

## Commentary

### Freedom and Constraint: The Paradoxes of Play, Games, and Sports<sup>1</sup>

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At some point or another play touches all of us. We play for fun, for fantasy, for excitement. In some cases our play seems spontaneous and freely innovative. In other cases it is more regulated and orderly. Yet, no matter what form our play takes, there is a sense in which it always appears to transcend the practical affairs of everyday life. In play we seem to be absorbed in a reality that has its own limits of time and space, its own purposes and special emphases. Play allows us to be totally frivolous about important things in our work-centered lives or else completely serious about things that are trivial. In either case, because we so deeply enjoy such freedom, we are frequently prone to celebrate play's expressive spirit and creative autonomy.

There is, of course, a great deal more to human play than expressive freedom, peak experiences or transcendental fantasy. While play certainly has its apparent unreality, its sense of abstract form, the nature and meaning of this form are greatly influenced by different social structural relations and cultural formations. When people organize their play in order to play with or against others they create rules whose expressed purpose is to define standards for playing that are binding on all the players and insulate the activity from the society at large. These rules are not spontaneous individual creations, rather they are cultural products that stem from the collective social experiences of the participants. Thus, while one of the purposes of rules is to separate play from reality, the very act of rule construction has the effect of embedding play deeply in the prevailing logic of social relations and thereby diminishes its autonomy. For this reason, the study of play is haunted by a fundamental paradox. Play gives the impression of being at once both an *independent and spontaneous* aspect of human action or agency and a *dependent and regulated* aspect of it.

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The significance of this paradox becomes more evident if we go on to consider the institutionalized character of so much of what passes for play in modern life. Games and sports, for example, by their very nature as highly-structured institutionally-defined social practices, are frequently so over-regulated and instrumental that they often seem only nominally related to play in its simplest expressive form. We tend to say that games and sports are “played” but the rules, customs, styles and purposes of many of these activities seem almost completely determined by the social and cultural environments that frame them. In some cases, most notably high level international “amateur” or commercial sports, it has often been argued that there is not much of the freedom and creatively expressive character of play left at all.

This relationship between the spontaneous and independent versus the regulated and dependent aspects of play, and those activities that are ostensibly “played” (e.g., games and sports), has attracted the attention of a great many writers and has always confused them. The confusions have been of two sorts. First, the range of human activities that can be classified as “playful” is extremely broad. Involved are activities as diverse as kicking a stray can in the street, singing in the shower, daydreaming, children’s games, community recreation and highly organized competitive sports. The definitional line between “play” and “sport” in these examples is determined by the ways in which social structural and cultural forces have stylized play of certain types in an institutional fashion (i.e. *a* way of playing becomes *the* way of playing), but it is always difficult to know exactly where this line occurs. One may find moments of play in big-time sports, but is it possible to argue that such sports in themselves are inherently playful?

The second set of confusions is even more complex. For all the generality of the themes that are discussed in the social analysis of play, games or sports, many writers have often appeared to be writing about another subject altogether—a subject embedded in the seemingly paradoxical relationships that exist between the autonomous and determined character of play, games and sports but not immediately evident in the terms of discourse that are commonly used in the analysis of these activities. The real subject in question here is the relationship of play, games and sports to the broader problems of freedom and constraint, liberation and domination in human existence.

Consider, as examples of this last point, some of the questions that scholars have raised (not always consciously) in their assessments of the social significance of play, games and sports. Is play an assertive expressive act that involves an attempt to expand one’s personal powers and exercise a form of creative control over an immediate environment or is it nothing more than simple fantasy, an escape from reality? If a free form of individual play is a dramatic culture-creating force, as so many writers seem to assert, does its

organization into social or collective forms introduce such constraints that play loses its free culture-creating capacities and thereby becomes nothing more than a passive mirror of limiting social conditions? To what extent, and under what circumstances is it possible to see sport as a negation of play or, conversely, to see sport as an extension of play's essential character into the broader spheres of institutional life in society? These questions are all ways of asking when and in what ways human beings exercise their energies as conscious historical actors both in and through play, games and sports. The questions also suggest concern about the nature of the social conditions under which specific actions might occur.

In this essay I shall discuss Michael Novak's *The Joy of Sports*, Jean-Marie Brohm's *Sport: A Prison of Measured Time*, and Allen Guttmann's *From Ritual to Record*<sup>2</sup> as three more books which attempt to resolve our confusions over such matters. It can be argued, I believe, that each of these books not only pays a good deal of attention to the nature of sport and its relationships to human play, but that each is also concerned with the significance of these relationships for assessing much deeper questions about human possibilities and their denial under different forms of social organization. Each book also contains a number of tacit assumptions about the degrees to which human beings make history as conscious historical actors or else are the bearers of objective or metaphysical forces and influences. Previous reviewers<sup>3</sup> of the books have provided a valuable service in pointing to the various substantive strengths and weaknesses of the authors' arguments but few attempts have been made to understand and evaluate the central ideological, theoretical and epistemological assumptions which underlie the analyses put forward in each case. It is this latter task that I have chosen as the focus for the discussion which follows.

In *The Joy of Sports* the well-known Catholic theologian and philosopher, Michael Novak, focuses his attention on the metaphorical character of sport in an effort to show sport's deep ties to playfulness, spiritual freedom and the pursuit of meaning in human existence. Sports are much more than amusements or childish fantasies, Novak argues, nor should the emotion and drama that is so intimately associated with sport be dismissed simply as some kind of catharsis or adult escapism. What sports offer us are an ultimate statement about human possibilities. Thus, Novak writes that sports are "true in a way that few things in life are true" (p. xi). They embody a transcendent mythic form, a ritual elaboration of the music of the human spirit that is at once both dramatic and deeply religious.

