Sport & Modernity

RICHARD GRUNEAU

"Rick Gruneau is the best theorist and analyst of sports writing today or yesterday; and probably will be tomorrow as well. *Sport and Modernity* is as sophisticated theoretically and as rich empirically as it is pleasing to read. A landmark."

Toby Miller, University of California, Riverside

"With the publication of the brilliant *Sport and Modernity,* Richard Gruneau has not only produced a new way of looking at sport but, more importantly, has offered us a radical rereading of the origins and project of modernity itself and in so doing confirms his position as Canada's leading social theorist and cultural historian of sport."

Ben Carrington, University of Southern California

This important new book from one of the world's leading sociologists of sport weaves together social theory, history and political economy to provide a highly original analysis of the complex relationship between sport and modernity.

Incorporating a powerful set of theoretical insights from traditions and thinkers ranging from classical Marxism and the Frankfurt School to Foucault and Bourdieu, Gruneau analyzes the emergence of "sport" as a distinctive field of practice in western societies. Examining subjects including the legacy of Greek and Roman antiquity, representations of sport in nineteenth-century England, Nazism, and modern "mega-events" such as the Olympics and the World Cup, he seeks to show how sport developed into an arena which articulated competing understandings of the kinds of people, bodies and practices best suited to the modern western world.

This book thereby explores with brio and sophistication how the ever-changing economic, social, and political relations of modernity have been produced and reproduced, and sometimes also opposed and escaped, through sport, from the Enlightenment to the rise of neoliberalism, as well as examining how the study of exercise, athletics, the body, and the spectacle of sport can deepen our understanding of the nature of modernity. It will be essential reading for students and scholars of the sociology and history of sport, sociology of culture, cultural history, and cultural studies.

Richard Gruneau is Professor of Communication at Simon Fraser University.

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Sport and Modernity

For Shelley, Dani, Char, Jesse, and Martin

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Bowen Island, 2017

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INTRODUCTION

In this book, I argue that the concepts "sport" and "modernity" share a roughly similar history. Both are conceptual abstractions, invented, debated, and refined between the seventeenth and twentieth centuries by upper- and middle-class individuals in Europe and the Americas. My goal is to provide a historical sociology of the making of these abstractions as well as of the competing narratives, struggles, ideologies, and changing practices associated with them. To narrow this very broad agenda, the book is loosely organized into snapshots of five moments in western history where sport and modernity can be conceptually intertwined: (1) the way ancient discourses, practices, and debates about athletics, body imagery, and spectacle selectively played a role in the making of modernity; (2) how sport became conceived as an autonomous "object" of modernity and as a distinctive field of practice within it; (3) how, along with international exhibitions, international sporting spectacles developed as part of the "staging" of modernity; (4) how sport emerged both as a " project" of modernity and of the critique of modernity; (5) how international sporting spectacles came to reference competing views of "modernization" and became significant features of "global" capitalist modernity – often resulting in increasing social and economic polarization in host cities and nations.

The study of sport and modernity is complicated by the fact that both terms have complex genealogies, multiple meanings, and contested histories. Some classical historians have argued that linguistic precedents for the word "sport" can even be found in Mediterranean antiquity, although this is not the majority view.[1] Most etymologies of the word "sport" trace its ancestry to a Latin root, *portare*, meaning to carry or to bear, and more specifically to *deportare*, to

carry away. The Latin root is evident in medieval French in the verb *porter*, to carry, and in the verb *desporter*, to carry or move from one place to another, to transport, or to divert or distract. The French word *desporter* resembles the medieval English word "disport," which was initially interpreted as the act of "carrying oneself in a different direction from that of one's ordinary business."[2] Disport thus connoted distraction in the pursuit of amusement, pleasure, or frolic. The actual word *sport* is evident in medieval English as early as the fourteenth century, with an initial emphasis on distracting amusements (by carrying the participant away from more serious daily tasks).

However, virtually from the outset meanings of the word evolved in multiple directions, referencing certain gaming practices and popular amusements, especially the field "sports" of the English upper classes, as well as a number of different social behaviors (e.g. the "sporting" behaviors of the betting gentleman; "sport" as a form of healthy exercise; being a good "sport;" making "sport" of something or somebody; wearing or "sporting" an item of clothing). By the early twentieth century, the word "sport" was emerging as a more coherent, but contested, category whose description often involved comparisons to (and contrast with) seemingly related practices such as play, games, leisure, and amusements.[3] Within three decades of the end of World War II, attempts to classify sport as a cultural practice with unique characteristics were widely evident in disciplines as diverse as philosophy, history, sociology, and psychology.[4] A notable concern for delineating sport as a distinctive category of analysis and evaluation continues in the present day. To cite just one of many examples, the classical historian Thomas Scanlon has recently argued that "sport" is a "culturally relative but universally present phenomenon, in local species difficult to define but in genus easy to recognize."[5] He goes on to cite his historian colleague Donald Kyle, who defines the genus – the overarching category – of *sport* as "public physical activities, especially those with competitive elements, pursued for victory and demonstration of excellence."[6]

