

Essay Review

Popular Culture and Sport History in Early Modern Europe

Popular Culture and Elite Culture in France 1400-1750. By Robert Muchembled. Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1985. Pp. 326. \$30.00

The Birth of a Consumer Society: The Commercialization of Eighteenth-Century England. By Neil McKendrick, John Brewer, and J. H. Plumb. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1982. Pp. viii + 345. \$29.95, cloth; \$12.98, paper.

Farce and Fantasy: Popular Entertainment in Eighteenth-Century Paris. By Robert M. Isherwood. New York: Oxford University Press, 1986. Pp. 324. \$29.95.

Revel, Riot and Rebellion: Popular Politics and Culture in England, 1603-1660. By David Underdown. New York: The Clarendon Press, Oxford University Press, 1985. Pp. xvi + 324. \$29.95.

The study of popular culture has received more and more attention from historians in the past ten or fifteen years. Academic rigor and methodology have improved among the students of popular culture while the undisciplined attitudes associated with antiquarians, hobbyists, or buffs have disappeared. An important indicator of this change is the broadening of the chronological interests among students of popular culture. Whereas the easily accessible popular culture of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries has dominated the field, in recent years researchers have moved increasingly into the early modern, medieval, and ancient eras.¹ The rich surviving source materials from the early modern period have made it especially attractive to researchers of popular culture.

One important manifestation of this new interest was the appearance in 1978 of Peter Burke's *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe*.² This often cited

1. For examples see Fred E. H. Schroeder, ed., *5000 Years of Popular Culture Before Printing* (Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green University Press, 1980) and Eileen and Stephen Yeo, eds., *Popular Culture and Class Conflict, 1590-1914: Explorations in the History of Labour and Leisure* (Brighton, Sussex: Harvester Press, 1981).

2. Peter Burke, *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe* (New York: Harper and Row, 1978).

book traces the historiographical background of the study of popular culture and outlines its broad concerns and subject areas for other scholars. It also puts forward the thesis that in early modern Europe (c1500-1800) a cultural division and struggle developed between the adherents of elite (learned) culture and those of popular (mainly illiterate) culture. Ultimately, the elite culture of discipline and control prevailed just as the societies and governments of Europe became more urban, industrial, and centralized. Burke's broad synthesis of early modern popular culture has achieved widespread acceptance. As a result, some writers of textbooks and surveys have quickly incorporated its findings into their own works.⁷ In the meantime, more new research on popular culture, in all its aspects, appears all the time.

Like many subjects of research, popular culture is very difficult to define in general, let alone precise terms. In the December 1985 issue of *History Today* five eminent British historians were asked to give their answer to the question "What is the history of popular culture?"⁴ Three of them (Asa Briggs, Peter Burke, and Stephen Yeo) expressed their common opinion that defining exactly what elements made up popular culture was a knotty task. As Briggs aptly put it, "It is easier to participate in, to enjoy, or to explore popular culture than it is to define it."⁵ However, all five authors agreed that popular culture is concerned with the daily life, work, and leisure of most people in a given society. They would further accept Thomas M. Leitch's assessment that the basis for the study of popular culture is largely anthropological.⁶ Therefore, the goal of research is not merely to describe the activities but also to understand the motives, structures, and contexts behind popular culture.

Needless to say, sport historians and students of popular culture have many common concerns and goals. Allen Guttman's essay "From Ritual to Record" provides a valuable structural analysis when it identifies the seven major elements present in modern sports: secularism, equality, specialization, rationalization, bureaucracy, quantification, and records.⁷ By tracing their presence or absence in the sports of various eras, he provides a framework for understanding the changing role of sports in society and its relation to the culture, social structure, and economic organization of a society. These insights have been fruitfully applied by Guttman to a study of spectators at British sporting events from 1660 to the 1830s.⁸ This essay examines issues of sport history that are also of interest to all of the authors under review below as

3. Two recent examples are Geoffrey Parker. *Europe in Crisis. 1598-1648* (Ithaca, N. Y.: Cornell University Press, 1979), ch. 8, "The Culture of Post-Renaissance Europe" and Isser Woloch, *Eighteenth-Century Europe: Tradition and Progress, 1715-1789* (New York: Norton, 1982), ch. 6, "The Varieties of Culture."

