From Ritual to Record:
Allen Guttmann’s Insights Into Modernization and Modernity

Douglas Booth

By any reckoning, From Ritual to Record: The Nature of Modern Sports is a landmark book in sport history. Prior to its publication, in 1978, the field was devoid of a scholarly, theoretically explicit explanation of the structure of modern sport and its development. Certainly it lacked one written with flair. From Ritual to Record not only corrected that oversight; it provoked intense debate, simultaneously exciting and annoying historians and sociologists of sport. Today, more than two decades after its release, From Ritual to Record continues to stimulate debate as the lively discussions during the retrospective on the book at NASSH 2000 testify. I felt honored to participate in that retrospective in which I focused on Guttmann’s methodology and approach, and on his conceptualizations of modernization (as a process of change) and modernity (as a historical conjuncture). While discerning much merit in his broad approach, I found Guttmann’s theoretical contributions and understanding of modernization and modernity more contentious.

Methodology and Approach

From Ritual to Record is an exemplar of scholarship in its methodology and approach. As such it deserves a distinguished place in sport studies, a field that has traditionally paid scant attention to methodology. From Ritual to Record contains a coherent theory, factual credibility, historical evidence, and diverse primary and secondary sources drawn from different languages and cultures. It also includes relevant historical, social, and statistical comparisons; social and cultural context; a broad historical sweep; ethnographic and anthropological evidence; presentation and evaluation of counter-evidence; and searching questions that force the

D. Booth <dbooth@pooka.otago.ac.nz> is with the School of Physical Education at the University of Otago, Dunedin, New Zealand.
reader to reappraise fundamental assumptions. Lastly, *From Ritual to Record* is a piece of fine writing.

In short, *From Ritual to Record* escapes the constraints of a single set of sources and a single historical method or approach. Ironically, this diversity failed to impress some critics. In his review, Jack Berryman criticized *From Ritual to Record* for its use of “fictitious literary sources.” In light of the subsequent impact of postmodernism, poststructuralism, and literary criticism on the discipline of history and their more recent influence on general sport studies, Berryman’s claim that “the explanatory power of novels is questionable” not only seems petulant but places him in the lonely camp of the traditional historian “trained in the arcane seek-and-ye-might find world of archival research and elaborate documentation from primary (preferably unpublished) sources.” Guttman’s use of literary sources puts him light years ahead of his peers and confirms the depth of his thought.

Of course, none of this means that Guttman’s methodology is beyond reproach. An almost total reliance on sport studies literature and an extremely limited consultation of non-sport sources are significant oversights. For example, when discussing the commercialization of sport under the heading Marxist Interpretations, Guttman inserts a note in which he claims that “the fullest documentation of commercialism comes from non-Marxist sources.” While Guttman is quite correct (see his paper in this volume), when he claims in his defense that *From Ritual to Record* predated the major Marxist-leaning accounts of the commercialization of sport—notably Richard Gruneau’s *Class, Sports, and Social Development* and John Hargreaves’ *Sport, Power and Culture*—the writings of Karl Marx, György Lukács, Ernest Mandel, Edward Thompson, and Raymond Williams all provide materialist insights into the political economy of culture upon which Guttman should have drawn for a more comprehensive account of the forces of commercialization.

Lastly, notwithstanding Guttman’s obvious abilities as a wordsmith, in several places in *From Ritual to Record*, irrelevant or irrational examples detract from rather than reinforce arguments. Discussing the quantification of sport, Guttman refers to the development of electronic timers that “measure in hundredths and even thousandths of a second” and he notes that “these differences are perceived by the spectators and by the athletes themselves as intensely significant.” Then, completely forgetting all the laws of politics that govern social relationships, even those in international sporting federations, he poses a classic non sequitur: “Was it merely an accident that the founder of the International Amateur Athletic Federation—Sigfrid Edstrom—was an engineer?”

These minor quibbles aside, *From Ritual to Record* contains the essential methodological ingredients of sport studies. It is, at the very least, a text that sport historians can proudly hold up as an exemplar of a sophisticated field of study and research. More contentious, however, are Guttman’s concepts of modernization and modernity.