

## Notes, Documents, and Queries

### Plato's *Lesser Hippias*: A Neglected Document in Sport History

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To the sport historian, Plato is important mainly for the insights he can give concerning the Greek view of the role of athletic training in the educational system. Most familiar are his comments in the *Republic* Books III-V, where he recommends a program of athletic training closely associated with music, and one which would include women as well as men. Less familiar, though more useful than the *Republic*, is his discussion of athletic training in Books VII and VIII of the *Laws*, where Plato proposes a system of training and contests more strenuous than the program then in effect in Athens; and again he emphasizes the inclusion of women in his program. One suspects the influence of Sparta on both his rigor and his inclusion of women, though of course the Spartans had no contribution to make to the classical ideal of balance in the education of body and mind.

*Lesser Hippias* has commanded no attention from sport historians, and, for that matter, little attention from students of antiquity in any discipline. It is, to be sure, one of the shorter dialogues, and its subject matter is specialized (not to say limited) when compared with the *Republic* or the *Symposium* or the *Laws*. Besides this, its position in the Platonic canon has been challenged, though not on very impressive grounds. Despite the fact that Aristotle refers to *Lesser Hippias* in his *Metaphysics* 4.29.5 (1025<sup>a</sup>), and there explicitly attributes it to Plato, Plato's most authoritative English translator, B. Jowett, states that the work, though "very clever and ingenious . . . does not appear to contain anything beyond the power of an imitator, who was also a careful student of the earlier Platonic writings, to invent."<sup>1</sup> Although I do not plan to deal with the authorship problem in this essay, I would note two points about it: (1) the doubting of *Lesser Hippias* is based on subjective judgment, not on any hard linguistic or historical evidence, and indeed it flies in the face of the evidence adduced from Aristotle, who must surely have been in a better position than we could be to know what Plato did and did not write; and (2) in the

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course of our discussion we shall discover a dimension of subtlety which escaped Jowett's notice. This has to do with Plato's exploration of the limits of metaphor, and particularly of athletic metaphors, in philosophical discourse.

In two respects, *Lesser Hippias* is a valuable document for the sport historian. First, the dramatic setting of the dialogue is supposed to be the Olympic festival, and through it, Plato gives us some welcome insights into the social and cultural and intellectual activities associated with the ancient Olympics. Second, as suggested above, Plato represents his interlocutors, Socrates and Hippias, as exploring a philosophical problem by analogy to circumstances drawn from athletics. Their discourse turns out to be an exploration of the limitations of metaphor, especially of sport metaphors, in the field of ethics. Since this problem of the validity of sport metaphors has been 'discovered' by sport philosophers within the last decade or so, it is instructive to find the problem dealt with in a dialogue by Plato.

#### *Socrates and Hippias at the Olympic Festival*

The dramatic setting of *Lesser Hippias* is indicated early in the dialogue, when Hippias remarks that "at each Olympic festival, as I went up from my house at Elis to the temple of Olympia, where all the Hellenes were assembled, I continually professed my willingness to perform any of the exhibitions which I had prepared, and to answer any questions which anyone had to ask" (363<sup>d</sup>). Again towards the end of the dialogue we are reminded that Hippias, a professional sophist, has been displaying his intellectual talents before "all the Hellenes" (372<sup>b</sup>), something which could occur with regularity only at the Olympics, the one festival at which Greeks from all the city states could expect to be found congregated. As a citizen and statesman of Elis, Hippias could expect to have had a close association with the Olympic festivals. Though only fragments of his writings survive, he was a man of varied intellectual interests, and wrote an *Olympionica* or history of the Olympics, c. 400 B.C. This was revised and updated by Aristotle in the fourth century B.C., by Eratosthenes of Cyrene in the third century B.C., and by Phlegon of Tralles whose *Olympiades* brought the list of victors up to 140 A.D. Thus Hippias was to be regarded, in later times, as the founder of a historical genre—the Olympic chronicle—which in the third century B.C. became the basis of the ancient system of chronology.<sup>2</sup>

