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Sport and Modernity (Review)

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Sport and Modernity, by Richard Gruneau. Cambridge, UK and Medford, MA: Polity Press. 2017. 246 pp.
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Already a fixture in the sociology of sport, Richard Gruneau has written another important and challenging book in this field; this time about the historically contested meanings of sport and modernity. *Sport and Modernity* is cleverly organized around a series of somewhat disconnected inquiries into the role that athletics or “sport-like” things have played in societies as diverse as classical Greece and Rome, on the one hand, and our contemporary globalized world, on the other. The unifying theme is Gruneau’s attempt to understand the appearances of these two “conceptual abstractions” (p. 1) -- sport and modernity -- at key moments in history. Along the way, we are treated to Gruneau’s episodic and insightful forays into class struggle, the dynamics of political domination, and the uses of sociological theory.

The five chapters of the book cover broad swaths of western history and each is a compelling study on its own. While the first chapter focuses on Greco-Roman antiquity, the next four chapters deal with various aspects of the spread of sport and modernity from the seventeenth century to the present.

The first chapter links Greco-Roman athletic practices, body cultures, and spectacles to ideologies that come to inform our notions of modernity. Though he draws no direct connection between Greco-Roman athletics and modern sport, there were aspects of Greco-Roman society that were progenitors of modern sport and modernity. Debates about sport and athletes – which continue to the present day – were evident in ancient Greece: Plato considered athletic training a “narrow and monomaniacal pursuit that produces men with hard characters and little capacity for independent thought” (p. 31). Many of the key elements of modern sports first come to light during the Roman Empire through the development of gladiatorial combat. Markers that we now take for granted in sports competitions are here: matching sizes of combatants and other means of creating fair fights among equals; keeping records of past competitions; and the democratization of spectatorship. Further, the emergence of a “rational hygienic culture” (p.58), Gruneau suggests, is an important indicator of modernity, insofar as it universalized a conception of self that attempted to deny the vast gender, class, and power differences that were obvious in the society.

Gruneau then examines the development in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries of English sport, which has long been seen as a key locus for the development of sport “as its own object” as well as a critical moment in the establishment of “modernity.” In this chapter, Gruneau demonstrates how sport became connected with what he calls the “project” of modernity especially as it became associated with progress. And progress was linked to making clear distinctions between “high” and “low” culture or between “good” (male) and “bad” (female) athletic bodies. Though he draws clear connections between the creation of institutions focused on the health of the social body (say, hospitals and schools) and the development of “gentlemanly athleticism,” Gruneau is adamant that these associations are

indirect and mediated by class and gender relations. It was fascinating to read about the challenge in football of making it clear that fairness depended on the son of a bottle merchant being able to tackle the son of a lord. Ultimately, Gruneau insists that the production of a separate sports field in England was part and parcel of “the social production of English capitalist and colonial modernity from the seventeenth through the early twentieth centuries” (p. 95).

The next three chapters deal with different “stagings” of sport and modernity. Gruneau discusses the similarities among the forces behind international exhibitions, national industrial expositions, World’s Fairs, and the modern Olympics. In very different ways and toward different ends, Gruneau uses these three chapters to highlight the idea of modernity as progress and how nations compete in a kind of modernity sweepstakes within and across many domains. Throughout, Gruneau makes clear that these expressions (both materially and ideologically) of modernity are rent by class, gender, race, and global contradictions. He argues quite forcefully that “international expositions revealed a powerful ideological tendency to stage modernity as *a spectacle of binary division, of past versus present, primitive versus modern, the exotic versus rational, and uncivilized versus civilized*” (p. 115). And these international public stagings are occurring on sports fields, as well.

It is difficult to convey in a short review Gruneau’s narrative command of topics ranging from Pierre de Coubertin’s (originator of the modern Olympics) notions of what the staging of an international Olympics could and should be to how current sports mega-events systematically reinforce patterns of slum creation and maintenance. Along the way, we are also treated to Gruneau’s overview of the Frankfurt School’s engagement with sport. Not only does he provide a brilliant ten point summary of the main ideas of the Frankfurt School’s critical theory of sport but he discusses what aspects have been superseded and what aspects should still be retained for their critical edge. One important takeaway from this overview is the Frankfurt school’s focus on domination and ideology. Gruneau explains that critical theory considered sport as a particularly seductive cultural form as it engaged in highly disciplined, controlled, aggressive, even brutal practices “disguised by the rhetorics of play, fairness, and meaningful leisure” (p. 151). Though many ultimately rejected critical theory because of its emphasis on negation which became associated with pessimism, Gruneau hopes that sociologists can retain its dual focus on critiquing modern sports and culture *as well as* capitalist social relations. The dual emphasis would reinforce that theory should be used – as Marx’s eleventh thesis suggests -- to both analyze *and change* the world.

The last chapter of the book focuses on the linkages among sport, development, and slums. Gruneau takes on two major topics here: the dynamics of projects dedicated to sport, development, and peace; and the connections between sporting mega-events, on the one hand, and social exclusion, unrest, and corruption, on the other. By this point in the book, the reader expects a broad and deep consideration of the relevant theoretical landscape. Gruneau provides a serious discussion of theories of capitalist development and of modernization, highlighting along the way dependency theory, critical geography, and versions of postcolonial theory. Somewhat surprisingly given his comprehensive theoretical overview, his discussion of modernization theory doesn’t include its links to Parsonsian theory and Inkeles’ extensions of it. This represents a missed opportunity to highlight the precise sources of the explicit assumptions that underlie the ideological claims that are made about some sport/development projects and sport mega-events. Nevertheless, Gruneau constructs a compelling argument about how sport mega-events and urban development lead to both gentrification and slum expansion. Further, he suggests that these dynamics are virtually the same as those that surrounded the World’s Fairs.

Gruneau's overall argument is that, rather than creating a more inclusive and sustainable world, these developments in sport and expressions of modernity have, in the context of global capitalist social relations, increased global poverty.

Though this book presents a wide-ranging, informative, and fairly convincing case that sport and modernity were virtually twin-born, the complexity and wide historical range of the argument would have benefitted from a concluding chapter tying together its various elements. Gruneau's highlighting of the ways that cultural change in the context of capitalist development was strongly associated with announcing, naming, and staging particular inventions or expressions of "progress" is a major contribution to our knowledge. Though he has provided the groundwork for other scholars to do so, I hope that Gruneau decides to write an analytical summary of his contributions in this book so that we may once again benefit from and revel in his lively and deep thinking.