Of Remembering and Forgetting:
*From Ritual to Record* and Beyond

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In the course of our lifetime we read much that is easy to forget, but much as well that we are obliged to remember, even if we are not always convinced of its plausibility. Allen Guttmann has gone through this *ritual* of remembrance and forgetting, to *record* his understanding of the transition from traditional to modern forms of sport. Published in 1978, *From Ritual to Record* is part of Allen’s intellectual odyssey, a journey through a world of the intellect that wends its way through Book XIII of Homer’s *Iliad*, Plato’s notion of ideal forms, Marx’s dialectical materialism, Freud’s understanding of the unconscious, Turner’s frontier thesis and the notion of American exceptionalism, David McClelland’s conception of the achievement-oriented society, and then ultimately Max Weber’s grand theory of the transition from traditional to modern society.

Along the way are various literary, sociological, and historical side-trips and stopovers that testify to a mind steeped in sociological theory and literary refinement. For sport historians, his has been an unforgettable voyage, one that has shaped our understanding of what we do, one that we cannot help but remember. I am thus delighted to partake in this revisitation of *From Ritual to Record*, to outline what I found most memorable there, and to comment as well upon what I find most worthy of forgetting. In his earlier remarks, Allen pointed to his paradigm, which outlined the uniqueness of modern sports and their difference from more primitive or traditional sporting activities, and how that became more important to him than the identification of differences between American and European sporting traditions and practices. Later, however, he referred as well to what I would consider another and especially crucial element of the book; his elaborate assault on old-line structuralist Marxist writings, and upon late sixties and early seventies social control theories that had

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been applied with little profit or enlightenment to an understanding of
sport in the modern age. I will have much to say presently about this com-
ponent of the study, for it seems to me that it is this section of the book that
roots the work in the 1970s, even while many of Allen’s insights continue
to shape our thought as we enter a new century. Moreover, by focussing
upon the historical and ideological context that surrounded the writing of
From Ritual to Record, I can perhaps explain why within the discipline of
history, modernization theory has been “widely discredited” and often
treated dismissively, an explanation that Allen has so politely asked for in
his paper.

Allen tells us that while he started work on this project in order to
understand the difference between sport in America and Europe, he soon
became more interested in change over time, in the contrasts between then
and now. This temporal paradigm of differentiation, fashioned in the opening
couple of chapters, is no doubt familiar to most of you. (If it isn’t it
should be!) After carefully delineating the similarities and differences be-
tween play, contests, games, and sports, Guttmann outlined seven character-
istics of modern sport: secularism, equality, rationalization, specialization,
bureaucratization, quantification, and the obsession with records. A
few quibbles have emerged. Critics have noted that Guttmann’s emphasis
on equality in modern sports fails to account for the continuing inequalities
involving gender, race, ethnicity, class, or region, but this was hardly
something that Allen was unaware of. In fact, as he pointed out, “there are
numerous inequalities” in modern sport, but this by no means invalidates
the notion that in a society where achievement is respected more than is
ascriptive or inherited status, equality is prized. On the whole, the first
section of the book is convincing. Although some reviewers have criticized
Guttmann for his inclination to bold speculation based upon sociological
theorizing and limited literary inferences, the opening two chapters are
filled with considerable insight and a stunning array of examples. His abil-
ity to sweep across cultures and time, not to mention his facility in a num-
ber of languages, are particular hallmarks of the Guttmann approach.

Deeper problems emerge, however, when we move beyond a mere
taxonomy of characteristics to an assumption that in identifying a process
of change, we arrive at an explanation for change. While many processes
are identifiable in history, it is another thing altogether to understand history
itself as process. Guttmann’s argument reflects his interest in history
as process, an orientation that was a commonplace during the 1960s and
1970s. From Ritual to Record was written at a time of grand theorizing,
when the grand narratives of development that postmodernist scholars
now disdain were clearly in vogue. Let me remind you of the intellectual
excitement that surrounded the publication of Jacques Ellul’s, The Techno-
logical Society, first published in France in 1950 and then released in the
United States in 1964, or Andre Gunder Frank’s development of