Outside of *Lesser Hippias*, the evidence for Socrates' presence at Olympia is ambiguous. Plato at one point represents Phaedrus as remarking that Socrates, when out of Athens, is "like some stranger who is led about by a guide," and Phaedrus asks, "Do you ever cross the border? I rather think that you never venture even outside the gates." Socrates neither confirms nor denies the suggestion that he never leaves Athens; he says, cryptically, "I am a lover of

knowledge, and the men who dwell in the city are my teachers, and not the trees or the country” (Phaedrus 230<sup>c-d</sup>). From Alcibiades’ description of Socrates in *Symposium*, however, it is clear that Socrates had plenty of experience outside of Athens when on military campaigns (*Symposium* 219<sup>3</sup>-221<sup>e</sup>). In the course of a speech to Crito, when near the end of his life he defends his decision to abstain from undertaking an escape from prison which his friends had arranged for him, Socrates imagines the Athenians as saying to him,

Of all Athenians you have been the most constant resident in the city, which, as you never leave, you may be supposed to love. For you never went out of the city either to see the games, except once when you went to the Isthmus, or to any other place unless when you were on military service; nor did you travel as other men do.

(*Crito*, 52<sup>b</sup>)<sup>3</sup>

This is contradicted by Xenophon, who in his *Memorabilia* represents Socrates as having heard someone express fear about undertaking a journey to Olympia and responding as follows:

Why do you fear the distance? When you are at home, don’t you spend most of the day in walking about? on your way there you will take a walk before lunch, and another before dinner, and then take a rest. Don’t you know that if you put together the walks you take in five or six days, you can easily cover the distance from Athens to Olympia? It is more comfortable, too, to start a day early rather than a day late, since to be forced to make the stages of the journey unduly long is unpleasant; but to take a day extra on the way makes easy going. So it is better to hurry over the start than on the road.

(Xenophon, *Memorabilia* 3.3.5)<sup>4</sup>

Socrates does not explicitly say that he has been to Olympia, but this sounds like testimony from personal experience. Since *Phaedrus* does not explicitly deny the possibility, and *Crito* deals with the subject only in a hypothetical speech by imaginary Athenians, and *Symposium* credits him with extensive travel experience while in military service, we may take Xenophon and *Lesser Hippias* together as sufficient testimony that Socrates attended the Olympic festival at least once.<sup>5</sup>

Festival-goers at Olympia attended games in the stadium, horse and chariot races in the hippodrome, religious ceremonies at the temple of Zeus, and also, as it appears from Hippias’ remarks, lectures by professional writers and teachers. According to Lucian, who of course did not write until more than five centuries after the supposed event, and whose source is unknown, it was Herodotus who began the tradition of lecturing at the Olympic festival when, before a packed audience of “the most eminent men from all Greece, he ap-

peared in the temple chamber, presenting himself as a competitor for an Olympic honour, not as a spectator; then he recited his *Histories* and so bewitched his audience that his books were called after the Muses, for they too were nine in number” (Lucian, *Herodotus or Aëtion*, 1).<sup>6</sup> This sounds suspiciously like a story made up to explain the names of Herodotus’ books, and, moreover, Lucian’s juxtaposition of intellectual with athletic achievement echoes a somewhat artificial biographical convention which goes back to the fifth century B.C.<sup>7</sup> Be that as it may, there is certainly historical truth behind Lucian’s subsequent remark that various sophists—Hippias, Prodicus of Ceos, Anaximenes of Chios, Polus of Acragas, “and scores of others”—saw the Olympics as a “short-cut to glory” and so displayed their talents at the festival by means of recitations (Lucian, *Herodotus*, 3). Philostratos, in *Lives of the Sophists* 1.11, confirms Lucian’s testimony with the remark that Hippias “used to charm Greece at Olympia with ornate and elaborate speeches.”<sup>8</sup> Aëtion the painter, too, displayed there his picture of “The Marriage of Roxana and Alexander” (dated sometime after 327 B.C.), and one of the Hellanodikai, Proxenides, was so impressed with his talent that he made Aëtion his son-in-law (Lucian, *Herodotus*, 4). Among orators there developed an Olympic tradition of speeches on the theme of Hellenic unity. Gorgias of Leontini (c. 483-376 B.C.) is said by Philostratos (*Vit. Sophist.* 1.11) to have given such a speech. So too did Lysias—his *Olympiacus*—at the 98th Olympic festival in 388 B.C.; and Isocrates delivered his famous *Panegyricus* in 380 B.C.<sup>9</sup>