Physical exercise and training regimes, ritualized games, and physical contests of varying types have been found in cultures around the world for as long as humans have kept records. Many cultures have also had important traditions of disciplinary knowledge in areas such as medicine, military training, and pedagogy, and have promoted a variety of physical training and dietary regimens. Medieval and Renaissance European scholars inherited and reinterpreted ideas about health and physical exercise from Greco-Roman thinkers,

Semitic, and Asian sources, as well as a variety of games and physical contests from the early Christian and Islamic worlds. Later European writers also resynthesized Hellenistic and Roman traditions of discussion and debate about the utility and morality of athletic contests and public spectacles, including considerations of their relations to commerce, culture, and politics. A number of these ideas were spread through colonial networks and influenced in turn by local customs and interpretations.

It took a unique conjuncture of events and social conditions in Europe and North America during the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries to prompt an interest among physical educators, philosophers, sociologists, and historians in defining sport and classifying its apparent characteristics. This project of definition and classification does not appear to have a decisive presence in European thought before the mid-1800s. For example, there is no entry for the word "sport" in the legendary *Encyclopedia* prepared in France by Denis Diderot and Jean le Rond d'Alembert in 1751–2. There are numerous references in the *Encyclopedia* to words that are often used today in association with the word "sport," such as "leisure," "pleasure," "games," "feasts," and "festivals," including occasional references to the Greek Olympics in entries pertaining to the "religion of the Greeks and Romans."[7] There are also references to individual activities that most people today would view as falling under the ambit of sport, such as athletics, gymnastics, pugilism, wrestling, hunting, and foot races.

Given their commitment to create a "universal encyclopedia," why didn't Diderot and D'Alembert commission a generic entry for sport? The obvious answer is sport was seen to be an English word and therefore outside of the linguistic reach of the *Encyclopedia*. There are no readily identifiable references to sport in French writing until the early nineteenth century. Moreover, even though the word was used in the title of a periodical magazine, *Le Sport*, as early as 1851, it was used inexactly, mostly with reference to activities associated with leisure and distraction. The first reference to "sport" in a French encyclopedia does not occur until 1872, where it is defined as an "English word to designate all outdoor exercise, such as horse racing, canoeing, hunting, fishing, archery, gymnastics, etc."[8] In Germany, as Jon Hughes points out, the word "sport" was not widely used until the late Wilhelmine era and tended to be "reserved for competitive Anglo-Saxon disciplines," such as boxing, athletics, and team games that tended to emphasize individual performance and quantifiable results. This was in contrast to *Leibesübungen*, a term that encompassed "Turner" expressive gymnastics and dance.[9]

Still, I think there is something else operating here beyond the perceived Englishness of the word. The absence of a reference to sport in Diderot and D'Alembert's *Encyclopedia*, or its restricted usage in Wilhelmine Germany, suggests that European intellectuals before the late nineteenth century did not yet have an agreed upon *single* category to describe, linguistically unify, and universalize a field of common qualities associated with physical exercise, game-contests, agonistic spectacles, or leisure pastimes. In this abstract and omnibus sense, sport had yet to be invented. In Pierre Bourdieu's phrase, it had yet to emerge "as its own object."[10] The actual linguistic sign used here is not the relevant issue. The *object* Bourdieu refers to might well have been called something other than sport. The key point is the emergence of an inclusive classificatory term as a conceptual "thing" whose meaning and content were meant to describe a distinctive field of practice. I shall argue later in this book that it was a very short step from the invention of sport as its own object to the argument that the object of sport had certain *inherent* properties or qualities. This initiated a struggle of sorts to assert *what* those properties and qualities are, or what they *should* be.

There can be little doubt that formal or operational definitions of sport as a distinctive area of human practice have enabled useful comparative discussion and evaluation. For example, like many other similar recent attempts at definition and classification, Scanlon's assertions noted above and Kyle's definition share the virtue of providing conceptual rigor to the study of very complex phenomena. Nonetheless, *any* formal definition of sport invites discussion about what it includes and what it leaves out. The beast hunts of Roman antiquity, and many of the "blood sports" of medieval Europe, such as ratting, bear baiting, or dog fighting, do not fit easily into Kyle's definition without stretching our understanding of concepts such as "physical activities" and the "demonstration of excellence" so broadly that they become analytically useless. Similarly, the concepts *species* and *genus* that Scanlon uses have the effect of constructing a falsely imagined analytical standpoint: an imagined "view from nowhere" closely linked to the empiricist dream of identifying concrete historical objects to be analyzed, in E. H. Carr's famous analogy, "like fish on the fishmonger's slab."[11]

Carr raises a major concern about analytic categories created in the present, but treated as if they were actually existing social objects; that is, the tendency to be insufficiently reflexive about the social and historical dynamics involved in their constitution. One of Karl Marx's most insightful observations was to note how the supposedly