

Between the Virgin and the Dynamo: Athletics, Energy and Social Discourse in Modernizing America

Mark Dyreson

Weber State University

At the Paris Exposition in 1900 Henry Adams observed the great dynamo which sparked him to write his pessimistic essays concluding that the uncontrollable energies unleashed by modernity portended ominous consequences for the future of civilization. If Adams would have turned away from the machines at the main venue and observed exhibitions at other venues, he could have seen a demonstration at the Paris fair of energy controlled and applied by human dynamos- the American domination of track and field at the Second Olympic Games which were held in conjunction with the *fin-de-siecle* World's Fair.

While scholars like Allen Guttman and Melvin Adelman have linked the rise of athletics in its contemporary form with modernization theory, their paradigms have mostly described rather than explained why sport was linked with modernization. Other scholars, like T. Jackson Lears, have linked modern sport with the culture of antimodernism. In fact, the athletes and their games symbolized a commitment by American bourgeois culture to certain kinds of modernity, and a rejection of other modern frameworks. Sport became a key ingredient in the discourse to define the direction of modern progress in an effort to control energy and avoid the gloomy future of Adams' imagination. Sport was not as secular as the modernization theorists have asserted, nor was it as

atavistic as Lears claimed. Instead, it played an important role in an attempt to synthesize traditional and modern historical ideologies and forces.

This study charted the connection of modern athletics to the broader discourse concerning the nature and direction of change and evolution in the late nineteenth- and early-twentieth century United States. It also was an effort to understand why the promotion of a republican version of vitalism through athletic competition became central to the progressives attempts to engineer a corporate civilization.