

Holt, Richard. *Sport and Society in Modern France*. Hamden, Connecticut: Archon Books, 1981. xiii, 256 pp. Index, bibliography, notes, pictures, \$25.00 (cloth).

The paradoxical and pretentious phillistinism of the “intellectual” is a thing to wonder at. The beginning of this erudite study of *Sport and Society in Modern France* was watched by at least one perplexed member of the Gallic intellectual establishment. In Holt’s own gently sardonic words: “When I applied for a reader’s ticket at the Bibliotheque Nationale, I was eventually interviewed by an official of the library who asked me what I wished to do. I replied that I was thinking about writing a thesis on French sport. A mixture of pain and sheer disbelief crossed his face. . . I rather felt as if I were impugning the dignity of French culture by the mere mention of sport in so august an institution.” French culture has survived the shock, and has been enhanced by Holt’s audacity. There are many good things in this book. He is interrogatory, tentative and subtle. He is sensibly aware of the fact that interpretative statements in history can never be more than probable however well founded on logic and evidence. His introduction is of benefit to contemporary antiquarians who pose in conceptual transvestite fashion as social historians: his chapter on sport and sociability adds a dimension to the concept construction of others; his section on social Catholicism reveals the expedient pragmatism of religion in the relentless pursuit of souls: his careful, rigorous self-scrutiny of his own methodological approach—warts and all—is an exercise in intellectual humility which fellow-scholars can only applaud and emulate.

Revealing an attractive obeisance to the Positivist legacy of the social sciences Holt faces up squarely to his methodological problems. He is conscious of omissions, and consequently sensibly qualifactory in his claims. He attempts to hold the balance between the general and the specific, to give equal weight to special circumstances and common characteristics and to allocate effort in proper proportion to both spectator and participatory activities. He is unapologetically selective in his time-scale—the bulk of the evidence comes from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The most important changes occurred then. As befits his title he devotes more attention to the emergence of sport as a form of mass leisure in the inter-war years than to the decline of traditional activities in the Third Republic. He stimulates dissension in this reader only when he requests “a broad national survey of the most significant developments” *prior* to consideration of regional developments, and implies that he has provided it. There are too many omissions for this to

be true (some which Holt acknowledges): among them—activities such as horseracing, fishing and winter sports and themes such as women and sport, sport and education, sport and the media. Furthermore, it is at least arguable that regional and specific studies would provide a solid empirical and conceptual foundation upon which to construct that desirable phenomenon which still eludes the historian of French sport and society: “a broad, national survey.”

The study is divided into two sections: part one unravels the separate strands in the largely geographical knot, while part two seeks to re-entwine these strands around a wider sociological and historical framework. Thus the first half of the book deals with a set of case-studies: Field Sports, Gymnastics, “English Sports,” Cycling, Bullfighting and Cockfighting, and the second half considers the issues of violence, sociability, status and ideology.

As Holt makes quite clear, the development of modern sport in France was a late nineteenth century phenomenon. And the pace of change was frenetic. The Union des Sociétés Françaises des Sports Athlétiques for example, representing rugby football and athletics, expanded from about 200 clubs during “La Belle Epoque” to over 1600 shortly before the Great War. By the 1920s “sport had become an item of main consumption.” A curious and insoluble conundrum? If not, how is this explained? Certainly not by simplistic, obsessive sociological theories of a tight causal relationship between industrialisation and mass sport, but more subtly and sophisticatedly by reference to a multiplicity of both discrete and related forces—economic, philosophical, educational, sociological and psychological. Among the author’s virtues is his eschewal of narrow structural functionalism and his acknowledgement of the force of the Cyrenaic impulse—happiness in the sum of particular pleasures and golden moments. Holt is firmly of the opinion that the history of the evolution of modern sport in France—is the history of modern society in France; no more, no less. The conclusion is inescapable: “A study of the history of French sports requires both familiarity with many well-worn themes of French history and an interest in some hitherto neglected aspects of behavior and opinion.” Mandarin librarians of the Bibliothèque Nationale and others, please note!

This is a scrupulous, attractively written and well-argued contribution to the study of society, culture and sport, and to the social historical literature.

Jordanhill College, Glasgow

J. A. Mangan