

The Invention of the Sporting Republic: Middle-Class Ideology and Sport During the Progressive Era

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“The Invention of the Sporting Republic” explored the relationship between Progressive explanations and definitions of the role of sport and the middle class in the construction of a liberal modern civilization. It sought to examine the ideas which motivated American thinkers who promoted a revisionist liberalism to incorporate athletics into their efforts to construct a national culture designed to realize their political agenda.

American advocates of republicanism and the liberal tradition found themselves in a quandary at the beginning of the twentieth century. The classical liberal political culture which they cherished had been defined in Western thought as requiring a vigorous and vital citizenry composed of economically independent individuals. The architects of republicanism, from Polybius to Jefferson, had warned that urban and “artificial” civilizations produced corrupted and decadent people and led to conditions in which power and privilege became centralized in the hands of the few. In the eyes of many republican theorists during the progressive era, the industrialization of the late nineteenth century, the rise of the city as the focus of economy and society, and the “closing” of the frontier was creating precisely the type of social system which the sages of classical republicanism had warned could not sustain liberal government.

American Progressives who found republicanism the most desirable of all governmental forms searched desperately for ideas and institutions which would help them to revise the republican formula to fit the conditions of the new industrial order. In modern sport they found a tool which they believed would promote a vitalistic brand of nationalism, inculcate a respect for the rules of the game and constitutions, channel energy in productive directions, promote equality and preserve the values which they associated with the republican order. Through the concept of a “middle class” the Progressives promoted new ideology of social roles which identified the backbone of revisionist

liberalism with a group of citizens who existed in a mobile if amorphous area between the underclass and the leisure class. They considered sport as a central component in their efforts to define the new middle class, and to reshape the liberal tradition.



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