4. Asa Briggs, Peter Burke, Jeffrey Richards, Dai Smith, and Stephen Yeo, "What is the History of Popular Culture." *History Today* 35. (December 1985): 39-45.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 39.

6. Thomas M. Leitch, "The Case for Studying Popular Culture," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 82 (Spring 1985): 119. For an excellent example of this anthropological approach see the essays in Natalie Zemon Davis, *Society and Culture in Early Modern France* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1975).

7. Allen Guttman. *From Ritual to Record: The Nature of Modern Sports* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1978), pp. 15-55 *passim*.

8. Allen Guttman, "English Sports Spectators: The Restoration to the Early Nineteenth Century." *Journal of Sport History* 12 (Summer 1985): 103-25.

general or specific issues of popular culture. Commercialization of culture (McKendrick), the evolution of traditional popular culture into mass culture (Muchembled), popular recreation and entertainment as a relatively classless activity (Isherwood), and specific games as a reflection of social structures and values (Underdown) are all topics that appear in Guttman's article.

Robert Muchembled's *Popular Culture and Elite Culture in France, 1400-1750* was first published in France in 1978, the same year that Peter Burke's book appeared. Both books cover much the same material and draw roughly similar conclusions. However, Muchembled's study is more focused in its effort to establish the historical evolution of popular culture in the early modern period. Burke attempted to survey the entire European popular culture. In contrast, Muchembled intensely studies the Picard region of France while making occasional reference to the rest of the country. Using that research, he has drawn some general conclusions for the entire country.

Popular culture was a system for survival in a hostile world for about ninety-five percent of the French population from 1400-1550/1600. They lived in a world full of insecurity and fear, both physical and mental. Hunger, cold, and illness were their constant deadly companions. Animals, whether wild or domestic, also threatened people's existence by attack, rabies, or even the stray pig by feeding on an unattended infant in a village lane or town street. Men posed threats to other men. Marauding soldiers, brigands, gypsies, beggars, and lepers all menaced settled life. Besides these constant fears, a host of mental dangers added to the woes of humanity. Night was the kingdom of the devil, storms and floods were visitations of divine anger, and the devil and malevolent spirits worked further misfortunes at all times. Life was truly nasty, brutish, and short.

To combat these dangers, men formed various bonds of solidarity. Survival could only come from collective not individual action. Neither the Church nor the central government had the resources and power to provide security at the local level. So most people developed their own sources of mutual assistance and protection: the nuclear family, the extended family, and the local community with about two to three thousand members. The extended family provided the densest network of mutual support through the selection of godparents and membership in guilds, fellowships, and fraternities.

The activities and rituals of popular culture all possessed an internal logic which worked to give temporary relief from life's multiple anxieties and to reinforce men's bonds of solidarity. Periodic festivals allowed temporary escape from routine misery. Processions, rituals, and games all reinforced group unity. In addition, the freedom from normal constraints during festivals and the competition provided by games like *la soule* (a form of soccer) temporarily purged the pent up aggressions and passions of normal existence. Anyone who has walked through Bourbon Street during Mardi Gras or witnessed the behavior of many parents at a Little League game will have seen the same forces dilutedly at work even today. Popular culture worked well as a combination of religion, moral code, philosophy, and guide for daily action. Security in a

hostile environment was thus maintained for the vast majority of vulnerable people in early modern society.

The elites of church and state, however, found this popular culture offensive and threatening. Even in the fifteenth century, municipal authorities and elites tried to tame popular culture's spontaneity and its rituals of social inversion. By 1600 the central government, the church, and the civic elites had effectively repressed or regimented urban popular culture. The largely animistic attitudes of popular culture were transformed and Christianized by the division of life's activities into sacred or secular. Festivals became pious occasions instead of times for unrestrained fun and release. Work, self-discipline, and respect for authority became the social norms in the cities. After that victory, the elite's repression of popular culture started to move into the untamed rural areas at the beginning of the seventeenth century.

