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Evolving Modern Sport

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Much as some sports historians might fear that the field has been taken over, or is under assault from, Theorists drawing on other disciplines (with a dreaded proper noun status), as practitioners we have a tendency to fail to develop or even employ endogenous theory. As Matt Taylor has recently and justly noted, more often than not academic sports history is about something other than sport itself: it is often used to explore and elaborate non-sport-specific social and cultural questions.[1] What is more, the field has a tendency to leave the study of the basic units of sport organisation, the clubs, to the antiquarians, perhaps fearing a charge of antiquarianism itself.

There are some notable exceptions to this tendency: Colin Tatz and Brian Stoddart's history of the Royal Sydney Golf Club stands out.[2] For the most part, however, sports clubs have been treated as axiomatic – they have become a given of modern sport, and seem to be treated much like the axioms of algebra. The risk to the sub-discipline is that just as algebra's axioms do not stand up to critical enquiry (on a curved surface, the shortest distance between two points is not a straight line), sports history may also be built on a foundation of sand. Perhaps the major gap in our body of knowledge is caused by the paucity of good historical material about the organisations of sport at levels below national bodies.

The second major lacuna in sport history is comparative study. For the most part, the field is locked in a national framework. Even when exploring apparently comparative cases such as imperial sport, the focus tends to be within rather than between the British or the French or the American or any other empire. Again, it is the presence of some notable exceptions that makes clear how poor much of the field's 'comparative' work really is: John Hoberman's theory of Olympic internationalism, for instance.[3]

For these reasons, if nothing else, Szymanski's attempt to theorise the emergence of the sports club in Britain, France, the USA, & Germany is more than welcome. In grounding this analysis in the often observed but seldom-invoked-in-sports-history notion of the emergence of associationalism, Szymanski has challenged the field to more firmly locate the emergence of the infrastructure of modern sport in socio-cultural tendencies in post-European Enlightenment Europe other than the tendency to industrialisation. As a number of scholars have noted, we cannot realistically grasp

eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Britain without engaging with the emergence and power of the drive to associationalism: quite simply, the British formed clubs.[4] Associationalism is a slippery beast, especially when it is deployed alongside an economic theory of club formation that presumes that actors make rational economic choices. Szymanski's model, useful as it is, needs significant refinement if it is to demonstrate greater explanatory power: this is a theory of sports history grounded in economic theory that is in need of either some materialism or some economism or both, a much more subtle grasp of civil society, and a theory of class. Szymanski's analysis is a valuable contribution to, and perhaps creator of, a debate: in being so it takes on a sacrificial status as something later analysts can criticise and develop. In pointing to some the gaps and different interpretations, this is an attempt to chart some of the possible contours of that debate.

Szymanski seems to be engaging is a search for an origin moment of sports clubs rather than either a process of social struggle and conflict, or a serendipitous confluence of events. Part of the problem with this approach lies in the notion of 'modern', and another part in the need for a more careful grasp of the cultural politics of sports networks. At note 14 (p4), Szymanski "locates the origin of English sports in eighteenth-century associativity rather than nineteenth-century industrialisation", and in doing so places himself firmly in league with Huizinga. This seems similar to what both Dipesh Chakrabarty and Meghan Morris have called a quest for an 'emblematic' or 'epistemic' singularity – one thing therefore one origin.[5] Emblematic and epistemic singularities are neat, but seldom sufficiently illuminating, and often obfuscatory. The problem is that this approach does not seem to recognise first the changes in or different character of the clubs doing modern sports that were formed during the eighteenth-century and those sports that modernised during the nineteenth-century era of factory capitalism, or second the different relationships between those sports' clubs. Whereas Szymanski is correct to treat associationalism as an abstract concept deployed across the ages and places, he seems in places to be abstracting clubs. Although his empirical evidence points to difference in the British and USA cases, his French and German evidence lacks the same sort of detail.

The first aspect of the argument that needs more development is the constitution and role of civil society in the states Szymanski addresses. The institutional function of 'modern' governing bodies, be they national or not, sits uncomfortably in the model. The key difference is that these governing bodies and clubs fulfil different functions. Clubs are the quotidian site of sports practice, the banal institutionalisation of the