Now in this era of mass sporting spectacles it has become something of a commonplace to say that sports have taken on the character of a modern religion. In most cases, however, such assertions are advanced cynically as a

tacit condemnation of the excessive secularism of modern life. Yet such views, Novak asserts, are often little more than the residues of a Puritan ethic that overly values labour, rejects play and fails to grasp the significant interconnections between play and the sacred. Art, worship, prayer and civilization itself, Novak tells us, find less fertile soil in the world of work than in play and since sports appear to be nothing more than institutionalized derivations of play, they deserve to be included in any serious discussion of modern religion. Novak then goes on to develop and expand upon this point in a number of lyrical and compelling ruminations on the essential characteristics of sport, its attractions for athletes and fans, and its present problems and future prospects. Included in these ruminations is a good deal of romanticized hagiography that is of little relevance for the serious student of sport. On the other hand, Novak manages to capture the drama and excitement of athletic action in a way that few scholars have, and his work is a rich source of speculative material on the inherently theological nature of the concept of play and on the relationships of play, games and sports to ritual and myth. Much of what Novak has to say on these topics echoes long-standing themes explored by other Catholic writers (notably Johan Huizinga, Josef Pieper and H.S.J. Rahner<sup>4</sup>) who have sought answers to the fundamental paradoxes of play, games and sports by turning to the realm of the sacred.

This emphasis on the sacred is suggestive but it is also extremely limiting. For as stimulating and as compelling as Novak's celebration of sports is, it never breaks completely free from a crude form of theology. Novak asks us, as all theologians do, to accept his organizing assumptions as matters of faith and these assumptions are dominated by the metaphysics of the spiritual. Given this, there is a sense in which *The Joy of Sports* proves to be virtually innocent of sociology or social history. Novak stresses the phenomenal, the subjective, the transcendental, at the expense of an understanding of material social relationships. At the same time, however, while Novak is unwilling to push sports too far into the realms of politics and power, the political implications that can be drawn from many of his arguments are often disturbing.

Consider, as an example, Novak's discussion of how sport, seen as a type of sacred form, relates to human freedom. As humans "play" sports, Novak argues, they liberate themselves from the obsessive seriousness and confusions of everyday life. This spiritual freedom comes from an acceptance of "fixed limits" that give definition to transcendent moments of excellence and precision (see pp. 223-226). But what about social and political freedom—freedom from domination or exploitation? Novak argues that there is little salvation for humans in material life. We are neither born free nor can we ever hope to transform totally the chaotic, violent and exploitative character of social existence. In other words, politics and secular struggles are all the opiates of western societies. Real salvation can only lie in the pursuit of form, in the

transcendence of chaos through a commitment to order and bounded space. The play of our games and sports is an expression of our willingness to submit to these limits.

But surely there is something missing here. By defining the criterion for establishing the connections between sports and human freedom in purely metaphysical terms, Novak underplays the extent to which sports can be understood as historically constituted features of social arrangements whose limits can very well be as repressive as they are liberating. Novak is caught in the idealist metaphysical trap of seeing the essence of social institutions as projections of abstract form—projections that may be blocked or repressed, perhaps, yet projections nonetheless. Thus, while Novak recognizes that much of modern sport is overly commercialized, excessively instrumental, and prone to excesses on a grand scale, he sees these tendencies only as a debasement of the pure form that underlies our playful spirit. As a result, sport as an institution does not require radical reconstruction or transformation, it only requires adjustment, a realignment of form and content. A self-proclaimed follower of Edmund Burke, Novak argues in his concluding comments that while much of the criticism often directed at modern sport rings true, these criticisms only attack the “contents” of culture and not the “form.” Sport is worth saving and reforming and one can do this by introducing checks and balances that will reduce the corruption of sports, its secularization, and its evolution from an institution which provides “moments of sacred time” to one which increasingly offers profane spectacle.

Jean-Marie Brohm would argue that such thinking is little more than sophisticated conservative rhetoric and idealist wishful thinking. The very title of Brohm’s book, *Sport: A Prison of Measured Time*, offers a marked contrast to Novak’s frequent description of sport as an area of human endeavour marked by “moments of sacred time.” Sports are not timeless abstractions, Brohm tells us, and they have very little to do with play or some trans-historical notion of ultimate possibilities. In Brohm’s words: “Such mystical conceptions present sport ahistorically, as a transcendent entity, over and above historical periods and modes of production” (p. 175). Sport is a form of institutionalized social practice that simply mirrors the social conditions which surround it. Indeed, the very existence of institutionalized sports as we currently understand them is tied to the emergence of industrial capitalism as a distinct social formation. If we subject sport to materialist institutional analysis, Brohm continues, we find that the rhetoric which surrounds sport is little more than bourgeois ideology disguised by metaphysics. According to Brohm, sports glorify meritocratic standards of hierarchy and success based on skill, celebrate commercialism, willingly embrace a technocratic frame of reference that subordinates the body to the machine, and present a false view of social progress through the continued assault on the record books. At the same time, sports

ostensibly serve a number of repressive ideological functions: they provide a false sense of escape and thereby act as compensatory mechanisms to alienated existence, they undermine the revolutionary potential of eros by transferring libidinal potential for play into potential for work, and they are symbolically tied to the coercive state and aid in reproducing its legitimacy.

To adopt the style of Brohm's own terminology, *Sport: A Prison of Measured Time* can almost be seen as a "negation" of *The Joy of Sports*. Brohm replaces Novak's emphasis on the transcendent spirit with an emphasis on the material world of productive forces and relations. For these reasons he argues that the type of regulation which defines our modern games and sports does not allow for freedom so much as it allows for the reproduction of the repressive constraints inherent in capitalism and Stalinism. Sport is both a "constraint in itself and a preparation for further constraints," Brohm contends, "since it removes all bodily freedom, all creative spontaneity every aesthetic dimension and every playful impulse" (p. 41). In other words, sports are actually *antithetical* to play and the freedom of expression that play so often represents. In modern sports the athlete becomes a prisoner of social forces which block all access to freedom and spontaneity. And, since the very underlying structure and logic of sport embodies these forces, sport cannot be reformed or cured of its many ills. It has to be rejected in favour of a renewed commitment to playful spontaneity and fun in games.

