

Sport, Class and Society: A British Perspective

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Though there is a long tradition of writing on sport in Great Britain, it is only relatively recently that it has become an accepted part of academic life. Its position is still quite a marginal one, but even so some interesting characteristics have emerged in the treatment of sports history. Many of its practitioners are from the more established fields of social history, in particular from labour history. Not surprisingly they have brought with them a strong concern with *class* as the principal explanatory concept in their analysis of sports.

This is in many ways entirely appropriate, since Great Britain has a powerful claim to be regarded as the birthplace of modern *popular* sport. Not only was mass participation to be found from the late 19th century in the sport of football, but a large popular following had developed in sports such as boxing, darts, walking, speedway, rugby and the racing of pigeons and greyhounds by the inter-war period. Some of these activities, notably boxing, brought together various social groups. Others, such as pigeon-racing, acquired an exclusively working class character, while in yet others there was a clear social demarcation between participants. Rugby, for example, illustrates not only marked social barriers as between its two codes (Union and League) but distinctive geographical differences as well. As a game confined to working class communities in industrial England, Rugby League communicated a particular sense of 'northern-ness'.

Notwithstanding these configurations Great Britain presents an exceptional picture of working class sport when viewed in European terms. The difference lies in the relatively minor role played by the formal organisations of labour (trades unions, Labour Party etc) in the growth of British popular sport. Whereas in France and Germany the labour and socialist movements had taken a leading part in sponsoring sporting activity among working people (and, in so doing, directing it into political areas) the British labour movement was unable to politicise sport to any significant extent. The prior existence of a mass popular culture, and the eclectic nature of labour ideology, are important considerations in any explanation of this divergence.

This has meant that there has been no *overt* political meaning in British sporting culture, even though sport might have engendered a broad class consciousness among male workers which in turn could help nurture Labour loyalties. For all of these reasons an emphasis on class in the study of British sport is justified. But it is by no means the only identity signified in sporting practice and discourse. And if British sports historiography is to develop beyond its present boundaries its practitioners must be prepared to explore the complexities of nationalism, regionalism, ethnicity, race, age and gender more boldly than hitherto.