practice community, and therefore the associationalist model works well; governing bodies however exist to make rules and manage the infrastructure of competition – that is, to regulate relations between clubs. They are a form of meta-club. Szymanski, however, tries to apply a voluntarist model of associationalism both to governing bodies that are a single club that has acquired the status of law-giver – such as the Jockey Club, the Marylebone Cricket Club, and Royal and Ancient Golf Club at St Andrews – and to later governing bodies that were federations of clubs such as the Football Association or the Rugby Football Union. The football codes are significant in that they illustrate effectively the differences caused by the relations within sports practice communities: Szymanski's sidelining of them does not help his argument. Unlike the cricket, horseracing and golf where individual clubs became accepted as the rule makers, in later 'modernised' sports such as the football codes there was not a reliance on a voluntary acquiescence to a single law-giving club, but membership of a separately constituted governing body – although in some cases this was a voluntaristic association of voluntaristic associations. On [p 35] Szymanski states that "governing bodies can be seen as a kind of club of clubs": this is so, but the situation is very different when the accepted governing body (such as the MCC, the Royal and Ancient, or the Jockey Club) is also an association of individuals organising sports events on the same basis as all the other clubs.

The problem in emphasising voluntary associationalism is that according to Szymanski the constituent clubs of these nineteenth-century governing bodies have no legal personality. This causes insoluble problems for governing bodies disciplinary functions, and makes the rule-making role of the MCC, the Jockey Club and the Royal and Ancient different from that of the FA or the RFU, because acquiescence by a voluntary association to a decision of another is constitutionally different from the acquiescence of a voluntarist association to a federation of clubs determining and enforcing rules. This difference becomes even more pronounced when these federations refer to each others rules as influencing the conduct of their practice communities, as did, for instance, the Amateur Athletic Association or the Amateur Rowing Association in their rules concerning professionalism during the 1880s.

The differences between these types of governing bodies are significant, and reveal a different political and cultural dynamic within the practice communities of sports. Whereas the effect might have been the same, the acquiescence of the London (Cricket) Club to a rule determination by the MCC was, in cultural and political terms, very different from the acquiescence of the Royal Engineers Football Club to a rule

decision after a vote within the Football Association, even if the FA had been dominated by a single club, which often got what it wanted. This blurring of difference seems to be a product of Szymanski's emphasis on voluntarism and economic rationality.

In this discussion of clubs, there is insufficient consideration of the significance of civil society in Britain. British civil society with its grounding in the growing eighteenth- and nineteenth-century social-cultural relations of capitalism is a paradoxical thing.[6] The emphasis on Locke's social contract and community of free association is useful, and provides a solid philosophical base for exploring English/British ideologies, and a helpful foil to the invocation of Rousseau in the discussion of French physical education. In exploring the clubs that did emerge, Szymanski's assertion of voluntarism is flawed in two ways. The first is his assumption that an economic theory of clubs can be voluntarist and grounded in rational economic decisions by club members, prospective or actual: this assumption is implicit, not explicit, in his analysis. A more serious problem is his assertion of the market as a form of voluntary association. As capitalist social and economic relations embedded in the UK from the later portion of the eighteenth- to the middle of the nineteenth-centuries market associations became essential for survival: they were compulsory. The market as the compulsory mediator of social relations may have been the fundamental change British socio-cultural relations from the latter eighteenth- until the end of the nineteenth-centuries. It is the key change resulting from the embedding of capitalism.

This assertion of market voluntarism points to the second gap in Szymanski's analysis: class. An associationalist model of sports history must attend to at least three factors. First, it must note the function of conspicuous consumption in bourgeois/middle class sports. Second, it must note the different roles that various bourgeois fractions seem to perform. Third, it must ask the question about the extent to which clubs functioned as a mechanism of emerging class consciousness. In particular, it must explore the extent to which the bourgeoisie, as the most class conscious group in capitalism, deployed 'clubs' as an instrument of class consciousness. An economic theory of clubs is insufficient if it does not also address these political economic questions.

The role of sport in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century bourgeois masculine cultures was contradictory. Here were groups that prioritised work, that were resolutely materialistic in the worldviews, despite the links between non-conformist Christianity

and new economic forces, but who were willing to spend considerable amounts of time engaging in unproductive social activities, such as sport. One way of making sense of this contradiction is to see sport for these groups as a form of conspicuous consumption; as a way of saying the 'I am so well off that I can afford spend a day playing golf instead of earning money'. This conspicuous consumption suggests a different basis for working class associations and middle class associations. The available evidence suggests that working class associations were based in principles of mutuality, such as the insurance, funeral and other schemes that were linked to or provided the basis for trades unions. Middle class clubs however seem to be more consumption oriented than focussed on maintaining a commonwealth or the commons. That is, these middle class clubs seem to presume a degree of disposable resource – time and money – whereas working class 'clubs' seek to make provision in the absence of disposable resources. It seems then that working class leisure as 'sport' was associated with other social activities; middle class leisure as sport is usually seen as an athletic end in itself. Szymanski challenges the usual interpretation of this difference – that is, that working class leisure as sport was grounded in an attempt to build new forms of community where the effect of a socio-economic dynamic towards industrialisation and urbanisation was a drive away from community towards society – by disputing the foundations of sports organisations in industrialism.