The Olympic festival could also serve as a venue for proclamation and diplomacy. At the 52nd Olympics, 572 B.C., Kleisthenes tyrant of Sikyon, having won the tethrippon, caused a proclamation to be made inviting Greeks who judged themselves worthy to be his son-in-law to attend a festival at Sikyon, where he had built a race-track and a wrestling-ring for that purpose (Herodotus 6.126). At the Olympics in which Dorieus of Rhodes won his second victory in the pankration (the 88th, 428 B.C.), Lesbos, having revolted from Athenian domination and set up an oligarchy, sent ambassadors to plead—successfully—for admission in the Peloponnesian league (Thucydides 3.9). At the 114th Olympics, 324 B.C., Nicanor officially issued Alexander’s proclamation—before 20,000 exiles—requiring the Greek states to restore to their former status all men who had been exiled or dispropertied on political grounds. And that same year, Athens sent Demosthenes to Olympia to negotiate—unsuccessfully—concerning an article in Alexander’s decree which required the Athenians to relinquish control of Samos.<sup>10</sup>

If a single observation underlies all this it would be variety: a great many events other than athletic contests took place at the Olympic festivals. Poetry was recited by professional minstrels, too. In the same year when Lysias delivered his *Olympiacus*, 388 B.C., Dionysius, ambitious tyrant of Syracuse, sent to the festival, under direction of his brother Thearides, not only a

large number of teams for the tethrippon, but also minstrels to recite some poems which he had written. These, however, were ridiculed by the Greeks at the festival on account of poor quality in composition (Diodorus 14.109). The Greeks were used to better quality. Were recitations of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* part of the Olympic entertainment? Homeric scholars agree that the seventh century venue for these poems was the great Ionian festivals, the Panionia at Mycale and the Delia at Delos; and in the sixth century, when Pisistratus of Athens reorganized the Great Panathenaea, he made provision for prizes for Homeric recitation as well as for athletic contests.<sup>11</sup> I know of no ancient text recalling Homeric recitation at the Olympics, but it is hard to believe that the professional minstrels would fail to appear there, where a ready audience could be guaranteed every four years. As Cedric Whitman observes, “When Pisistratus reorganized the Panathenaea to include orderly performances of epic, he did little more than elaborate and glorify what was already a deeply rooted social practice.”<sup>12</sup>

At any rate the first topic taken up by Socrates and Hippias, in *Lesser Hippias*, reflects a Homeric dimension in the cultural activity at Olympia. Socrates asks, who did Homer mean to portray as the better man, Achilles or Odysseus? One major theme in the *Iliad*, and it appears in the *Odyssey* also, is centered around the formulaic phrase, “*aristos Akhaion*” ‘the best of the Achaeans.’ In the *Iliad* this epithet is applied most often to Achilles, for he is the best of the Achaeans within the context of that poem. In the context of the *Odyssey*, however, Odysseus is the best of the Achaeans.<sup>13</sup> The question debated by Socrates and Hippias, therefore, is a sensitive and sophisticated response to a genuine Homeric theme.

Hippias takes the position that Achilles is the better man because he always speaks the truth, whereas Odysseus practices deception. Socrates brings forward an incident from the *Iliad* in which Achilles speaks other than the truth: he tells his army on one occasion, and Agamemnon on another, that he will return home to Phthia because of Agamemnon’s insults to him, yet he never makes any preparation for departure and shortly afterwards he tells Ajax (Aias) of his intention to wait in his tent until Hector joins in battle (*Lesser Hippias*, 370<sup>a</sup>-371<sup>c</sup>). Hippias objects that Achilles’ untruth was not intended as a deception, and this leads to a widened ethical problem: who is in a better condition, a man who errs voluntarily, like Odysseus, or one who errs involuntarily, like Achilles? Socrates maintains that the man who errs voluntarily—Odysseus—is better off. If his position seems unexpected, even perverse, we should consider that he is not being candid with Hippias. In the *Republic*, Books II and X, Socrates excludes poets from his ideal state because they fabricate deceptions. With regard to Achilles and Odysseus, Socrates’ true position must be that poetry does not provide a milieu suitable for the exploration of problems in ethics. Socrates himself, like Odysseus, is

practicing deception, in order to back Hippias into an indefensible position and thereby reveal the weakness of argument by analogy.

