby (voluntary) life-threatening situations are handled skilfully and with poise despite anxiety and pressure. Like flow, it demands total immersion in the situation, but the stakes are raised. While skydivers push the boundaries of survival, the traceurs in Kidder’s study are more interested in hedging their bets, so he calls their motivational orientation hedgework (p. 103). While edgework was described as a response to a sense of alienation in contemporary society in the 1980s, Kidder shows how the traceurs’ vocabulary of motive resonates with the neoliberal rhetoric of postmodern culture and neoliberalism as the economic discourse of postmodernity. Risk has a certain significance in postmodern culture, and neoliberalism places a strong emphasis on personal responsibility in risk-taking. As an activity, parkour reflects the abstract cultural values promoted by neoliberalism (pp. 103-106).

Kidder then describes the two related practices of what he calls rites of risk and rituals of symbolic safety. To practice parkour is to experience fear. The rites of risk involve not letting fear hold you back. A key component of parkour’s rites of risk is commitment to the challenging manoeuvres. The
traceurs want to feel that they can manage their fear and (like “men”) show themselves capable of action (p. 107). Therefore, fear is also necessary and something the traceurs discuss openly and explicitly. While the rites of risk can be understood as a test of the individual traceur’s character, development and training are highly collaborative. As Kidder argues, the rites of risk in parkour – the will to challenge oneself and commit oneself to risk – are acts of membership (p. 113).

What separates parkour and the traceurs’ risk-taking from pointless stunts or Jackass-like activity are the rituals of symbolic safety. In the parkour community there is a clear guiding principle of responsible training (including warm-up and healthy eating) and progression. If a traceur acts recklessly or speaks brashly about danger, they are reprimanded (p. 114). As Kidder shows, however, there is an obvious contradiction between commitment and progression. Some manoeuvres cannot be slowly progressed. It is make-or-break. Here the traceurs need to find a balance between the rites of risk and the principle of progression. As Kidder also argues, progression is often more a way of talking about one’s actions: “… traceurs use the principle of progression as a rhetorical device for justifying and rationalizing the risks they take” (p. 117).

These rituals give discipline and the experience of fear a meaningful framework. They upgrade pointless stunts to meaningful actions. Furthermore, the rituals of safety are communicative performances: they are practices that express that the individual traceur belongs to the parkour community (p. 218). To emphasize the importance of the rites of risk and rituals of symbolic safety, Kidder uses an example of a traceur who occupies a marginal status in the community because of his failure to combine the rites of risk with appropriate respect for the symbols of safety. This example is very informative.

So is Kidder’s use of contradictions and disputes inside the community throughout the book. Lifestyle sports are full of disputes about authenticity and legitimacy, although they tend to be represented by practitioners or studied as having one real, authentic “essence” (often lost because of sportification and/or commercialization). Kidder’s research reminds us that it is always important to combine stated ideals with actual behaviour if we are to fully understand the practice and its broader social connections and significance. This does however mean that we as researchers sometimes go beyond the practitioners’ preferred portrayal of their practice, as Kidder also describes in the acknowledgments: “Regretfully, as a sociologist, what interests me about the social world of parkour inevitably diverges from those

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in the community, especially with respect to the ways they may prefer to see their activities portrayed” (p. ix).

Kidder’s book is an excellent example of how to maintain a fine balance between “going native” and doing critical sociological analysis. If we are “just” giving the practitioners a clear voice, we should be biographical authors and not sociologists. Kidder’s goal is to “place parkour and its popularity within its relevant sociological context” (p. 6), and he does indeed succeed in doing that when he sums up the arguments in the conclusion.

A call for culturally sensitive and comparative studies in lifestyle sport

Kidder’s empirical research fills a need for studies in parkour to be sensitive to the local context. Although much of the early research on parkour was based on empirical studies of local parkour groups (see e.g. Atkinson 2009; Clegg & Butryn 2012; Mould 2009; O’Grady 2012; Saville 2008), only a few of these focused specifically on the significance of the local contexts. Although videos and new media from all around the world are crucial for the transmission of parkour skills, the practitioners’ ideas of what is possible and their interaction with others (as well as themselves), the physical manoeuvres are always emplaced in the real world, in a local and specific physical environment, and performed by unique, local, bodily actors. Kidder’s sensitivity to this makes the book especially relevant in relation to the globalisation (Robertson 1995) of parkour as well as other lifestyle sports (see e.g. Sterchele and Camoletto 2017; Gilchrist and Wheaton 2017; Ugolotti 2017; Thorpe and Amad 2015). For a researcher in parkour and lifestyle sport in a Danish and European context, the book presents numerous themes that could be interesting for comparative research. For example, Kidder states in the introduction that parkour is mostly experienced as an activity totally outside the scope of institutional control. This argument is questionable when taken out of the North American context (and if the global ethnoscape is ignored as an institution). In Denmark, parkour has been integrated on a large scale as an activity into physical education in public schools and voluntary gymnastic and sport associations (Larsen 2015). Furthermore, dedicated facilities for practicing parkour have been built throughout the country. In the autumn of 2015 there were 126 specially designed facilities for parkour registered in the 49,931 km² that make up Denmark (Larsen et al. 2015, p. 25). According to the Danish Institute for Sport Studies, 3% of all Danish
children (7-15 years old) participate regularly in parkour (Pilgaard and Rask 2016, p. 18) and 45% of them are organized in an institutional setting such as voluntary sport clubs (Pilgaard and Rask 2016, p. 122).

Kidder’s study reaffirms that new ontologies are needed that go beyond dualist thought, the dichotomy between the alternative and the mainstream which characterized earlier lifestyle sport studies (c.f. Rinehart 2008; Wheaton 2010; Crissy Honea 2013). The socio-cultural context affects the way lifestyle sports emerge and evolve. Lifestyle sports like parkour do not evolve in a vacuum but interact with and are coloured by the cultural context in which they take place. It is for that reason that studies of sports enable broader knowledge about our society. This is not to deny that the “original” and authentic parkour exists but to believe that a more relativistic and socio-cultural sensitive approach is necessary if we want to understand how parkour is practiced and understood in all its shades and nuances.

The book is well written, and I recommend it to all scholars and students who are interested in lifestyle sport, urban sociology or to those who are looking for a good example of how sport (as well as all human activity) is significant beyond itself.

References