The suppression of popular culture was not a planned or systematic effort. It was more a natural consequence of changes in France's power structure between 1600 and 1789.⁹ By the early seventeenth century the absolutist state and a reformed and newly efficient church possessed the means to unify the previously fragmented local communities. They could replace popular culture as the provider of security. Quickly the competing system of beliefs associated with popular culture came to be seen as aberrations, heresies, or witchcraft by the elite. New controls were asserted over the bodies and souls of the common people through dramatic increases in the use of punishments, torture, and surveillance. Monarchical, patriarchal, and clerical authority all reinforced each other. Together they overthrew popular culture.

The most dramatic manifestation of the conflict between the elite and popular culture was the persecution of witches. Women predominated as the victims of this persecution since they were both powerless and the primary transmitters of popular culture. Muchembled closely follows the ideas of Keith Thomas and Alan McFarlane in his description of the structure of witchcraft's persecution.¹⁰ Its existence denoted a divided community in the midst of a social and economic crisis. Cultural divisions effected perceptions of witchcraft. Elite judges sought to uncover evidence of an underground satanic church. On the other hand, the accusing villagers merely wanted to eliminate the remnants of animistic sorcery associated with popular culture. Either way, traditional popular culture and its adherents lost.

By about 1715 elite culture had triumphed and became the civilization of France with its values penetrating deep into the entire society and creating four levels of culture. At the top stood the rarefied civilization of the social elite. Below it was the middling utilitarian culture of the educated professionals. For the literate peasants and craftsmen there was made available a new mass culture to take the place of popular culture. This mass culture used the forms of popular

9. For a description of the development of elite culture in the early modern period see Norbert Elias, *The Civilizing Process* 3 vols. (New York: Pantheon, 1982).

10. Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (New York: Scribner, 1971) and Alan McFarlane, *Witchcraft in Tudor and Stuart England* (New York: Harper and Row, 1970).

culture but grafted onto them the values of the elite culture: discipline, work, and respect for authority. The remaining illiterate majority of the population was consigned to an existence of unrespectability and supposed barbarity, cut off from even the limited support of traditional popular culture.

Muchembled's definition of popular culture has a strong functional difference from Burke's. For him popular culture was a system of thought and action that functioned to provide small autonomous communities with relative security before the era of centralized states and national churches. Mass culture replaced this popular culture in the daily life of most people. But, it did not function as a means to communal solidarity. Instead it was a mechanism for transmitting the elite's cultural values and solidifying their social control over the general populace. Burke defines popular culture more descriptively as simply the activities and values of the broad range of a society that are open to all. As a result, the two authors evaluate eighteenth century popular or mass culture quite differently. For Burke, the commercial revolution of the eighteenth century resulted in "a golden age of traditional popular culture (material culture, at least)."¹¹ By adding the "material culture" qualification, Burke chooses to ignore Muchembled's primary concern with social control. In contrast, Muchembled views the eighteenth century popular/mass culture as

a new and extraordinarily alienating popular culture that the elites offered the masses to satisfy their supposed need for the fantastic, but in fact to distract their attention from real problems and to avoid the proliferation of social tensions and revolts. (p. 5)

Muchembled's survey of popular culture in early modern France offers a dynamic historical analysis with a vigorously argued thesis. Its contents demonstrate detailed research into the manuscript sources and secondary literature. The interpretation which the author offers on the place of games and sports in the overall framework of early modern popular culture is brief but provides an essential supplement to the seven elements of modern sports identified by Guttmann.

The essays of Neil McKendrick, John Brewer, and J. H. Plumb in *The Birth of a Consumer Society* offer another important analytical framework for historians of popular culture and sport in eighteenth century England. People's life styles at all levels of society profoundly changed because of the consumer revolution and commercialization of material life that took place. Burke's study briefly touched on this issue and its effect on the material aspects of general European popular culture.¹² His conclusions were influenced by Plumb's seminal "The Commercialization of Leisure in Eighteenth-century England" which has been reprinted in the present volume. This essay traces the growth of commercialized leisure from its beginnings to 1690 to its maturity as a flourishing industry by the 1750s and 1760s. A literary marketplace for the general reading public appeared for the first time with many of its modern components: newspapers,

11. Burke. *Popular Culture*, pp. 245-46.

12. *Ibid.*, pp. 244-50.