### *Ethics and Athletics*

If the first half of *Lesser Hippias* is a reflex of an intellectual pursuit at the Olympics—Homeric recitation—the second half, in a structural balance of mind and body, reflects athletic pursuits. Having decided that Odysseus errs voluntarily while Achilles errs involuntarily, Socrates switches from poetry to argument by analogy to determine which of these two conditions is preferable:

*Socrates.* I am very desirous, Hippias, of examining this question, as to which are the better—those who err voluntarily or involuntarily? I think it can be best examined in this way, Please answer: you would admit, would you not, that there are good runners?

*Hippias.* Yes.

*Soc.* And there are bad runners?

*Hip.* Yes.

*Soc.* And he who runs well is a good runner, and he who runs ill is a bad runner?

*Hip.* Very true.

*Soc.* And he who runs slowly runs ill, and he who runs quickly runs well?

*Hip.* Yes.

*Soc.* Then in a race, and in running, swiftness is a good, and slowness is an evil quality?

*Hip.* To be sure.

*Soc.* Which of the two then is a better runner? He who runs slowly voluntarily, or he who runs slowly involuntarily?

*Hip.* He who runs slowly voluntarily. (373<sup>c-d</sup>)

The conclusion is that a man who runs a race slowly does a bad and discreditable action; and he is worse off if he did so involuntarily than if he did so voluntarily. A parallel argument is developed with wrestling:

*Socrates.* Well; but at a wrestling match—which is the better wrestler, he who falls voluntarily or involuntarily?

*Hippias.* He who falls voluntarily, doubtless.

*Soc.* And is it worse and more discreditable at a wrestling match, to fall, or to throw another?

*Hip.* To fall.

*Soc.* Then, at a wrestling match also, he who voluntarily does bad and discreditable actions is a better wrestler than he who does them involuntarily?

*Hip.* That appears to be the truth. (374<sup>a</sup>)

Socrates continues with parallel cases from medicine, music, navigation, archery, and so on, and in all these cases, Hippias agrees that the man who performs ill voluntarily is better off than the one who performs ill involuntarily. Socrates then transfers the problem to the realm of ethics:

*Socrates.* And will our minds be better if they do wrong and make mistakes voluntarily, or involuntarily?

*Hippias.* O, Socrates, it would be a monstrous thing if those who do wrong voluntarily are to be better than those who do wrong involuntarily!

*Soc.* And yet that appears to be the only inference.

(375<sup>d</sup>)

If Hippias seems to be backed into a corner, it is because he mistakenly thinks that the subject of the dialogue is the question about who is better off, the man who does ill voluntarily, or involuntarily. The true subject of the debate is the validity or invalidity of analogical argument in the realm of ethics. In order to deal with a problem in ethics, Socrates has gotten Hippias to agree to the terms of a metaphor drawn from athletics, and then to another and another, and these led him by degrees to a position which turned out to be morally unacceptable.

My interpretation of the dialogue has some support from Aristotle. Concerning the argument “that he who is *willingly* bad is better,” Aristotle writes that

This is a false result of induction—for a man who limps willingly is better than one who does so unwillingly—by ‘limping’ Plato means ‘mimicking a limp,’ for if the man *were* lame willingly, he would presumably be worse in this case as in the corresponding case of moral character.

(Aristotle, *Metaphysica* 1025<sup>a</sup>)

As Aristotle recognizes, Plato is exploring a logical fallacy in *Lesser Hippias*. His dialogue may therefore be thought of as expanding conceptually in three stages. First there is the specific question whether Achilles or Odysseus is the better man. Second, that question is widened to ask who is better off, a man who errs voluntarily or involuntarily. Third, by implication, the true subject of the dialogue turns out to be an exploration of the limitations of metaphor and analogy in philosophical discourse.

