

## Book Reviews

Elias, Norbert, and Dunning, Eric. *Quest for Excitement: Sport and Leisure in the Civilizing Process*. Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1986. 313 pp. Notes, index. £19.50. Cashman, Richard. *'Ave a Go, Yer Mug! Australian Cricket Crowds from Larrikin to Ocker*. Sydney, Collins, 1984. 192 pp. Notes, pictures.

Among the major contemporary sociologists, Norbert Elias is unusual. He believes in the importance of historical perspective, shuns quantitative analysis, and has written extensively on sports. His *magnum opus*, *Ueber den Prozess der Zivilisation*, was originally published in 1939, generally ignored, republished in 1969, and translated into English in 1978 as *The Civilizing Process*. There are few references to sports in this two-volume work, but Elias has written a number of essays, some of them in collaboration with Eric Dunning, in which the basic argument of *The Civilizing Process* is applied to the field of sports studies. Since many of these essays appeared in German books and periodicals or in English journals not widely circulated in this country, American scholars should be delighted to have *Quest for Excitement*, which makes readily accessible the most important sports-related essays by Elias and Dunning.

The value of the collection is enhanced by a preface (Dunning) and a long introduction (Elias). The outlines of the theory are made clear. The emergence of the modern state, which claims a monopoly on the use of violence, in combination with the division of labor or what Elias prefers to call "the lengthening chains of interdependence," which involve us all in necessary social interactions, has tended over the last several centuries to diminish the spontaneous expressive interpersonal violence characteristic of the Middle Ages, the Renaissance, and early modern times. Constrained both by the increased external power of the state and by internalized restraints ("conscience," "the super-ego"), modern men and women are much less likely than their ancestors to physically assault one another in outbursts of uncontrollable rage. We mask our emotions. The history of sports, therefore, reveals a progressive diminution of the level of violence. The mayhem of Medieval folk-football becomes the closely regulated game of soccer; the spectator riots which sometimes attended eighteenth-century cricket games give way to the murmured approval of the onlookers at Lord's,

Needless to say, Elias and Dunning set forth a far more complex account of the civilizing process as it applies to sports. The first pair of reprinted essays, "The Quest for Excitement in Leisure" and "Leisure in the Spare-time Spectrum," argue for an Aristotelian conception of leisure as an activity rather than as simple rest and relaxation. In a world characterized by routinization and

relative lack of risk, i.e., in a civilized society, men and women need excitement, and sports are among the “mimetic” activities that provide “a social enclave where excitement can be enjoyed without its socially and personally dangerous implications” (p. 90). Aristotle’s term “mimetic” is appropriate because the emotions aroused by sports spectatorship, like those experienced by theater-goers, are related to those of ordinary life “transposed in a different key” (p. 80). Adapting Aristotle’s discussion of tragedy, Elias and Dunning argue that sports provide the opportunity for catharsis. The ebb and flow of excitement in the course of a soccer match is not unlike what one experiences in the theater. At the final whistle, the sports spectator feels a sense of relief and fulfillment.

These essays are followed by two by Elias, “The Genesis of Sport as a Sociological Problem” and “An Essay on Sport Violence,” which stress the uniqueness of modern sports. Greek wrestlers and Roman boxers are, for instance, compared to modern ones in order to exemplify the extraordinary violence permissible in antiquity. Similarly, the English fox-hunt, with its emphasis on the chase, with the hounds as proxies for the hunter at the moment of the kill, is compared to earlier hunts in which “the excitement of hunting and killing animals had always been to some extent the peacetime equivalent of the excitement connected with killing humans in times of war” (p. 161). Employing the concept of “figuration,” which he prefers to “interaction” or “structure,” Elias shows that Greek statuary art derived from the same masculine values as the violence of the pancration. Elias indicates also that the decline in sports violence in eighteenth-century England paralleled the decline of English political life and was thus part of the same larger civilizing process.

The six essays which follow are by Elias and Dunning, by Dunning alone, or, in one case, by Dunning in collaboration with two of his associates at the University of Leicester. The essays range widely, but their primary focus is on (a) the transformation of folk-football into the modern games of soccer and rugby and (b) the problem of residual violence in the form of “soccer hooliganism.” In the course of these essays, the authors contend that the upper classes led the way in the modernization of sports and that sections of the lower classes have not participated fully in “the civilizing process” as it relates to sports. While middle-class players and spectators have internalized the rules of the game, alienated lower-class youths continue to act out rituals of violent masculinity. Some of what the authors have to say has been said at greater length in Eric Dunning and Kenneth Sheard, *Barbarians, Gentlemen and Players: A Sociological Study of the Development of Rugby Football* (1979) and in John Williams, Eric Dunning, and Patrick Murphy, *Hooligans Abroad: The Behaviour and Control of English Fans in Continental Europe* (1984), but the essays in *Quest for Excitement* add nuances and subtleties of various kinds, e.g., the distinction between the “segmental bonding” of traditional societies and the “functional bonding” of modern times, a distinction similar to Durkheim’s between “mechanical” and “organic” solidarity.

It should be obvious from the tone of my remarks that Elias and Dunning

have made a major contribution to sports studies. My criticisms are not meant to detract from their achievement.

