

Richard Holt, *Sport and Society in Modern France*. Macmillan, London, in association with St. Antony's College, Oxford, 1981. pp.256. Bibliog., Index.

I am not a historian, much less a sports and social historian, thus, I cannot competently judge Richard Holt's book as a historian would. My perspective is that of a 'political sociologist', specialist on contemporary France, and an unathletic academic notably uninterested in sport as such. On all three of my levels of expertise/prejudice, this is a fascinating, profitable and enjoyable book indeed. It sheds considerable light on 'modernizing' tendencies in popular culture, enduring characteristics of French society, and the evolution of a wide variety of different sports. It is clear, interestingly-written, professionally produced, and illustrated by well-chosen photographs (including a racy cover of the *tour de France*, that most popular of French sports, showing struggling cyclists passing through a crowd of workers, bourgeois, police, and soldiers - all men - in 1923.) The cover aptly symbolizes the major themes of the book: the emergence of mass spectatorship, often partly across class lines;

commercialisation of sport; nationalist influences in sporting preferences; and social mobility via competitive and increasingly professionalised sporting activity. At the same time, the cover also raised an interesting paradox that is only summarily treated by Holt; why so few women as either participants or spectators in modern sports before World War II?

The book jacket blurb on my copy of Holt seems quite accurate and succinct:

This book offers the first detailed and scholarly account of sport in France from the later nineteenth century to the outbreak of the Second World War . . . Sport is presented as an important social indicator in its own right, as accurate a measure of values, attitudes and behaviour as the study of religious belief, class structure or economic life,

Moreover, several of Holt's specific themes, which are consonant with those developed by such influential predecessors in French studies as Richard Cobb, Eugen Weber, Peter Stearns, Laurence Wylie, and Theodore Zeldin, deserve mention. The importance of diversity of sport and especially local traditions in the face of increasing national pressures, the use of foreign models (British rugby, German gymnastics, Flemish cockfighting and Spanish bullfighting) but also indigenous invention (cycling), the persistence of religious and partisan politics in sporting bureaucracies, the disjunction of motives between elite, club leaders (concerned for patriotism and morality) and club participants and spectators (concerned for fun and excitement), and the persistence of gender, class, and urban-rural differences - despite the onrush of urbanisation and mass culture - all of these are well-developed and documented phenomena in this book,

Two problems remain, however, one minor and one fairly major. In his analysis of violence in sport, Holt speaks of 'atavistic ferocity' (133) 'working off. . . aggression' (136) and 'the endless struggle for territoriality' (138), in opposition to 'civilized' modern games and 'educated public opinion' particularly as exemplified especially in the Protestant and anglo-phile middle class. The decline of violence in sport and/or its redirection and control as modernisation proceeds is obviously a crucial topic. However, Holt is ambiguous in using both quasi-biological explanations and

more strictly historical and sociological explanations. These may be capable of synthesis but in this instance the two kinds of analysis are simply juxtaposed.

Finally, the question of women's participation in sport is not sufficiently addressed, particularly since Holt has seemingly made a very strong case for their needing to indulge in sport as much as urban male workers and employees. Why should they too not need and want to develop their physical health, enjoy excitement and escapism, use their increased leisure time (at least before marriage) in active ways? Why should tennis and, to a lesser extent, cycling have been the only (minor) avenues for women's sports? Why didn't women respond to male exclusiveness in their sporting clubs by founding clubs of their own? We know that women after World War II did come to participate in a whole new range of sports; why so little, however, before the war? It is Holt's virtue that he allows such issues to be raised at all. He has opened up sports history to at least one outsider and shown how fascinating it can be; hopefully, he and others will go even further down that interesting avenue of research.

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