At the centre of the problem with this approach is that it seems to treat the late eighteenth- and the mid nineteenth-centuries as the same, or at least similar. They were not. Towards the end of the eighteenth century the stronghold of embedded capitalist social relations was in the countryside, where changes in agriculture and land-holding practices were forcing increasing numbers of people either off farms or into market relations (for the poor there was little that was voluntary about this) whereas by the mid to late nineteenth-century capitalist social relations had become more extensively embedded, and more importantly with it a newly powerful middle class had grown in size, confidence, and influence.[7] Association with and through the market became increasingly less voluntary and less voluntarist as these capitalist social relations developed, and as the new middle class grew. The new middle class came into being as social relations – Weber's society rather than community – became more coercive, and less free, and as market relations became almost universally compulsory, the efforts of Robert Owen and other utopians and communalists notwithstanding.[8]

This new class was not monolithic, but diverse. Arguably, the northern industrial bourgeoisie had a different relationship to the communities in which they lived than did the southern industrial or financial bourgeoisie. Not only does Szymanski not adequately point to the middle class character of his voluntaristically associating actors, he also glosses the different fractions of the middle class. Whatever bourgeois fraction was at work at play, however, by the latter nineteenth-century their social objective was, amongst other things, to distinguish themselves from the disreputable aristocracy, who in many other ways they sought to emulate, and the working class, from whence many of the new bourgeoisie had come.

That is to say that the associationalism of the bourgeoisie may be read as a vital weapon in the formation of its class consciousness. It is little wonder then that the older sports – cricket, racing and golf – had as their law-giving institutions individual clubs that were dominated by men of the aristocracy, while 'modern' sports, organised and codified in the mid to late nineteenth-century had, as their law-giving institutions, apparently more democratically organised confederations of clubs dominated by various fractions of the newly powerful bourgeoisie.

It may be crude periodisation, but it was broadly the case that whereas the eighteenth-century saw the regularisation of the pastimes of the aristocracy, the nineteenth-century saw the adaptation of popular games, recreations and pastimes into the sports of the new classes of capitalism. In a comparative view, a key issue is not the genesis of sports, but the two-fold dynamic that saw sport, first, modernised in England, and, second, English modernisations spread through-out the world and articulate to other indigenous sport and body culture practices. Szymanski accepts the first part of this dynamic, and suggests following Peter Burke [on p 12] that modernisation was intimately linked to privatisation by the aristocracy and some middle class fractions in the form of a withdrawal to the 'private sphere'. Leaving aside the dubiousness of the concept of the private sphere, the emphasis on clubs makes this claim problematic in that this 'private sphere' was becoming regulated by clubs as they took on the role of capitalist civil society. This changing status of clubs means that the institutions that populate this model of sports history sit at the interstices of the private and the public.

These class dynamics, and the concurrence of English and British nation-building, mean that Szymanski's case that French (and by implication German) associationalism was different from British because the French clubs acted in

interests of the state while the British and USA clubs were independent, voluntaristic, and not explicitly politicised risks misreading British associationalism by misreading its classed character. The key issue here seems to be that of the change interests of those leading, forming, or advocating these sporting and other cultural associations. The French interests seem to be explicitly those of an emerging culturally unified nation so there was an explicit emphasis on building a new entity, while English middle class associations (that is, the new sports groups, not the MCC, R&A or Jockey Club) were seeking to extend capitalist social relations with discourses of competition, attained status, and cultural dynamism all mediated by the compulsion of the market.[9] The difference here is not that groups forming clubs had similar change-objectives (new and improved social relations) but in the distinctions between absolutist traditions – as Szymanski notes – and in the classed character of those groups, which he does not note. These classed characteristics mean that arguably, de Coubertain's Union des Sociétés Françaises de Sports Athlétiques was more like the Jockey Club, the MCC, or the Royal and Ancient nexus than it was like the FA, the RFU, or the AAA. The central issue here is the differences in character of national civil societies, which is in turn linked to the constitution and patterns of socio-cultural change.

Questions posed about the articulation of clubs to civil society, state and nation go on to open up further provocative questions. The emphasis on absolutism in France and Germany poses challenging constitutional questions about the status and significance of civil society, in addition to those that emerge from the differences in these absolutisms.[10] Whereas the tradition of absolutism changes the civil society-state dynamic, reading through a classed lens there is little suggest that the French and German associations, as little more than 'focus-group(s) for the status quo' [p23], were significantly different from many of England's middle and upper class associations. Where a difference can be discerned is that Britain's deepening capitalist social relations and increasing compulsion of the market disrupted the status quo through the latter eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. By the mid-nineteenth-century a newly powerful social class – the bourgeoisie – was forming sports clubs and supra-club institutions.