Why did Plato select athletic metaphors to illustrate the logical shortcomings of analogical argument? Probably because already in the writings of the pre-Socratics (Democritus for example), the moral life of man was seen in terms of exercise and discipline needed to gain mastery over the passions.<sup>14</sup> Athletic metaphors, especially as applied to ethics, continue to be used throughout the classical period and beyond—by Aristotle in his *Nicomachean Ethics*; by the Cynics and Stoics; by Epictetus and Plutarch; by Romans like Seneca and

Cicero and Marcus Aurelius; by Hellenistic Jews like Philo of Alexandria and the Apostle Paul; by early Christians like Clement of Alexandria and St. John Chrysostom.<sup>15</sup> The athletic metaphors in Paul's epistles are especially well known, since he tends to use them when expressing key ideas: the life of a Christian is like a foot-race or wrestling; its prize is an everlasting crown; or alternatively, his own evangelical mission is an athletic contest, its prize being the conversion of others. A systematic history of the athletic metaphor tradition has yet to be written although some individual authors have, of course, been studied. The present analysis has shown that *Lesser Hippias* is a fundamental text in the history of such metaphors, for in it, Socrates points out that if we accept as valid the metaphor of the moral life of man as an athletic contest, we must also accept the position that a man who does wrong intentionally is better than a man who does wrong without intending to.

The validity of athletic metaphors in ethics remains a problem in contemporary discussion of sport philosophy. One aspect of this problem has to do with the limitations of "sportsmanship" as a moral category. "Sportsmanship" is often thought of as meaning something like "fair play,"<sup>16</sup> and is also thought of as exemplary moral conduct applicable to real life as well as to games; however, J. W. Keating has pointed out that "fair play," that is, equity in the application of the rules, is the central ethos in games where competition and winning are emphasized above all other possible sport values, whereas "sportsmanship" implies a sporting generosity, a willingness, even, to allow the rules to be bent in favor of one's opponent, in the interests of such sport values as companionship, enjoyment, health and exercise. Neither "sportsmanship" nor "fair play" seem strictly applicable to the ethics of real life,<sup>17</sup> and the ethical dimension becomes confused further when one introduces a phrase like "a poor sport," which implies that in some contexts, sportsmanship is a sort of moral minimum.

An even more powerful case against sport metaphors has been brought forward by Ike Balbus, who notes the increasing tendency, during the presidencies of Richard Nixon and Gerald Ford, to describe political activity by analogy to the game of football.<sup>18</sup> This becomes a disturbing metaphor when one finds offenders in the Watergate scandal excusing their conduct on grounds that they were merely "players" on the "team" and had to follow the "game plan." The goal of a football game is undisputed—it is to win—and the reason it is undisputed is because it is trivial. The goal of political activity is neither undisputed nor trivial; and so the attempt to transfer the ethos of football to the realm of politics may itself be a signal of moral ineptitude on the part of the "players" of political "games." This is only one of the several ways in which Balbus shows that the football analogy is inapplicable to moral or political conduct, and can even lead to unacceptable moral decisions. Whatever one may think about sportsmanship or fair play or teamwork, it is clear that *Lesser Hippias* has a contribution to make to the contemporary dis-

cussion; for Plato was the earliest writer to question the validity of athletic metaphors in the realm of ethics.

