On Metcalfe, Marx, and Materialism: Reflections on the Writing of Sport History in the Postmodern Age

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It was almost forty years ago when as a young student at Mount Douglas High School in Victoria, I first laid eyes on Alan Metcalfe. Straight out of Newcastle, England, this wet-behind-the-ears “Geordie” with a bright red MGB sports car, carrot-coloured hair, and resonant voice had been hired to teach physical education and English to a class of teenagers whose idea of good exercise was watching the gyrating bodies on Dick Clark’s American Bandstand. What became evident immediately was that Alan was a disciplinarian in the broadest sense of the word; he disciplined young bodies and minds in ways that to us seemed particularly demanding, even mildly intimidating. His gym classes regularly involved his leading forty kids on runs up and down Mount Douglas. “You’re not fit, Canadian lads!” he would shout, and we were never sure whether he intended this as an admonition or as a way to make us perform better by playing on our nationalist sensibilities. In English classes he would demand absolute quiet and strict attention, although—as he would likely admit himself—his credibility as an English teacher rested more heavily on his British accent than on his mastery of English grammar. One thing was always clear, however. For Alan Metcalfe, teaching was a form of social production: it was never to be an abstract exercise of the imagination, but rather a craft and a vocation that demanded discipline to be successful.

Recently I was reminded of how the words discipline and production seem bound up with Alan’s approach to his life and work. I had been invited to deliver a seminar for graduate students and a guest lecture at the University of Windsor. Between the two events Alan and I stopped by his office. On his desk was a myriad of charts and tables, which he had carefully assembled over considerable time from census data and municipal records to demonstrate the relative immobility and stability of the north-country miners and their communities. “You know,” he said, “I really distrust those sociologists and historians who are so quick to construct and apply theory, who can write paragraphs that make sweeping claims on the basis of hardly any evidence at all. It sometimes

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takes me days to write a paragraph.” It occurred to me that Alan the historian is very much like those stolid north-countrymen that he studies. He realises, as they do instinctively, that the world is produced in material ways as much as it is by the human imagination. Alan is a materialist at heart. And, given this inclination, it should not be surprising that he leans towards a Marxist view of history. His is not Marxist in its arterio-sclerotic, structuralist, or deterministic form, however. Rather, his is a flexible, cultural Marxism rooted in the work of Antonio Gramsci, Edward Thompson, and Raymond Williams, and which focuses on the complex ways in which culture—in Alan’s case sporting culture—is produced and reproduced.¹

Yet in these postmodernist days of virtual reality, where the world is “invented” and “reinvented” or “imagined” and “represented,” where historians turn their ears attentively to a multitude of “voices,” and where “everything that is solid melts into thin air,” it is something of a challenge to stick to the intellectual canons of historical materialism and not join in the “descent into discourse.”² Obviously, postmodernism has its attractions. Kicking over old and seemingly desiccated traditions, after all, is often a lot of fun. But as sport historians open themselves up to insights from outside the discipline of history, is there not a danger that historical inquiry in the field of sport and leisure will give way to the kind of abstract theorising that concerns Alan so much? Some time ago Tony Judt put the case against idealist approaches to social history and the uncritical importation of models from the social sciences into historical writing, in more provocative and somewhat exaggerated terms. “Social history,” he wrote, “is suffering a severe case of pollution. The subject has become a gathering place for the unscholarly, for historians bereft of ideas and subtlety” who turn naively to the social sciences, borrowing indiscriminately their terms and theories and claiming to be interdisciplinary historians. “The study of the past,” Judt continues, has “become a playpit for the unattended urchins of other disciplines,” and the theoretical abstractions that emerge represent a collective loss of faith in history itself.³ Although Judt overstates the issue, the concerns he raises bear some scrutiny. Given that many people working in the field of sport history are not trained as historians, the danger of descending into unfettered idealism and intellectual abstraction must be acknowledged.

Last year at the NASSH meetings in Springfield, Illinois, I had a chance to talk with Steve Pope about the flight from materialism that is so evident in the work of sport historians. Steve had just presented an adroitly crafted little paper that connected the improvisational genius of black jazz musicians to the marvellous ingenuity of professional basketball performers. It was a delight to listen to, and one could dance along the “Sweet Georgia Brown” pathways of Steve’s imagination and be transported by his innovative prose during his twenty-minute gig. After his paper, we chatted briefly about the need to connect this kind of analysis of style and virtuosity to broader processes of cultural and economic production. During the conversation Steve made a comment that has been ringing in my head ever since. A lot of people in sport history, he said, seem to “think that materialism is passé.” He is absolutely right. Many do. But what a sorry state of affairs—I’ve been thinking—for Metcalfe, Marx, and me!