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**A Cultural History of Sport (in Six Volumes). London: Bloomsbury Academic 2021**

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Let me start by detailing, in a straightforwardly factual sense, what is entailed in this anthology – before moving to an assessment of its contribution to scholarship and its likely appeal to readers.

The anthology consists of six books specifically recounting the ‘cultural history of sport’ produced under the editorial supervision of sport history pioneer Wray Vamplew, John McClelland, whose transition from the study of French literature to sport history he himself described in an article of 2017 (McClelland, 2017) and leading American sport historian Mark Dyreson.

Each book deals with a discrete period and these periods are divided up as follows: *The Cultural History of Sport in...Antiquity* (800 BCE<sup>1</sup>-600 CE); *The Mediaeval Age* (600–1450); *The Renaissance* (1450–1650); *The Enlightenment* (1650–1800); *The Age of Industry* (1800–1920); and *The Modern Age* (1920–2020). The primary aim seems to have been to create a showpiece – a project that covered the history of sport from ancient times to the present – a span of over sixteen centuries – all captured with six gleaming volumes. This meant, though, devoting over 800 pages to preindustrial sport and a little over 400 to sport since 1800. This might be thought disproportionate and certainly, since there is so much to say about sport in these two latter centuries, it called for a great deal of condensation on the part of contributors to Volumes Five and Six.

What is effectively a box set runs to a little short of 1,300 pages, excluding the references, which are copious. The various writers – around fifty in number, are

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drawn from a range of historical specialisms, working in university departments across North America and Europe.

I need hardly add that a thoroughgoing assessment of this project will not be possible in this short review, but a number of things may tentatively be said about it.

In my judgment the first and most obvious strength of these books is in their presentation. The books are beautifully designed, and each cover is decorated with a judiciously chosen and evocative image. Moreover, throughout the six books the text is supported by an impressive array of photographs and other images. The series has a pleasurable and invariably stimulating bias toward art and photography.

Second, there is a great deal of very interesting information about the games and sport played in various societies by myriad social groups down the centuries.

Third, this information is furnished by a cast of contributors that is striking both in its multinational diversity and in the range of disciplines and scholarly expertise on which it draws.

Beyond that, however, there were several things that had me scratching my head.

First, the initial invitation to the reader, prefacing each book, could have been phrased better. The series, it says, will review 'both the internal practices of sport from remote Antiquity to the present and the ways and degrees to which sport has reflected – and been integrated into – contemporary cultural criteria' (Volume one, pp. x). Having read this sentence several times it still seems rather clunky to me (do you 'integrate' things into 'criteria'?) and unlikely to spur many people to read on, let alone shell out the £400 or so that this anthology will cost. The offer to the reader, later in the same paragraph, of a choice between 'synchronic and diachronic approaches' doesn't seem to help in this regard either.

Second, the use, right at the outset, of this rather obtuse language suggests (to me, at least) that the target audience for these books is the familiar one of academics, under- and postgraduates, supplemented perhaps by the fabled (and in this instance well remunerated) intelligent lay reader. If that's the case then a swathe of relevant and highly respectable scholarship on the history, politics and sociology of sport has been ignored in the early volumes. This prompted a second look at the cast list.

On further perusal, the varied professional origins of the contributors began to seem both an asset and, arguably, a drawback. The first four volumes feature almost nobody that could be called a sport specialist: the writers here are those whose publications include perhaps one item that bears on sport, and perhaps none at all. Only in Volume V do names familiar to those working in the field begin to appear: the fifth book is edited by respected British sport historian Mike Huggins and its first chapter is written by the excellent US scholar Gerry Gems, author of a clutch of books providing critical analysis of sport in American history. While there is of course nothing wrong in principle with the deployment of writers who are not specialists in sport scholarship, I felt their lack of familiarity with recent writing occasionally leapt off the page.

Sometimes this expressed itself as truism. For instance, the editors of Volume 1, who are both classicists, suggest that scholars of sport should move on from 'event-oriented sport history' but, if I have understood that term correctly, scholars of sport made this departure several decades ago.

Similarly, Chap. 5 of Volume 1 begins with the words ‘Sport is an innately [sic] competitive activity that can excite passions, antagonisms and even violence. It can exclude and integrate, unify and divide’ (pp.121). This is the sort of statement that seems to assume that the socio-historical analysis of sport is in its infancy; it might have been a worthwhile opening pitch fifty years ago – not now. Indeed, scholars long since began to argue over the sources and social construction of this competitiveness, of these passions and antagonisms, this violence.

For me, this concern was heightened in the introduction to the second book, edited by Prof. Noel Fallows, a Spanish specialist and an expert on mediaeval jousting in the Iberian Peninsula. Here there is more explicit acknowledgement of theory. *Homo Ludens*, the work of the Dutch historian Johan Huizinga, is cited, along with *Man, Play and Games* by the French intellectual Roger Caillois. The work of Norbert Elias and Eric Dunning on sport and the civilising process – for a time the subject of tedious theory wars in the sociology of sport which (to the relief on many scholarly bystanders) petered out in the 1990s - is also mentioned. *Homo Ludens* was first published in Holland in 1938 and Caillois’ book in France twenty years later and excerpts from both books appeared in Dunning’s (1971) path-breaking reader *The Sociology of Sport*, published in the UK. There is also reference to Allen Guttmann’s (very useful) book *From Ritual to Record: The Nature of Modern Sports*, first published in 1978. It’s important to stress (a) that the work on Huizinga, Caillois, Guttmann and, to an extent, Elias and Dunning is primarily definitional and (b) that, worthwhile as these sources are, a good deal of scholarly water has flown under the bridge since then.