## Notes

1. Plato, *The Dialogues of Plato*, trans. B. Jowett, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1892) in 5 vols.; 4th ed. (1953) in 4 vols.: I am using the text of *Lesser Hippias* in vol. 1 of the 4th ed., pp. 603-23. For Jowett's remarks see p. 599 in that volume. For Aristotle, the translation used is *Metaphysica*, vol. VIII in *Works of Aristotle*, trans. W. D. Ross, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1928).
2. For Hippias: Hermann Diels, *Die Fragmente der Vorsokratiker, griechisch und deutsch* (5 aufl., Berlin: Weidmann, 1934-37), II, 326-34. For Eratosthenes: Felix Jacoby, *Die Fragmente der griechischen Historiker* (Berlin: Weidmann, 1923 ff.; Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1954 ff.), II B, 241; for Phlegon, *ibid.*, p. 257. For the tradition of Olympic victors generally: Luigi Moretti, *Olympionikai, i vincitori negli antichi agoni olimpici* (Rome: Atti della Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei, 1957).
3. Jowett, ed., *Dialogues*, III, 136; I, 551-53; and I, 381.
4. Xenophon, *Memorabilia and Oeconomicus*, ed. and trans. E. C. Marchant (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard, 1965 [Loeb Classics]), p. 257. For the reliability of *Memorabilia* as a witness of Socrates, see Robert R. Wellman, "Socratic Method in Xenophon," *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 37 (1976), 307-18.
5. On this point I find myself in agreement with Ludwig Drees, *Olympia*, trans. Gerad Onn (London: Pall Mall, 1968), p. 63.
6. Lucian, ed. and trans. K. Kilburn (8 vols., Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard, 1959 [Loeb Classics]), VI, 145.
7. For this see Mary R. Lefkowitz, "The Poet as Hero: Fifth-Century Autobiography and Subsequent Biographical Fiction," *Classical Quarterly*, 28 (1978), 459-69. Lefkowitz does not mention Lucian in her study.
8. As quoted in R. C. Jebb, *The Attic Orators from Antiphon to Isaeus* (2 vols., London: Macmillan, 1893), I, 198.
9. See Jebb, *Attic Orators*, I, 197-201; and George Norlin, trans., *Isocrates* (3 vols., Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard, 1966 [Loeb classics]), I, xxv-xxxvi for discussion and pp. 120-241 for text.
10. Herodotus, *Histories*, trans. Aubrey De Séincourt (Baltimore: Penguin, 1954), p. 405; Thucydides, *The Peloponnesian War*, trans. Richard Crawley (New York: Doubleday, n.d.), p. 168. The Lesbian ambassadors stood in the temple of Zeus when they made their speech; they appeal by "Olympian Zeus, in whose temple we stand as very suppliants" (p. 171). For Alexander, Nicanor and Demosthenes: Diodorus Siculus 18.8.5: *Diodorus of Sicily*, ed. and trans. C. H. Oldfather (12 vols., Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard, 1968 [Loeb Classics]), For discussion see Elias Bickerman, "La lettre d'Alexandre aux bannis grecs," *Revue des études anciennes*, 42 (1940), 25-35; E. Badian, "Harpalus," *Journal of Hellenic Studies*, 81 (1961), 25-31; R. Sealey, "The Olympic Festival of 324 B.C.," *Classical Review*, 74 (1960), 185-86.
11. See Geoffrey S. Kirk, *The Songs of Homer* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1962), pp. 274-81 and 301-15; Cedric H. Whitman, *Homer and the Heroic Tradition* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard, 1963), pp. 65-86.
12. Whitman, *Homer*, p. 75.
13. Gregory Nagy, *The Best of the Achaeans* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1979), pp. 26-58.
14. Diels, *Fragments*, II, 192-93; Victor C. Pfitzner, *Paul and the Agon Motif. Traditional Athletic Imagery in the Pauline Literature* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1967), p. 25.
15. For various Greek, Roman, and Hellenistic writers: H. A. Harris, *Sport in Greece and Rome* (Ithaca: Cornell, 1972), pp. 25, 32, 37 for Philo and pp. 44-74 for Romans. Harris, however, in his discussion of the passages drawn from ancient texts, seems to think that he is dealing with personal responses to athletic events, where most of the time the passages are merely transmitting a stereotyped metaphor. For the Apostle Paul: E. Eidem, *Pauli bildvärld I, Athletae et Milites Christi* (Lund, 1913: Beiträge zur Religionswissenschaft der religionsw. Gesellschaft zu Stockholm, I [1913-14]); L. Schmid, *Der 'Agon bei Paulus* (dissertation, Tübingen, 1921); Pfitzner, *Paul and the Agon Motif*, as cited above, note 14. For St. John Chrysostom: O. A. Sawhill, *The Use of Athletic Metaphors in the Biblical Homilies of St. John Chrysostom* (dissertation, Princeton, 1928).
16. For example in Kathleen M. Pearson, "Deception, Sportsmanship, and Ethics," *Quest*, 19 (Jan., 1973), 115-18.
17. James W. Keating, "Sportsmanship as a Moral Category," *Ethics*, 75 (Oct., 1964), 25-35.
18. Ike Balbus, "Politics as Sports: The Political Ascendency of the Sports Metaphor in America," *Monthly Review*, 26 (Mar. 1975), 26-39.