Elias, among the last scholars whom one might accuse of moralistic prose, warns that "civilized" and "uncivilized" should not be taken as "expressions of ethnocentric value judgments" (p. 133). We should not criticize past societies "as if members of these societies had been free to choose between *their* standards and *their* norms and ours, and, having had this choice, had taken the wrong decision" (p. 135). To judge by the norms of a modern historian or social scientist is-ideally-to judge with full awareness of historical change and cultural difference. Such judgments are not ethnocentric except in the trivial sense that *all* ethical judgments are inevitably made from within the confines, sometimes broad, sometimes narrow, of one culture or another. I am troubled less by the ethnocentricity of which Elias has sometimes been accused than by his emphasis on spontaneous interpersonal expressive violence and his relative neglect of programmatic institutional instrumental violence. While he deplors the violence of the modern state, his approach seems to lead to the paradoxical conclusion that the states controlled by Hitler and Stalin were more "civilized" than the United States because the violence done to Russian kulaks and German Jews was done by governments, i.e., was neither spontaneous nor interpersonal nor expressive in the sense presently under discussion. All in all, the concept of modernization seems, despite *its* unfortunate connotations of linear progressive development, to be preferable to the even more value-laden and ambiguous term "civilization."

I also have my doubts about the concept of catharsis as it relates to sports. After all, the most "dramatic" soccer game is very different from the experience Aristotle analyzes in the *Poetics*. Social psychologists have done an enormous amount of research devoted to testing the catharsis theory as it relates to sports, and all the research seems to indicate that sports spectacles increase rather than diminish propensities to commit acts of violence. Although several of Dunning's essays indicate skepticism vis-à-vis the catharsis theory, Elias and Dunning have neither come to terms with the empirical research in this field nor worked out the inconsistencies in their work (e.g., the different views of catharsis in "The Quest for Excitement in Leisure" and in "The Dynamics of Sport").

There are also empirical data which raise questions about the theory that the quest for the excitement of sports is an escape from the routinization of modern life. If this is the case, and it certainly *seems* plausible, how can we explain the well-attested fact that the advantaged rather than the disadvantaged members of society are more likely to do and to watch sports? In other words, those whose lives are least routinized, e.g., professionals, are more likely to seek excitement in sports than those whose lives are most routinized, e.g., factory workers. Perhaps the answer lies in the *kinds* of sports that are popular with different groups of people.

There is another criticism which, in its way, is a form of praise. The work of Elias and Dunning is so very important that one is sometimes tempted simply to

adopt their views in their entirety just as one is tempted to accept the comprehensive paradigms of Marx, Durkheim, Weber, or Freud. The temptation should be resisted because the paradigm is not comprehensive enough. There are concerns which Elias, and to a lesser extent Dunning, have not dealt with as fully as one might hope. The focus on violence as a discriminator, for instance, has led them to pay little attention to other discriminators, e.g., the level of quantification which sets modern sports apart from those of all previous ages. The valuable emphasis on excitement, tension, and catharsis is well and good, but there is also the enormously important role played by the psychological process of identification, which turns athletes into symbolic representatives of social groups. This sort of symbolism is discussed in Dunning's "Figurational Dynamics of Modern Sport," but a good deal more needs to be done if we are to achieve an adequate interpretation of the appeals of fandom.

Richard Cashman's history of Australian cricket spectatorship is a much more conventional book in that it is not obviously informed by what C. Wright Mills referred to as "grand theory." It is not "abstract empiricism" either. *Ave a Go, Yer Mug!* is a marvelously detailed narrative splendidly illustrated with photographs and cartoons. It is definitely social history rather than mere chronicle, and Cashman writes with an eye to the constant interaction of national character, geography, social class, and spectatorship. "Australian cricket crowds never accepted the English conventions of restrained behaviour and polite applause" (p. 30). Sydney is a rougher place than Adelaide. Working-class spectators are more likely to invade the field than "members of the club." Readers familiar with Dunning's discussion of the various measures of crowd control adopted by British authorities will be fascinated by the similarity of Australian efforts to contain the "larrikins" (grandstands, differential ticket prices, security officers, etc.). There are fine accounts of the verbal behavior of the crowd. In the 1880's raucous comments were condemned as "unmanly behaviour" (p. 48) by the *Melbourne Age*, but "barracking" took hold in the 1890's. One of the Sydney "barrackers," Stephen Harold Gascoigne, jeered his way into the *Australian Dictionary of Biography!*

Although the book is a gem of its kind, Cashman is especially good on the rapid transformation of cricket crowds when media-magnate Kerry Packer launched Channel Nine's World Class Cricket on May 9, 1977. The game was transformed (e.g., one-day matches), packaged for commercial TV, and popularized among groups who had formerly shrugged cricket off as a silly game for Oxbridge wankers. World Class Cricket is a great success in that it does indeed appeal to a new set of fans. They are younger, more "ethnic," and less affluent than the traditional fan. They are also more violent. "Barracking" has become obscene and racist. Australians, it seems, are now very like Englishmen and Americans.

From the "grand theory" of Elias through Dunning's mix of theory and empirical research to Cashman's detailed narrative is quite an intellectual trip, one that every sports historian should be eager to embark upon.

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