Almost all of Brohm's arguments in *Sport: A Prison of Measured Time* are powerful, penetrating and greatly overstated. Brohm writes in the quasi-journalistic tradition of revolutionary Neo-Marxism rather than from the stance of the sophisticated Marxist scholar. Accordingly his prime purpose is to demystify, to strip bare and to amplify for easy consumption the fundamental contradictions of modern sport. He notes early in the book that he has deliberately avoided writing dispassionate academic essays; rather his essays are "interventions" into the struggle to transform sport and society. In this way Brohm's work is something of a welcome alternative to the countless uncritical celebrations of sport that have passed for social scientific, historical and philosophical analysis in recent years, and he has gone some lengths toward showing how a Marxist analysis of sport might proceed and how it should be tied to concrete political practice.

Nonetheless, there is a great deal that is analytically troublesome in *Sport: A Prison of Measured Time*. Brohm is generally correct, I believe, in arguing that the institutional shape of modern sports has been contoured by capitalist industrialism and that sports play a role in the reproduction of relations of power and domination in modern life. He also does well to polemicize against a definitional frame of reference that views sport simply as a form of organized play or as an institutionalized derivation of the human play impulse.

Yet, he pushes this line of reasoning much too far. It is one thing to say that sports are historically-constituted institutions and elements of culture that are fundamentally different from play and which have the capacity to aid in legitimating social conditions. It is quite another thing to argue that sport is a completely determined product, a passive mirror, of capitalist productive relations and forces, that sport and play are mutually exclusive, and that the meanings which are attached to sport cannot be anything but socially and ideologically reproductive.

Brohm's greatest weakness is that his entire institutional frame of reference is built upon a mechanistic view which sees cultural formations as straightforward reflections of reality rather than meaningful dramatizations of it. This view not only downplays the reflexive capacities of human beings but also ignores the relative autonomy of cultural expression and the great range in meanings that humans attribute to their social experiences. It is just plain silly to argue for a copy-theory of institutional development and cultural formation which relegates sport to the objectified status of a simple reflection of abstract capitalist categories. It is equally problematic to conclude that sports effectively and successfully socialize their participants with reactionary political views and that through such determinations sports always support the status quo. Sports are active and constitutive features of human experience that must be understood in the context of a struggle over human limits and possibilities and over the appropriation of the rules and resources that define these limits and possibilities. Depending upon their association with divergent interests, the meanings of sports, like all cultural products, have the capacity to be either reproductive or oppositional, repressive or liberating. Yet, in Brohm's work there is little sensitivity to this capacity. For Brohm, capitalism has shaped sport in its own image and those who believe that an interest in sport is compatible in any way with the pursuit of the class struggle are simply falsely conscious dupes.<sup>5</sup>

There is an unfortunate left-wing elitism in such thinking that many people will find unpalatable. Moreover, I suspect that Brohm's polemical simplifications and his uncritical mixing of concepts from different Marxist theoretical traditions will probably have the effect of discouraging support even from those already sympathetic to Marxist analyses of capitalist institutions and cultural formations. It is certainly true that much of what Brohm has to say about sport is not inspired by Marxism so much as the "left-idealism" and cultural criticism of the French student movement to which Brohm belonged in the late 1960's and early 1970's. The current problems with sport appear to lie less with the class domination inherent in capitalist productive relations than with the subordination of individual expressivity and spontaneity to the dehumanizing forces of instrumental reason and technocratic rationality. Brohm's solution to this takes its cue from Marcuse<sup>6</sup> rather than Marx and is

based on a romanticized pursuit of individual freedom expressed through spontaneous play and games. These Marcusian overtones, however, are ironically accompanied by a good deal of crude economism and functionalist thinking. Brohm's attempt in some of the essays to incorporate "structuralist" concepts derived from the work of Louis Althusser and Pierre Bourdieu<sup>7</sup> does little to alleviate this problem. The overall result is a series of dramatic "interventions" that point in the right direction, but also show just how far the Marxist analysis of sport has to go in order to transcend the tired slogans and pat formulae of left-idealism, functionalism and crude materialist determinism.

Criticism of so-called Marxist and Neo-Marxist interpretations of sport occupy a good deal of Allen Guttmann's attention in *From Ritual to Record: The Nature of Modern Sports*. Guttmann acknowledges the existence of many of the problems raised by Marxist and Neo-Marxist analysis of sports, but he is unwilling to reduce the meaning and significance of sport to radical psycho-analytic or economic principles. At the same time, while Guttmann recognizes that the subordination of sporting performances to instrumental reason and technocratic rationality has placed certain limits on human expressivity and spontaneity, he is emphatic in arguing that such limits are not always repressive.

Guttmann begins by arguing that play clearly belongs to the realm of freedom. Play is something that is non-utilitarian and pursued for its own sake. In its most spontaneous forms, it may be as close as humans ever get to pure freedom and unrestrained expressivity. Yet, much of our play is organized and one has to ask how it is possible for play to remain in the realm of freedom once one submits to organization. According to Guttmann, the answer to this question is relatively straightforward. Even the regulated "play" of games and sports remains outside the sphere of necessity and is always free in the sense that it is consciously insulated from real life and is pursued for its own sake. Moreover, the regulations that define the bounded limits of time, space and behaviour in games and sports are actually *necessary* in order to open up the possibility of co-operative action and the freedom to lose oneself in the pursuit of gratuitous difficulty. In organized play, Guttmann asserts, humans voluntarily surrender a portion of their absolute freedom in order to achieve a state of mutual gain. The limits associated with organization do not necessarily constrain, rather they may actually expand choices and possibilities. As formally organized physical contests, sports are more "precisely demarcated" and structured than simple play-forms but this degree of regulation does not necessarily imply that sports are somehow qualitatively different from play. Indeed, according to Guttmann, it is possible to define all sports in abstract universal terms as "playful physical contests."