This sparing recourse to theory is supplemented, to a degree, in Mike Huggins’ introduction to Volume V, on sport in the age of industry. Here Huggins, a specialist in the history of horse racing, provides an eight-page biography of mid-Victorian jockey Fred Archer as an illustration of the place of the sporting hero in the industrial society of nineteenth century England (pp.2–10). This is followed by a reflection on the recent enthusiasm of sport historians for the word ‘culture’, which is seen as evidence of a ‘cultural turn’. The problem here is that the term ‘cultural turn’ means different things to different people; here, amid a stream of very interesting examples and references to important work, it appears to mean simply that sport is a vital part of the cultures of human societies.

The elephant in the room here is social class and a materialist understanding of sport (and any other) history. For the writers in this anthology, class is often an incidental – for example, in Volume 1 there is a brief allusion to social hierarchies and, specifically, to who sat where at the Roman Circus Maximus (pp.61–2); for other, key writers in this field – one thinks, for instance, of the leaders of the ‘Brighton School’ John Sugden and Alan Tomlinson – class, the Marxist tradition and in particular the work of Antonio Gramsci are central to their analyses (See Sugden & Tomlinson, 2002). Here Gramsci gets a passing reference (Volume Five, pp.22) and no more. The valuable work of Sugden and Tomlinson and many of their contemporaries receives a (invariably fleeting) acknowledgement in Volume Six.

This leads to a further source of disquiet, which is that the whole anthology is written to a formula. All the books are composed of eight chapters with the same headings. Thus, each book contains, in order, a chapter on: ‘The Purpose of Sport’;

‘Sporting Time and Sporting Space’; ‘Products, Training and Technology’; ‘Rules and Order’; ‘Conflict and Accommodation’; ‘Inclusion, Exclusion and Segregation’; ‘Minds, Bodies and Identities’ and ‘Representation’. This struck me as a form of George Ritzer’s (1993) McDonaldization in that each scholar was required to perform the same, specific task, irrespective of time period. There is an unacknowledged politics here. A recurrent ‘Conflict and Accommodation’ section downplays class antagonism, so that it becomes something that happens now and again and might express itself through sport: but class, as Thompson (1966) famously asserted, is not a structure, but a relationship (p.6). Likewise, the mandatory incorporation of a chapter on ‘Inclusion, Exclusion and Segregation’ – a term now pervasive in Western political discourse, where it has to all intents and purposes replaced ‘class’ – facilitates a discussion of social groups who happened to be marginalised and, perhaps, used sport to combat this marginalisation: women, black people, gays, the disabled are all mentioned in this regard in Volume Six but the structure of the book compels them to become rushed, uncontextualized items in a helter-skelter, endlessly fragmented narrative.

Each section is broken down into brief subsections (or bite-sized chunks), often only a page or two long: for example, opening Volume Six at random, in the ‘Conflict and Accommodation’ section ‘PLAYING AND WATCHING’ (one and a half pages) rapidly makes way for ‘SPORTING RIVALS, SPORTING FRIENDS’ (three pages, including two illustrations), to be followed, hurriedly, by ‘SPORT, UNITY AND COOPERATION’ (one page). To be sure, as I have noted, an impressive array of relevant books, articles and authors are mentioned and Volume Six, in particular, is a masterpiece of compression in this regard, but the chosen format lends a flatness to the various narratives and conveys a sense that what has been achieved here is nothing so much a set of beautifully fashioned sport encyclopaedias, which say a little bit about almost everything.

Finally, while, of the eight editorially designated streams I’d be inclined to say the ‘Representation’ scores the highest, given the dedication (here and throughout the anthology) to the visual, I felt here lay probably the greatest irony of all. The term ‘cultural turn’ is widely associated with postmodernism and, while many of us are understandably loath to treat with postmodernism at a level of theory, we do nevertheless recognise the importance and usefulness of seeing contemporary Western society as ‘postmodern’, with its emphasis on service industries, pervasive media, disregard for the distinction between high and low culture, and so on. Much sport long since became a global media spectacle within a corporate capitalist nexus and the Olympics, the World Cup and the English Premier League are all, obvious examples here. But there is scant acknowledgement of this. Volume Six takes the ‘Modern Age’ right up to the present day, the word ‘postmodernism’ does not appear in the index (nor does ‘post-industrial’) and these themes are simply touched on (like everything else) here and there. ‘GLOBALISATION’ has two pages in one place and two in another. ‘THE IMPACT OF MODERN MEDIA AND CONSUMERISM’ receives a little over two pages in the chapter on ‘SPORTING TIME AND SPORTING SPACE’. And so on.

This is a book, then, in which to seek the who, what, when, where and under what arrangements in the history of sport. There are lots of interesting information

– tantalisingly rendered almost wholly in snatches - and a plethora of often stunning images to this effect. But for the ‘why’ and for a more critical analysis it might be better to look elsewhere. A good place to start would, I suggest, be with *Sport in Capitalist Society* by Collins (2013), one of very best critical historians of sport, whose work, like so much else, receives only the odd passing reference here.

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