

About Turns: Reflecting on Sport History in the 1990s

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It is now more than thirty years since sport historians began to carve out a niche for their field within the general discipline of history. In that time sport history has established its institutional viability as a field to “be listed beside rather than inside” the allied area of social history.¹ Nonetheless, sport history has thrived as a field that takes its philosophical, theoretical, and methodological cues largely from social history. As sport historians often note, we study sport because it provides us with a means for learning more about society and because it is itself a social phenomenon that we seek to understand and explain. Throughout the 1980s and into the 1990s, however, even as scholars continued to affirm that social history was sport history’s primary intellectual home, the philosophical and conceptual grounds on which both stood had begun to shift. Three major areas of concern have combined to create pressure and provoke deep, wide-ranging examinations of the most fundamental concerns of historians. These are postmodernist assaults on history’s epistemological claims, empiricist certainties, and the modernist credo of progress; and within social history, a questioning of the centrality and universality of class as a category of analysis, of social and economic factors as sufficient explanations; and a growing emphasis on culture and meaning.²

This essay considers several issues that have arisen as history has taken these postmodernist, linguistic, literary, and cultural turns. It also reflects a little on the implications these turns have for sport and leisure history and discusses several recent works in the field that have been influenced by the paradigms emerging from them. I draw mostly upon women’s history for my illustrative and supportive material. Feminist historians were among the first to entertain and critique postmodernist theories, and the convergence of feminist thought with certain elements of postmodernism has been productive of some exciting and innovative history. In addition, it is with women, gender, and sexuality that my interests as a sport historian primarily lie, and I see this essay as an opportunity to sketch out some of the possibilities that postmodernism offers for research on these topics. That said, I hope this article will be received as a contri-

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bution to a debate that has relevance for the whole field—a debate that may well prove to rehearse the more controversial developments of the next several decades of sport and leisure historiography.

Among the most important aspects of postmodernism are the denial of the Enlightenment belief that history is moving purposefully and progressively to a desired, attainable state of individual and social well-being, and the undercutting of history's claims to the status of an epistemology. Each of these theoretical developments has consequences for the ways in which historians apprehend their mission and conceive of and write history. In particular, the putative failure of the modernist enterprise of improving society through the application of reason and scientific knowledge has prompted some to declare the bankruptcy of movements that have aspired to achieve this end. In this spirit, such "master-narratives" as Marxism, democratic liberalism, and feminism—following Madan Sarup, narratives which promise that progress can be made through the attainment of knowledge, understanding, and (thus) mastery of the social and natural world—are dismissed as vain-glorious and illusory.³

The discipline of history is inevitably caught up in this reappraisal because, as one of the modern social sciences, it has primarily cast itself as an epistemology through which the world can be comprehended. But postmodernists insist that the concern under this "epistemological philosophy of history" with truth, empirical fact, and verifiable description and explanation wrongly assumes that the historian has direct access to the past through its textual traces and can accurately and faithfully apprehend and reproduce it. Whereas all she or he can ever do is use those textual traces to construct a narrative about the past whose correspondence with it is impossible to verify. With the hopes of modernism thus unrealized and the epistemological pretensions of history problematized, according to Keith Jenkins, all that is to be done now is to recognize that postmodernity is our condition and to face up to the fact that we live "amidst social formations which have no legitimising ontological or epistemological or ethical grounds for our beliefs or actions beyond the status of an ultimately self-referencing (rhetorical) conversation."⁴

When postmodernist philosophies and theories have not been ignored or stirred up a furious defense of established ideas and practices, they have generated a number of influential conceptual and methodological developments. Of these, an emphasis on diversity and fragmentation, contingency and fluidity, constructedness and self-interestedness—of society, of human subjects, of such previously taken-for-granted matters as "class," "race," "woman"—and the constitutive status of language are among the most significant.⁵ Feminist scholars in particular have found a great deal that is appealing in these developments. Numbers of feminists have embraced aspects of postmodernist thought: that knowledge is not a neutral thing but is produced in the interests of specific individuals or institutions, and within a system of rules that determine what even gets to count as knowledge; that justice, reason, and truth are not eternal but are constructed and shaped within specific historical and cultural contexts; that all truths are partial. They see them as means of exposing the constructed, and thus mutable, nature of gender identities; validating the feminist political views and