There are, however, some qualifications to this type of abstract philosophical

classification. Although all sports share in a universal definition, Guttman argues, it must be recognized that the “Gestalt” of modern sports appears in “sharply delineated contrast against the background of primitive, ancient and medieval sports” (p. 15). Sports in earlier days were often closely tied to religious ritual and festivals, were limited by ascriptive standards for involvement that stemmed from class and caste, showed a low degree of formal organization and role-specialization and were generally oriented toward qualitative assessments of the meaning of the sporting experience. By contrast, modern sports have become secular, meritocratic, highly-rational, subject to bureaucratic organization and are increasingly oriented toward record-setting and quantitative assessments of the meaning of the sporting experience.

Such changes, Guttman goes on to suggest, can be credibly viewed from Marxist and Weberian theoretical perspectives. Marxist and Neo-Marxist explanations, however, prove on closer examination to be “unpersuasive” because they overly value economic determinations and because they are more guided by “ideology” than “careful empirical study.” More “congruent with reality” in Guttman’s opinion is a Weberian perspective which emphasizes the growth of a rational scientific world view as the “basic explanatory factor” influencing the nature of modern sport.

Guided by this theoretical and socio-historical framework Guttman moves on to a “series of speculations about what is and what is not unique about American sports” (p. vii). Despite long-standing beliefs about “American exceptionalism,” Guttman argues, American sports share the same essential characteristics as the sports of “every other modern society.” Local variations, however, do occur and are culturally significant as witnessed, for example, by the unique cultural importance of baseball for Americans. Guttman then pauses in order to outline some speculative comments on the nature and significance of baseball and football before returning to the core theoretical questions about freedom and constraint that seem to underlie his analysis. He returns to these questions by focusing on the relationships that exist between preferences for individual and team sports and American values. Americans may have strong individualist traditions, Guttman observes, but they are actually more prone than Europeans to participate in, and identify with, team sports. This preference occurs because, despite all of their emphasis on “frontierism” or “rugged individualism,” Americans value co-operation and team work as much as (if not more than) spontaneity and unrestrained individual expressivity.

Yet, having made this point, Guttman notes how it may actually be misleading to see the expression of individualism and co-operation as contradictions. The choice between one’s involvement in individual or team sports, or even between spontaneous play and structured sport, is not a mutually exclusive

choice between individuality or dull conformity, freedom of expression or oppressive constraint. Rather, the choice is between differing conceptions of individualism and freedom.

One version of freedom, Guttman reminds us, is based on the ideal of escaping from the restraints and trammels of institutional order. This view of “negative freedom” is symbolized in American thinking by the kind of pastoral utopian vision inspired by Thoreau. In a slightly different form, this “negative freedom” tends to underlie the praxis of the romantic Neo-Marxism of Jean-Marie Brohm and his new-left compatriots. The other version of freedom is based on the “positive” idea that submission to social order increases our opportunities to act out individual choices. The rules of social organization allow for man in society to be something more than he is alone. Guttman argues that both of these conceptions define important parts of the liberal tradition in western societies, but it is this latter view in particular that has flourished under conditions of modern democracy. In liberal-democratic societies, Guttman states, there are certainly many troublesome situations where the loss of personal freedom from restraint is greater than the gains of freedom of choice that stem from social organization, but on the whole, there has been a great gain in freedom in these societies over the last two centuries. modern sports are the benefactors of this increase. They may be beset with “imperfections and false emphases” Guttman concludes, but they can be seen now, more than ever, to hold forth the possibility of “relative if not absolute freedom” (p. 157).

On the whole, *From Ritual to Record* is a clear and thoughtful introduction to the social development and cultural significance of modern sport. Guttman has assembled an impressive amount of cross-cultural, interdisciplinary material and he presents this material in a lively and highly readable fashion. Particularly impressive, in my view, are Guttman’s impressionistic accounts of the cultural meanings of sports as expressed in works of American and European fiction. Guttman is a talented interdisciplinary analyst and he is at his best when discussing the contributions of novelists and other popular writers to an understanding of American and European cultural life. Sadly, however, he is much less effective when discussing sociology, political theory or the philosophy of history. For example, as Susan Birrell has noted in a recent review of Guttman’s book,<sup>8</sup> there are serious methodological flaws in Guttman’s attempt to provide empirical support for his thesis that Americans prefer team to individual sports. Similarly, it can be argued that Guttman never provides sufficient evidence for establishing a strong causal connection between the development of the scientific world view and the rise of modern sport. Moreover, his failure to discuss institutionalization in assessing the characteristics of modern sport is an oversight of major proportions. Yet, these criticisms only scratch the surface. For if one looks more deeply at the

theoretical core of Guttman's analysis it is possible to find even greater problems—problems which suggest that *From Ritual to Record* takes us no further in resolving our confusion over 'the paradoxes of play, games and sport than either the abstracted idealist metaphysics of Michael Novak or the crude materialist determinism of Jean-Marie Brohm.

This last statement requires elaboration. Much of the obvious appeal of Guttman's work lies in the degree to which it appears to be an effective empirically-grounded response to the economism, determinism and ideological bias of Marxist and Neo-Marxist criticisms of sport. Guttman demonstrates an acute sensitivity to the active and constitutive features of play, games and sports but, at the same time, he gives the impression of avoiding abstract metaphysics by recognizing that the main characteristics of games and sports at different times in history are shaped by social and cultural forces and relations.

