

Book Reviews

Mandell, Richard D. *Sport: A Cultural History* New York: Columbia University Press, 1984. xx + 340 pp. Illustrations, bibliographical essay, index. \$24.95 (cloth).

Richard Mandell has attempted to write "a history of the cultural importance of the sports of all people" (xx). Avoiding the snares (and benefits) of footnotes, Mandell seeks to provide wide-ranging and meaningful analysis, in the tradition of the German sources he relies heavily upon. He has not been pleased with most sports journalism or sport history. He says it "has almost always been hasty, hyperbolic, chauvinistic, venal, or some combination of the above." (xix). He wants to offer us something better.

Mandell is not interested in writing an encyclopedia of facts. Rather, he focuses on what he feels are the essential elements in understanding the development of sport as a cultural form. Defining sport as "competitive activity of the whole human body according to sets of rules for purposes ostensibly or symbolically set apart from the serious, essential aspects of life" (xvii), he spends the first third of the book describing and analyzing ancient, primitive, and medieval sport forms. This is largely in anticipation of his central thesis; namely, that sport as we know it is something relatively new, dating only from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

While this last position is hardly novel,¹ Mandell is refreshing in his insistence that "it is idle to look for the precursors of the competitions and games of modern industrial society by tracing the history of these activities themselves." This is an important point that Mandell argues forcefully. Sport as we know it is modern. We cannot read backward into history on the basis of a novel concept. Function and meaning do not necessarily follow form. Ancient Greek athletics, then, tell us little about what modern athletics means or should mean. Historians, who so often grasp for "lessons from the past," need to beware of distorting modern concepts like amateurism or physical education by injudiciously raiding the historical record.²

Today's sports "traditions," says Mandell, developed within the last two and one half centuries. And his best chapters carefully survey the twin roots of this development; one in England and one on the Continent. To England and the

1. See Allen Guttman. *From Ritual to Record: The Nature of Modern Sports* (New York, 1978); Alan Ingham, "American Sport in Transition: The Maturation of Industrial Capitalism and Its Impact Upon Sport," (Ph.D. diss., University of Massachusetts, 1978); Melvin L. Adelman, "The Development of Modern Athletics: Sport in New York City, 1820-1870," (Ph.D. diss., University of Illinois, 1980).

2. See Don Kyle's article and book review touching this issue, both in this Journal, Spring, 1983 and Winter, 1984 issues.

Industrial Revolution he credits the growth of "rationalization, standardization, calculation, and measurement." As he puts it, "sport, like manufacturing and trade, became ever more directed to attaining efficiency and its emphatic evidence, statistically provable and stateable accomplishments (p. 151)." The codification of rules, the creation of hierarchies of players, managers, and officials, the notions of teamwork and training, as well as the creation of records all fit neatly into the capitalist economic and political base of England and, quickly, America.

Mandell goes beyond this more familiar thesis when he outlines the other root of modern sport. This emanated on the Continent among intellectuals, particularly German intellectuals like Basedow, Guts Muths, and Jahn, but including others in France, Sweden, and Bohemia. Their gymnastics, games, and exercises—so well-described in histories of physical education—comprised what Mandell calls "induced" or "synthetic" sports. Although displaying the same concern for performance, training, and measurement that one finds in horseracing, boxing, and football, induced sports were "much more consciously devised. They were also determinedly uplifting, healthy, and intentionally ideological—which ever more came to mean patriotic (p. 162)." This highly analytical and critical approach toward gymnastics and sport was, it seems, indigenous to the Continental experience. It is not surprising that it could be grafted so easily to political ideologies on both the far right and left.

The Anglo-American and Continental roots of modern sport fused in the form of the modern Olympic movement. Herein the quest for records, the growth of bureaucracy, the division of labor, as well as unabashed and avowed chauvinism find their most advanced and most widely recognized form. Instructors seeking a concise description of the modern Olympics will find these two chapters particularly appealing.

Ultimately then, Mandell's major contribution lies not so much in his treatment of any one component of his argument. Rather, to my mind anyway, it lies in his suggestions about the coalescence of the Anglo-American with the Continental traditions during the last century, when the Olympic Movement grew to take center stage.

There are problems, of course, for anyone attempting a cultural history that ranges from Ancient Egypt through pre-Meiji Japan to contemporary America, with countless stops in between. Greatest of all is the difficulty of finding some unifying framework on which to mount the myriad, disparate details that have escaped historical oblivion. As Werner Sombart put it, "A general history always requires an overall model, good or bad, against which events can be interpreted. No theory, no history."³ Mandell's thesis on the transition to modern sport is not a general interpretive framework, but rather a derivative of one-one that lacks some consistency and contains clear limitations.

3. Quoted in Fernand Braudel, *Capitalism and Material Life: 1400-1800* trans. Miram Kocham (New York, 1973), p. xi.

Although he is never explicit on this, Mandell appears to view sport as culture in the sense of a *signifying system* through which, as Raymond Williams describes it, “a social order is communicated, reproduced, experienced and explored.”⁴ For instance, in summarizing “sport before high culture,” Mandell says that “New technologies and new political organizations regularly resulted in new varieties of class-specific and broadly sanctioned recreations or theatrically presented contests that symbolically affirmed the correctness of the social order that fostered them (p. 15).”