It is not in an assessment of Britain, but of the German evidence, that points to a need to re-evaluate the nation-building elements of Szymanski's case. Much of the evidence concerning the early development of Turnverein draws on evidence from within different state structures – the long-term merging of principalities to create

Germany, and the Austrian Empire. In citing the Karlsbad decrees [p 28] Szymanski points to the links and differences between the German states and Austria. These differences are vital. While it is true that Turnverein were nationalist and incorporated elements, for instance, of anti-semitism, their role in the nationalist politics of different 'German' polities is crucial. Any such analysis must consider the deep differences of nation-building from within a conglomerate of disparate states (as in the emerging Prussian-based Germany) and from 'nations' incorporated within a larger Empire (Austria). In the German states it may be that clubs were intimately associated with the socio-cultural and political establishments. In the Austrian Empire, there is good evidence that they opposed the imperial order. For instance, had Szymanski looked at Turnverein in comparison to Sokol in Bohemia and Moravia he may have found a different associationalist dynamic and been less inclined to see associations (even when authorised by the state) as servants of the status quo.[11] There is some evidence, for instance, that the forces of the status quo actively intervened to prevent dissention: in the Bohemian town of Budweis/Budějovice an attempt in 1865 by a German-speaking group of gymnasts to form a volunteer fire brigade was over-ruled by the mayor who insisted that the brigade be made up of both Turnverein and Sokol members.[12]

Szymanski's challenge to sports historians is significant, is profound, and is one that must be addressed. His failure to adequately address class, his simplification of the problematic dynamics of civil society, and his tendency to an ahistorical view of that cluster of activities at the interstices of the public and the private do not negate the importance of the question. How do we account for sports clubs? What form do they take and why? How do these clubs fit within a broader social tendency towards associationalism? Academic sports history has not been all that good a dealing with these questions – Szymanski is right to challenge us to do so. It is a challenge that demands a serious response.

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[1] Taylor, Matt. *The Leaguers: The Making of Professional Football in England, 1900-1939* (Liverpool, Liverpool University Press, 2005).
[2] Tatz, Colin & Brian Stoddart, *The Royal Sydney Golf Club: The First Hundred Years* (Sydney, Allen & Unwin, 1993).
[3] John Hoberman, 'Toward a Theory of Olympic Internationalism' *Journal of Sport History* 22.1 (Spring, 1995): 1-37.
[4] R J Morris, 'Clubs, Societies and Associations' in *The Cambridge Social History of Britain, 1750-1950, Volume 3: Social Agencies and Institutions* ed. F M L Thompson (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1992), 395-443.

[5] Meaghan Morris, *Too Soon Too Late: History in Popular Culture* (Indiana, Indiana University Press, 1998, 97-100.
[6] Ellen Meiksins Wood, 'The Uses and Abuses of 'Civil Society'' *Socialist Register 1990* ed. Leo Panitch (London, Merlin Press), 60-84.
[7] Robert Brenner, 'The Origins of Capitalist Development: A Critique of Neo-Smithian Marxism' *New Left Review*, I/104 (July-August 1977): 25-92; Robert Brenner, 'Agrarian Class Structure and Economic Development in Pre-Industrial Europe' *Past and Present* 70 (Feb., 1976): 30-75.
[8] Gregory Claeys, *Machinery, Money and the Millennium: From Moral Economy to Socialism, 1815-1860* (Princeton, Princeton UP. 1987); Taylor, Barbara, *Eve and the New Jerusalem; Socialism and Feminism in the Nineteenth Century* (London, Virago. 1983).
[9] Eugene Weber, *Peasants Into Frenchmen: The Modernisation of Rural France 1870-1914* (Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1976); Ellen Meiksins Wood, *The Origin of Capitalism: A Longer View* (London, Verso. 2002); John Hargreaves, *Sport, Power and Culture: A Social and Historical Analysis of Popular Sports in Britain* (Cambridge, Polity Press, 1986).
[10] The reliance on absolutism needs to be qualified. It may be better to think of a series of similar but different absolutisms. Although it may be over thirty years since he first made the case, Anderson has pointed to significant differences in European absolutisms. Perry Anderson, *Lineages of the Absolutist State* (London, New Left Books, 1974).
[11] Claire Nolte, *The Sokol in the Czech Lands to 1914: Training for the Nation* (Basingstoke, Palgrave, 2002).
[12] Jeremy King, Jeremy, *Budweisers into Czechs and Germans* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2002).