Upon closer examination, however, Guttman's analysis is not quite as persuasive as it seems at first sight. For one thing, his criticisms of Marxism are rather simplistic and his discussion of what a Weberian analysis of the social development of sport would entail is both caricatured and misleading. Moreover, while Guttman's philosophical frame of reference is less extreme than Michael Novak's transcendent theology of sports, there is a sense in which Guttman never quite escapes from idealism and metaphysics. Whereas Novak's metaphysics are tied to abstract conceptions of sacred form, Guttman's are more secular, more tied to abstract conceptions of voluntary action and human will. Indeed, one gets the distinct impression when reading *From Ritual to Record* that Guttman has tried so desperately to avoid any sort of materialist determinism that he has erred in the opposite direction. In response to an economic and determinist view of historical causality he offers us vague instinct theories and an analysis of social change whose "basic explanatory factor" is tied to the development of mind—of the scientific world view. We are then asked to believe that the limits on human expression which have occasionally resulted from this scientific *Weltanschauung* are either voluntarily accepted or else are not limits at all. The limits are simply new boundaries which act to demarcate sport's separate playful order while simultaneously reflecting the increased integration of sport into a system of social organization that is more free than in the past. In other words, as a replacement for the apparent shortcomings of Marxist historical materialism we are offered a theoretical affirmation of voluntarism and the merits of liberal democracy.

The first indication of these problems can be found in Guttman's preliminary philosophical discussion of the nature of play, games and sports. Here the groundwork is laid for a set of analytic tensions that run throughout the remainder of the analysis. Briefly stated, the problem is that Guttman wants to

make abstract universal connections between play and freedom, and play and sports while at the same time leaving room for the idea that the major characteristics of sports are socially conditioned. Yet, once he makes a universal connection between play and freedom and play and sports he has already tipped his hand about the degree to which social forces and pressures reflected in the organization and structure of sport will be found to be constraining. Guttmann argues that play lies in the realm of voluntary action and freedom and, because sports are inherently playful, they also are voluntary and free. This simply disposes of the notion that under certain social circumstances sports might well be “unfree.” Rather, it is argued *by definition* that the organization, rules and standards for defining sport involvement have the effect of guaranteeing sport’s freedom from necessity and insulating it from the constraints of the outside world.<sup>9</sup>

Two points are at issue here. First there is a fundamental difference between “freedom” from necessity and “freedom” expressed more broadly in social and political terms. The former refers to the ways in which rules allow for any given social practice to be conducted for its own sake, the latter refers to the opportunity for anyone to choose from a wide range of social practices or to create new ones. Freedom from necessity in sports is achieved by submitting to established rules and conventions, but social and political freedom may involve working against or challenging certain rules and conventions. Because Guttmann fails to differentiate between these two understandings of freedom his analysis tends to be ambiguous and misleading. In one sense he suggests that freedom is a universal condition of sport and in another sense he seems to want to locate freedom outside sport, as a condition of life in society.

This raises the second point alluded to above. Even when Guttmann actually does get around to talking about freedom and sport as an aspect of social conditions, he seems to want to make this freedom dependent in some way on the more universal notion of freedom from necessity. In other words, he often implies that since rules, organizations and established traditions facilitate freedom from necessity they also contribute to freedom in some broader sense. Yet, it is one thing to say that organizations, rules and standards for involvement have the *capacity* to expand human choices and possibilities, but it is quite another thing to imply that these social limits on spontaneous expression always do this. Rather, it seems to be a question of the type and quality of the limits that are created at any given point in time. If we are to understand the relationships between freedom and sport in social and political terms then we ought to insist that sociologists and historians tell us exactly when sports actually contribute to different types of freedom and when they do not.

It is to Guttmann’s credit that he actually goes on to attempt to answer some of

these questions. Moreover, even though he is philosophically predisposed to find freedom in the “play” of games and sports he does a good job of drawing linkages between some of the major social tendencies of contemporary societies and the characteristics of modern sports. His presentation of Marxist and Neo-Marxist views forces him to consider the broader social and political dimensions of sport’s relationships to freedom and constraint and, while he rejects Marxism, he outlines clearly the high degree of rationalization and bureaucratization that surround modern sports. As noted earlier, Guttmann is drawn to this emphasis on rationalization and bureaucratization by his reading of Max Weber—perhaps the greatest theorist of modern bureaucratic organization. However, if Weber was deeply pessimistic about the penetration of instrumental reason, bureaucratic regulation and technocratic thinking into all spheres of modern life, Guttmann is far more optimistic. There is no Weberian “iron cage” here. The consequences of rationalization and bureaucratization are worrisome and frequently inconvenient, Guttmann tells us, but on the whole we have gained much more from these processes than we have lost. Rationalization and bureaucratization are part and parcel of the progress of contemporary industrial societies and it is a bit like sour grapes to be obsessed with the problems of individual freedom from restraint when so much has been gained.

If this all sounds a lot like post-classical liberal ideology, it is because there are extremely strong undercurrents of this type of thinking throughout Guttmann’s entire analysis. The Neo-Marxists are criticized for their failure to understand the “positive freedom” that stems from established rules of order and authority and, while Guttmann does not go so far as Michael Novak in suggesting that blind submission to *sacred* order is our only salvation in modern life, he does suggest that submission to the *social* order of liberal democracy for the most part expands and enriches. As a result of such reasoning, Guttmann emerges from his analysis of the development of modern sport with his philosophical premises intact. It is ironic, however, that in order to accomplish this he ends up in a theoretical and ideological position that sometimes seems less influenced by Max Weber than by the spirit of Emile Durkheim’s famous dictum about human liberty being “the fruit of regulation.”<sup>10</sup>

