The Uses of Sport: A Critical Study


Reviewed by John Matthew Barlow, Concordia University, Montréal.

The Uses of Sport: A Critical Study, despite being a clearly written and structurally well-argued work, is a most frustrating experience for the reader, especially one with any familiarity with the explosion of sport studies across the disciplines in the past two decades or so. Throughout the text, authors John Hughson, David Inglis, and Marcus Free make repeated arguments for the inclusion of sport in Cultural Studies and its attendant disciplines of sociology and ethnography (though, unfortunately, they have very little to say about the field of history, a discipline that has seen the emergence of sport as a viable and mainstream form of cultural enquiry) as if sport is still regarded as an invalid means of cultural enquiry. Indeed, this argument is severely compromised by the nature of The Uses of Sport, which is largely based on secondary source research, culled together to contribute to the authors’ over-arching theoretical arguments. The fact that so many studies of the nature and significance of sport in culture, especially in the United Kingdom and Australia, seems to signify that the authors’ decrying of the exclusion of sport is somewhat retrograde.

The primary goal of Hughson and coauthors is to re-situate sport within the context of Cultural Studies; they advocate a return to the more traditional, and ultimately Marxist-infused, variety of the sort associated with Raymond Williams and Richard Hoggart and the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies at the University of Birmingham, in the late 1950s and 1960s. However, in so doing, the authors essentialize and engage in reductionism, not just of the varied field of Cultural Studies but, perhaps more troubling, their shibboleth: postmodernism and the postmodern culture, both of which have become so prevalent in Cultural Studies.

My fundamental problem with this book centers around the essentialized, reductionist, and flat conceptualization of poststructural theory and the postmodern condition as elucidated in The Uses of Sport. In this way, Hughson and coauthors recall the vibrant debate historians may be familiar with between social and cultural historians in the late 1980s and early 1990s surrounding the rise of gender history. This poststructural version of historical enquiry was attacked owing to its reliance upon the “linguistic turn” of deconstructivist methodologies.

Particularly frustrating in light of the authors’ anti-postmodern stance is their discussion of the concept of the “post-fan” and “post-fandom.” They discuss the advent of this concept, which can be described as a turn to the ironic among certain sets of sporting fans who view their own fandom of a particular club or sport in a disassociated fashion, separating themselves in an ironic way from the “real” or “authentic” sport fan, and ultimately leaving them detached from the team and sport. The post-fan and her or his gaze, then, can be compared with the
postmodern tourists’ gaze. Where the authors fail in their critique of the post-fan, however, is when they argue that the entire nature of the post-fan, viewing the sport with this detached ironic gaze, is therefore aware of the inauthenticity of her or his fandom, which means that there is thus a “real truth to be ascertained about leisure experiences” (p. 102). They take this then to mean that since there is a “truth” to be ascertained here, it challenges the alleged position of modernity that there is no truth. This, however, is rather misguided, as it is not necessarily the case that there is no truth in a postmodern world, simply that there might very well be multiple truths.

Finally, their argument for a return to the more traditional Cultural Studies of Hoggart and Williams, “adjusted to the times and phenomena at hand” (p. 94) is problematic when it is put up against the postcolonial fact of sport and nations such as Pakistan and Brazil (which do not receive much in the way of discussion in this book), but also predominately “white” settler cultures such as Australia or Canada, or even the former imperial metropolitan center in the United Kingdom, which has been forced in recent generations to come to terms with its own multicultural, and postcolonial, realities. Rather than engage such questions and realities, however, to say nothing of nonwhite nations and sporting traditions, the authors fall back on what are, essentially, outdated Marxist conceptualizations of race and ethnicity, subjugated mostly to class, to attempt to explain sport and race in the United Kingdom and Australia. And even though they have obvious sympathies to antiracist campaigns in rugby and football in these countries, it would seem to me that their analysis still remains rather flat.

Taken together, then, these shortcomings in The Uses of Sport leave the reader, especially perhaps the historian, frustrated.

**Sport and National Identity in the Post-War World**

Edited by Adrian Smith and Dilwyn Porter Published in 2004 by Routledge (200 pp., $40.95 U.S.)

Reviewed by Douglas Booth, University of Waikato

Questions about the relationship between sport and identity have underpinned sport history for the past decade, and numerous scholars have addressed the subject. Although many recent works show signs of staleness and repetition, Adrian Smith and Dilwyn Porter’s collection (nine essays and an introduction) is a well-framed and detailed analysis of the relationship between sport and national identity in the second half of the twentieth century. At the heart of Smith and Porter’s analysis sit two contending forces that variously concentrate and dilute national consciousness and make the relationship between sport and national identity infinitely complex. Among the forces of concentration are the disintegration of empires and the political “principle of national self-determination,” whereas the forces of dilution include “regional cooperation between nations for economic, military and political purposes,” “corporate multinationalism,” “the transnational media, and mass social mobility” (p. 1). Examples of the complex relationship between sport and nationality appear throughout the volume. Martin Polley, for example, shows that migration raises the number of identities from which citizens can choose (place of residence,