While Mandell properly views sport as a significant cultural form, however, somewhere between the first and second thirds of the book he shifts his view on the relationship of sport to the social order. In most pre-modern societies (with the possible exception of Japan) sports “were particular adaptations to or reflections of certain economic and political realities. When the realities changed, the sports changed” (p. 88). But when he turns to modern sport and England, we find a change in the *function* of sport (and, we may presume, culture). The calculation in racing, the debrutalizing of boxing, the codification in football are novelties that not only “indicate changes in society” but which also “may, in turn, *point the way for other changes* (p. 134, my emphasis).” At some point, then, sport is transformed from a rather passive reflection of a social and economic “base” to a more dynamic force that might actually *influence* its broader foundation. But what accounts for this shift in the *significance* of sport as culture? Mandell is never clear on this, but I suspect the difference stems more from his focus on the transition to modern sport than it does from any cultural deficiencies of pre-modern sport forms. As a signifying system, sport, leisure, and recreation have always been (as Williams puts it) “mutually constitutive” with the social system. Mandell mistakenly (and perhaps inadvertently) slights the constitutive nature of pre-modern sport. Indeed, for some one concerned with signification, Mandell surprises the reader by calling the public festivals “strange aspects” of Roman culture (p. 80), or the baths a “strange indulgence” (p. 85), or one of Henry the Eighth’s tournaments “silly” (p. 115).

There is another troublesome area in Mandell’s model, and that is his oversimplification of the transition to “modern” sport or “modern” society, particularly in England and America. For instance, he states (p. 152) that “sport not only eased, but actually promoted the mental adaption of the whole [English] population to the demands of the modern world.” This statement will be problematic to many. The complex developments of capitalism in England and America were the stages for class formation, class consciousness, and class conflict. Recently, historians have begun to examine the relationship of sport to all this. While much more research needs to be done, it is becoming clearer that sport forms like baseball or soccer could be usurped, if only temporarily, by workers who resisted the modern mentality. Mandell’s account misses the texture of resistance, accommodation and incorporation that has increasingly

4. See Raymond Williams, *The Sociology of Culture* (New York, 1982), p. 13

marked the best works on the subject. The deficiency is ironic, since his preface includes the bon mot that cultural history should illustrate "persistent themes in human nature," such as "the uses men make of their power over others." On balance, the book paints a functionalist world of consensus.

Along similar lines, I wish that Mandell had explicated his model more fully in chapters eleven, thirteen, and fourteen, which attempt a contemporary analysis of sport performance, sport organizations, and sport art. These chapters are not as coherent or as tightly edited as the others. His complaints about the deluding of black athletes appear in similar form in two chapters. His attack on the problems in college athletics appears two chapters after his discussion of the current American scene. Moreover, after both an excursus on racism, sexism, and media irresponsibility and a more interesting chapter on the joyous and inspiring moments that permeate the sport experience, Mandell does not spend much time reconciling the beautiful with the baneful. At the book's end he predicts (p. 304) "that the creative potential contained in modern sport has remained largely in the hands of shallow profiteers, ignorant sensation seekers, and opportunistic politicians cannot continue indefinitely." This is a more optimistic note than one finds in the previous chapter where he states (p. 277) that modern sport is "just part of a pattern of advance that brings with it prosperity, increase in numbers, synchronization, civilization and alas, destruction." Well, we ask ourselves, does sport reflect Weber's iron cage or does it point the way toward something better? Is it a structural mirror or a vehicle of structural transformation? This is an unanswered but a central question in the sociological literature. Mandell's last chapters, indeed the whole book, deserved a concluding chapter to better tie down these arguments. They have been defined for sociologists and historians since at least 1980 when Rick Gruneau and Allen Guttmann began their important dialogue in this journal.⁵

The bibliographic essays help explain why Mandell does not address the questions of agency, structure, resistance, or transformation. Much of the literature on these topics is in English. He has either overlooked it, ignored it, or dismissed it. One searches futilely for references to E. P. Thompson, Malcolmson, Mangan on England or to Adelman, Ingham, Beamish, or Metcalfe on North America—all have made important contributions to the question of modern sport and social development. One could cite others. Mandell's use of German sources is laudable. One hopes that he and Guttmann will shame more of us into reading important German material. On the other hand, Mandell's exclusion of important English-language sources is lamentable, troublesome, and at times (when he talks about the "pathetic" use of American source material) quite hyperbolic.

I hope, however, that readers will overlook Mandell's strident, biting, and often inaccurate characterizations of the literature. This is an interesting book.

5. See Gruneau's review of Guttmann, Novack, and Brohm in this Journal, Winter, 1980 issue. Guttmann's review of Gruneau appears in the Spring, 1984 issue, too late for Mandell to use. For an expansion of this debate, see Alan Ingham and Stephen Hardy, "Sport: Structuration, Subjugation, and Hegemony," *Theory, Culture, and Society* 2 (1984): 85-104.

It is generally well-written, witty, and analytical. I have discussed what I see as the overall thesis, but there are many other stimulating nuggets of thought that reward rereadings. The book will figure prominently in historiographical debates for some time to come.

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