Now I would argue that one need not be a Marxist in order to recognize that, for all their relative freedoms, capitalism and liberal democracy contain fundamental structural limitations on human possibilities and actions that are not always positive.<sup>11</sup> I suspect that Guttmann would agree with me on this. The problem lies in evaluating and deciding upon the nature of these limitations and the degree to which they facilitate freedom and constraint. In making these evaluations it is often the case that an analyst’s own ideological convictions come forward strongly.<sup>12</sup> This is what has happened in *From Ritual to Record*. Guttmann’s argument that the net loss in freedom from restraint

which occurs in liberal democracy is offset by net gains in social integration and the possibilities that flow from it is every bit as ideological as the Marxist views that he is so critical of. Throughout *From Ritual to Record* Guttman is disarmingly honest about recognizing some of the empirical and theoretical inadequacies of his analysis yet he overlooks this latter contradiction. In this sense Guttman's work can be seen to be one more contribution to that well-populated tradition of historical and social-scientific work where liberalism has been equated with objectivity.

Guttman's discussion of Marxism can also be criticized in other ways. For example, it is clear throughout his analysis that he does not have a well-developed understanding of Marxist concepts. He reduces the concept of the "mode of production" to simple productive *forces* ("industrialization" is taken to be the basic explanatory factor) and ignores the degree to which the *relations* of production figure in the productive process.<sup>13</sup> He also fails to understand how the concept of alienation is related to the totality of social relations in a society and not just a given class.<sup>14</sup> Moreover, he reveals very little sensitivity to the key Marxian notions of dialectic and contradiction and he overstates the extent to which cultural formations must be depicted by Marxists as direct reflections of an economic base.<sup>15</sup> Guttman gives us a critique of so-called Marxist and Neo-Marxist views on sport that helps to sensitize us to the problems of economic reductionism, determinism and anarchistic romanticism, but he demonstrates little sensitivity to the subtleties of Marxist theory and its many variations.

It might be argued that I am being a bit unfair to Guttman here. For despite his assault on Marxism's theoretical clichés, Guttman goes out of his way to point out that "economic factors" (which he does not define) are "absolutely essential to any satisfactory interpretation of the nature of modern sport" and that "Marxist scholarship has alerted us to this relationship" (p. 81). Moreover, even though Guttman sometimes gives the impression of having presented Marxist and Neo-Marxist analyses of sport only to refute them, his book is one of the few works on sport available in English that presents any sort of remotely balanced discussion of Marxist perspectives. I would readily concede, for example, that Guttman has helped to break somewhat new theoretical ground in the sociological and socio-historical study of sport in North America even though his work does little justice to Marxism and greatly overstates the case for making "positive freedom" both a universal characteristic of sport and a specific feature of liberal democracy.

There is a further caveat that should be added to any discussion of Guttman's treatment of Marxism and Neo-Marxism as frames of reference for the examination of sport in western industrial societies. Simply, a good number of the studies alluded to in Guttman's "sketches" of Marxist and Neo-Marxist ana-

lyses of sport deserve much of the criticism that they receive. For instance, many of the studies that Guttman calls “Marxist” studies are more properly seen as “Leninist” or even “Stalinist” works. The writers often come from state socialist societies or represent political parties where Marxism has long been reduced to a series of catechisms as a result of thinly disguised pressures for theoretical orthodoxy. It is extremely misleading, however, to claim as Guttman does, that criticism of these Leninist or Stalinist analyses is an effective criticism of Marxism itself. For example, the well known Marxist historian E. P. Thompson discusses community games and recreation in his *The Making of the English Working Class* without falling into any of the economic and reductionist traps that Guttman claims are characteristics of Marxism.

Guttman may be on somewhat more solid ground in his criticisms of the Neo-Marxists. As I noted earlier in my discussion of Jean-Marie Brohm, many of the Neo-Marxists that Guttman criticizes write in a revolutionary tradition that is sometimes overly cavalier about empirical detail and factual accuracy. But, such writers are not trying to impress us with their academic sophistication; rather they are trying to reveal a set of problematic “tendencies” and move us to action with voices that are raised in anger and in disgust. Guttman’s criticism of these voices are often accurate but seem comparatively ineffective. It is especially debatable whether Guttman satisfactorily answers any of the Neo-Marxists’ criticisms about sports and sexual repression or the constraints that stem from rationalization and the penetration of technocratic rationality into sport. Indeed, while clearly at ideological odds with the Neo-Marxists, Guttman’s own thesis is remarkably similar in some places to the Neo-Marxists’ emphasis on the significance of capitalist productive forces in history and the emphasis on rationality and science that has developed in conjunction with them. Guttman’s position, however, is that the Neo-Marxists’ view of this relationship is backwards. Industrial technology and the material requirements of an industrial society did not lead to the development of rationality and science; rather it is a case of the development of *Zweckrationalität* and a scientific world view creating the climate for industrial development.

Guttman again claims that this view is inspired by Max Weber and, by developing his analysis along these lines, he implies that Weber’s work can be seen as something of a refutation of Marxism—a view that Anthony Giddens has recently argued is extremely misleading about Weber’s relationship to Marx’s work.<sup>16</sup> The fact is that Guttman is far less sensitive than Weber to the complex interplay between material and ideational forces in social development.<sup>17</sup> For example, Guttman’s discussion of the relationship of sports to Protestantism is weakened by its inability to situate the Reformation in the broader context of class relations and status-group formation. Instead Gutt-

mann drifts into the tenuous argument that Protestant religions were simply among the first groups to develop a strong cultural attachment to the scientific world view. His supporting examples which depict low levels of sport involvement on the part of French Canadian Catholics and Swiss theology majors are not very convincing.<sup>18</sup>

It should be apparent by now that I have paid much more attention to Guttmann's work than to that of Novak and Brohm. My reasoning for this is straightforward. People often tend to dismiss both Novak and Brohm as extremists—the conservative catholic theologian and the Neo-Marxist revolutionary. On the other hand Guttmann seems so judicious, so reasonable, so (dare I say it) professorial. Moreover, his book has become quite popular and has been widely praised. I do not want to dispute the fact Guttmann's book is a valuable contribution, for it is certainly that, but I have tried to show here that it is not really any more helpful than the works of Novak and Brohm in resolving our confusions over freedom and constraint and the paradoxes of play, games and sports.