magazines, circulating subscription libraries, book clubs, cheap formulaic fiction, cookbooks, cheap dictionaries and encyclopedias, and children's books. Casual shopping began at this time and shopkeepers catered to it by arranging goods attractively in expanded storefront windows or specially designed display cases. Advertisements in newspapers communicated the existence of new goods and services and so stimulated demand for them. Sporting events like horse racing and cricket were among the first leisure activities to utilize the new medium of advertising. Commercialization transformed casual games and recreations into specialized and increasingly complex enterprises. Horse racing attracted leisure crowds willing to pay for their amusement which in turn prompted the development of professional jockeys and scientific horse breeding. The same process also guided cricket's development and ultimately contributed to the character of all modern sports. Thus, in this brief essay, Plumb has traced some of the broad outlines of the history of leisure for others to follow with more detailed research.

In a new essay, "The Acceptance of Modernity," Plumb identifies the key new attitude of modernity that appeared in the eighteenth century. Belief in modernity means that a society expects a hopeful future and the continual appearance of new and better things. Novelty and change become positive phenomenon. Advertising reflected this "acceptance of modernity" by the emphasis it placed on products being "new" and "improved." With the appearance of this sort of social mentality, the barrier that tradition posed to change was significantly weakened. How Plumb's concept of "modernity" could be applied to specific aspects of consumer society including sports and games should prove to be an interesting topic for much further study.

Neil McKendrick's four essays also contribute important interpretative and methodological approaches to consumerism and commercialization. "The Consumer Revolution of Eighteenth Century England" traces how the values of mass consumption gained general acceptance and supplanted traditional values of frugality and abstinence. Bernard Mandeville in 1714 pioneered the idea that private acquisitiveness was a positive social good in his *Fable of the Bees*. It was an idea that closely reflected the changing reality of English society where the ability and desire to spend were definitely on the increase. McKendrick points out the necessary link between industrial revolution and consumer revolution that economic historians have largely neglected. "The Commercialization of Fashion," "Josiah Wedgwood and the Commercialization of Shaving," and "George Packwood and the Commercialization of Shaving" are all specialized studies of specific topics. They supply important descriptions of product development, marketing, advertising, and the manipulation of taste during the consumer revolution. The modern attitudes and entrepreneurship of these eighteenth century businessmen is truly remarkable. Although none of these essays touch on sports and recreation, their methodology and conclusions are readily applicable to any similar study of eighteenth century sport.

Farce and Fantasy: Popular Entertainment in Eighteenth-Century Paris is Robert Isherwood's attempt to apply the French *Annales* school's historical

methodology to a popular culture topic.¹³ He contends quite rightly that popular entertainments used forms of presentation and themes that had remained unchanged or barely altered for centuries. Therefore, the study of vaudevilles and street performers must take into account the long epoch (*la longue duree*). Individual events have little impact on the virtually immobile traditions of popular entertainment. The same observation would be just as applicable to the study of popular sports and games in the early modern period. In the study of social history, it is most often those things that remain unchanged that possess the greatest historical significance.

Isherwood's study contributes some revisions of the interpretations of previous historians of popular culture. Both Burke and Muchembled emphasize how the elites increasingly withdrew from participation in popular culture. This was not the case with Parisian popular entertainment. Audiences at these events came from all social strata. Popular entertainment was the closest thing to a classless activity that existed in Old Regime society.¹⁴ The total inability of the elite Opera, Comédie Française, and Comédie Italienne to compete in the marketplace, in spite of government protection and privileges, demonstrates the appeal of popular entertainment and the artificiality and superficiality of the elite's withdrawal. In addition, the elite's constant struggle to control popular entertainment and its criticisms of the elite's authority and values weakens Muchembled's contention that a cultural revolution, in which elite culture successfully repressed and coopted popular culture, had taken place by the eighteenth century.

Farce and Fantasy is an excellent piece of research. Isherwood documents his contentions thoroughly from the primary sources. Throughout the book, the reader encounters fascinating and bizarre people and entertainments. Popular entertainment contained elements of a sexual, scatological, ridiculous, or fantastical nature that are every bit as advanced or extreme as any that could be encountered today. But, in spite of such promising material, the book is difficult reading. The author has piled massive detail into a loose organization that makes keeping track of the thesis and lesser contentions a struggle for the reader.