Where does all of this leave us? Throughout this essay I have hinted at some of the considerations that I regard to be necessary in order to develop more effective attempts at resolving the core theoretical, epistemological and ideological confusions that surround the work of sociologists and historians interested in the study of sport and society. As a concluding comment I want to summarize just a few of these considerations and offer some suggestions for future research in sport studies.

First, much of the confusion in studying sport stems from the unwillingness of researchers to abandon long-standing idealist and metaphysical frames of reference for analysis. Play is clearly a creative and meaningful feature of individual and cultural expressions but it should not be universalized as some trans-historical human essence or abstract form. Rather, play, games and sports are all features of our social being and as such cannot be conceived of independently of the organizing principles, expectations and disappointments which define lived social experience at any given historical moment.<sup>19</sup>

Secondly, and related to this first point, if we are to avoid the simplistic view that spontaneous play is always an expression of freedom and that "structured" games and sports are always constraining or, conversely, the view that all games and sports are simply organized expressions of play and thereby guarantee "positive freedom," we will have to be more sensitive to the dialectical relationships between social structures and human agency. In other words, it will be necessary to struggle to avoid one-sided considerations of players as voluntary agents acting in the absence of constraining structures and of structures which do not allow for the creative and transformative capacities of players.<sup>20</sup>

This struggle will require that we be more specific about the nature of the limits and possibilities that can be associated with structured forms of human activity. It will be necessary to recognize, for example, that any given structure may have the capacity to both open-up and close-off human possibilities and choices. The rules, organizations and traditions of games and sports may be both enabling and constraining. But how do we decide on the conditions which influence each of these options? One answer would be to situate our analyses of games and sports in the context of an understanding of the differential control of rules and resources in social life and the *forms of domination* that stem from this. Indeed, I would argue emphatically that any attempt to understand the problems of freedom and constraint in play, games and sports, must, ultimately, contend with the practical and symbolic relationships between these activities and the forms and processes of domination that frame human action at any given point in time.

Finally, there is the obvious need to be more historically specific about such issues. Sociologists and historians can supply concrete examples of the possibilities and choices that have presented themselves to people both in and as a result of specific game or sport forms at any given time. They can also provide examples of the collective representations that have been associated with these forms, the dominant, residual and emergent material interests and cultural values which have influenced these forms at different historical moments, and the types of demonstrable human experiences which have led to conflict, accommodation and change in games and sports and in society.

I am not arguing, of course, that a sensitivity to any or all of these suggestions will necessarily resolve our confusions over the paradoxes of play, games and sports and the problems of freedom and constraint, but I do believe that these considerations will help to focus our work in fruitful directions. In my own case, I have found helpful discussions which provide some theoretical background to such matters in Anthony Giddens' provocative work on the "structuration" of social life, in Raymond Williams' attempts to recast cultural theory within Marxism, in the recent theoretical work of Richard Bernstein and in the sensitive materialist historiography of E.P. Thompson.<sup>21</sup> Others will undoubtedly find insight and guidance in these matters from other sources. In the meantime, there are some useful starting points in the works of Novak, Brohm, and Guttman. Our task, however, is to go beyond them.

## Notes

1. This essay has benefited in various ways from several people. Specifically, I want to thank Eric Bagnall, Rob Beamish, Shelley Bentley, Hart Cantelon, Bob Hollands, Alan Ingham, Mary Morton, Geoff Mungham, Dave Neice, Kent Pearson, Julia Stevenhaagen, and Kevin Whitaker for their criticisms, suggestions, and encouragement.

2. Jean-Marie Brohm, *Sport: A Prison of Measured Time* (London: Ink Links, 1978), Allen Guttmann, *From Ritual to Record: The Nature of Modern Sports* (New York: University of Columbia Press, 1978), Michael Novak, *The Joy of Sports* (New York: Basic Books, 1976).

3. All three of these books have been widely reviewed in European and North American periodicals. However, for some reviews by sociologists, historians, and physical educators see the following: Benjamin Rader, "Modern Sports: In Search of Interpretations," *Journal of Social History* (Winter, 1979). Rader reviews Novak and Guttmann along with other works on sport. Novak's book is also reviewed in the *Journal of Sport History*, 5:2 (Summer, 1978) by Harold Vander Zwaag. Additional reviews of Guttmann's book include Jack Berryman, *American Historical Review*, 84:2 (April, 1979), James Frey, *Journal of Sport and Social Issues*, 3:1 (Spring/Summer, 1979), Leverett Smith, *Journal of Sport History*, 5:3 (Winter, 1978), and Thomas Henriks, *American Journal of Sociology*, 85:5 (March, 1980). Brohm's work has generally been reviewed in French periodicals (under the title *Quel Corps?*). However, for some reviews in English see Peter Fuller, "Team Slogans," *New Society* (September 7, 1978), and Phillip Shinnick, *Journal of Sport and Social Issues*, 3:1 (Spring/Summer, 1979).

4. See Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1955), Josef Pieper, *Leisure, the Basis of Culture* (New York: New American Library, 1963), and H.S.J. Rahner, *Man at Play* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1967).

5. Ralph Miliband has argued (*Marxism and Politics*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977) p. 52, that it is a bit too simple to claim that working class involvement in sport can only have the effect of discouraging the development of class consciousness. Such a position, Miliband concludes, "does not seem *a priori* reasonable and is belied by much evidence to the contrary; and to murmur 'bread and circuses' is no substitute for serious thinking upon the matter."

6. See Herbert Marcuse, *One Dimensional Man* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1964) and *Eros and Civilization* (New York: Vintage Books, 1962).

7. For samples of Althusserian "structuralism" see *For Marx* (Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1969) and *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays* (London: New Left Books, 1971). For examples of Bourdieu's work see *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge Press, 1977) and (with J.C.Passeron), *Reproduction in Education, Society and Culture* (Beverly Hills, California: Sage Publications, 1977).

8. *International Committee for Sociology of Sport Bulletin*, 15 (November, 1978), p. 9.

9. Guttmann's philosophical emphasis on freedom from necessity as opposed to freedom defined in broader social and political terms appears to be influenced by Huizinga's argument that play must be understood in a way "that leaves untouched the philosophical problem of determinism." (*Homo Ludens*) p. 7. This has the effect of guaranteeing that play is viewed in universal terms in a voluntarist and idealist fashion. Guttmann's attempt to solve this problem by showing that the major characteristics and social tendencies of capitalist industrialism and liberal democracy are only partly-determining and generally lead to "positive freedom" is an improvement on Huizinga's view but remains unsatisfactory.

10. Emile Durkheim, *Moral Education* (New York: Free Press, 1969), p. 54

11. For a broader theoretical discussion of this view see Steven Lukes, "Power and Structure," in Steven Lukes, *Essays in Social Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1977), pp. 3-29.

12. I develop this point more fully in "Conflicting Standards and Problems of Personal Action in the Sociology of Sport" *Quest*, 30 (Summer, 1978), pp. 80-90 and in "Sport As An Area of Sociological Study," Richard S. Gruneau and John G. Albinson (eds.), *Canadian Sport: Sociological Perspectives* (Don Mills, Ontario: Addison-Wesley, 1976), pp. 8-43.

13. For Marx's own views on this see *Grundrisse* (Penguin Books Edition, 1973), pp. 483-497 and Marx's "Second Observation" in *The Poverty of Philosophy (Marx and Engels' Collected Works, Lawrence and Wishart, 1975)*. I find it especially ironic that in Guttmann's sketch of how Marxists view the social development of sport he cites W.W. Rostow, a self-proclaimed anti-Marxist thinker. See *From Ritual to Record*, p. 61.

14. This lack of understanding is graphically evident in Guttmann's attempt to ridicule the Neo-Marxists' designation of sport as an aspect of alienation by suggesting that the correlation between high socioeconomic position and active sport involvement means that alienation is most felt among the dominant class. As Guttmann puts it, "if sport is an engine of alienation, we can only conclude that the advantaged have turned it on themselves rather than the disadvantaged." (p. 80). For an analysis which attempts to show how all classes and all forms of cultural expression are influenced by alienation see Bertell Ollman, *Alienation: Marx's Conception of Man in Capitalist Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971).

15. See, for example, chapters 1-10 in Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977).

16. Anthony Giddens, "Marx, Weber and the Development of Capitalism," pp. 183-207 in A. Giddens, *Studies in Social and Political Theory* (New York: Basic Books, 1977). See also Anthony Giddens, *Capitalism and Modern Social Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971).

17. It is instructive on this point to compare Guttman's "Weberian" interpretation of sport with Weber's own analysis of cultural formations in *Economy and Society* Vols. 1 and 2, G. Roth and C. Wittich (eds.), (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978). It is also interesting to compare Guttman's analysis to the self-professed Weberian views of Alan Ingham (*American Sport in Transition: The Maturation of Industrial Capitalism and its Impact on Sport*, unpublished doctoral dissertation: University of Massachusetts, 1978).

18. I want to make an additional point about one of these examples. Guttman's discussion of the study of Roger Boileau *et al.* on the under-representation of Francophones on Canadian international sports teams is somewhat misleading. It is true that the under-representation of Francophones can be related to the "traditional" rural mentality of French-speaking Quebecers until the "Quiet Revolution" in the 1960's. However, as I note in the "Introduction" to the section of the anthology where the article by Boileau *et al.* is published, it is also true that the Francophones were formally (and informally) excluded from certain activities by the anglophone groups that were generally responsible for organizing sport in the province. See Alan Metcalfe's discussion, "Organized Sport and Social Stratification in Montreal: 1840-1901" in Richard S. Gruneau and John G. Albinson (eds.), *Canadian Sport: Sociological Perspectives* (Don Mills, Ontario: Addison-Wesley, 1976), pp.77-101. Also see my discussion "Power and Play in Canadian Society," in R.J. Ossenberg (ed.), *Power and Change in Canada* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 190, pp. 146-194).

19. See E.P. Thompson's discussion of the role of "experience" in social and historical explanation in *The Poverty of Theory and Other Essays* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1976), pp. 6-9

20. The term "structure" can refer to two related conditions in social scientific research. Conventionally, it refers to a set of habitual or institutionalized social or cultural practices that take on a systemic existence independent of any one individual's actions (e.g., the social structure). The term "structure" may also refer to a set of "deeper" more abstract forces which guide and shape human activities—forces expressed, for example, in the construction of language or in a given productive relation (cf., Richard and Fernande De George, *The Structuralists: From Marx to Levi-Strauss*, New York: Anchor Books, 1972). I am generally skeptical of "structuralist" explanations; however, in this essay I have not attempted to distinguish between the two uses of the term "structure" unless a qualifier (e.g., *social structure*) is used.

21. Anthony Giddens, *New Rules of Sociological Method* (New York: Basic Books, 1976), *Studies in Social and Political Theory* (New York: Basic Books, 1977), Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), Richard Bernstein, *The Restructuring of Social and Political Theory* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1978), E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1968) and, *The Poverty of Theory and Other Essays* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1978).