In *Revel, Riot and Rebellion*, David Underdown has produced a political history that uses the study of popular culture, including sport history, to support its conclusions. For years historians have been trying to achieve an adequate consensus about how the English Civil War started in 1641 and what attracted supporters to King or Parliament. The same problem of explaining popular loyalty also applies to the establishment of Oliver Cromwell's Protectorate and its replacement by the restored monarchy of Charles II in 1660. These events could not have occurred without the active participation of ordinary people from all levels of English society. How was their allegiance obtained by one side

13 For the contributions of the *Annales* school to the study of popular culture see, Stuart Clark, "French Historians and Early Modern Popular Culture," *Past & Present* 100 (August 1983): 62-99

14. For a similar observation about English sports see, Guttman, "English Sports Spectators," pp. 115 and 119.

or the other? Previous historians have stressed deference (the tenant-farmers' traditional acceptance of their landlords' leadership), neutralism (a local population's desire to protect itself from the ravages of war and outside interference), and class (the common people's antagonism toward the nobility and gentry) as motivators of popular allegiance. Underdown accepts that all of these explanations have some validity for explaining popular participation in the Civil War but he proposes to add a fourth and more significant motivator. In his opinion, loyalty to King or Parliament was largely based on regional differences in social structure, economic development, and popular culture.

Rural England utilized two basic farming organizations: sheep-corn and wood-pasture. Soil and topography determined which organization predominated in a region. In turn, the type of farming organization would determine settlement patterns, social structures, economic development, and the forms of popular culture. Sheep-corn farming was located on the arable chalk lands. Its chief product was grain while the sheep provided manure, wool, and meat. People lived in nucleated villages where manorial organization retained its strength, and traditional popular culture remained largely unaltered.

Wood-pasture agriculture was located on the land better suited for pasturage and dairy farming. Inhabitants of those regions lived on scattered farms and often participated in clothmaking as a form of cottage industry. It was an economic environment that was becoming increasingly dominated by outside market forces with all the fluctuations that were brought during the early seventeenth century. Change was the order of the day in wood-pasture regions. Some people rose under its challenges. Other sank into poverty. Individualism was stronger there and so was social conflict. The fortunate were frequently attracted to the doctrines of puritanism since this type of self-improving religion was best attuned to their own worldview. Conflict did not take long to develop between the godly culture of the prosperous and the traditional popular culture of the poor. Underdown's description of the tumultuous evolution of wood-pasture society thus agrees substantially with the picture of the contemporary French situation presented by Muchembled in the second half of his book.

The increasing social and economic differences that developed between the wood-pasture and sheep-corn areas also effected their popular sporting cultures. Football was the favorite sport of the sheep-corn regions. It was a traditional game that emphasized community and teamwork and provided a ritualized form of combat with outsiders.¹⁵ In contrast, bat and ball games had the greatest popularity in the wood-pasture lands. People in north Wiltshire and other dairy regions played stoolball which involved a batter and a bowler. Play put more emphasis on the individual confrontation rather than that of the group confrontation. As such, the bat and the ball games more closely mirrored the social reality of a dairying and clothmaking culture. But, whichever region is looked at, the important point is the close relationship which existed between the community's social structure, economy, religion, and popular culture,

15. Cf. Muchembled, *Popular Culture and Elite Culture*. pp. 99-100.

including its sporting life. They all must be seen together as a whole to be fully understood.

Revel, Riot and Rebellion is a fine blend of political and social history. Although its research is predominantly based on the three West Country counties of Dorset, Somerset, and Wiltshire, its findings can be and are convincingly applied to all of England. The archival research and its presentation is truly impressive. In addition, its findings go beyond simply explaining the basis for popular allegiance in the English Civil War. Many important interpretations concerning the role of traditional popular culture in English local society, puritanism and social change, disputes over church seating, and opposition to and support for the *Book of Sports* (1617) can be found in this study. Thorough research, logical organization, and readable prose characterize this volume. It will become a classic of historical writing on early seventeenth century English political and social history. Furthermore, Underdown's accomplishment, once again, points out the basic unity of history. That unity allows a broad historical study successfully to use sport history, among other things, to attain a fuller understanding of the past.

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