

Garry Whannel, *Blowing the Whistle. The Politics of Sport*. Pluto Press, London, 1983. pp.117. \$7.50 paper.

Garry Whannel's little book on the politics of sport is one of a series devoted to the objective of making socialist ideas popular. Because, as Whannel reminds us, socialists have not paid much attention to sport, the author adopts an additional related, but separable, objective of persuading socialists to include sport on their agenda. In brief, he hopes to make sport popular with the socialists and socialism popular with the sports people.

The book begins with the familiar catalogue of political incidents in the history of international sport. Surprisingly then,

we are told that this is not what the book is about. What it is about is the social context of sport, the power structures which have governed the development of sport in England. In view of the irrelevance to the rest of the book and to its objectives, it is not surprising that this first chapter is disorganised into four sections which have little coherence. Chapter two briefly surveys, without references, four common socialist critiques of sport. It is to the author's credit that he does not find them convincing, although each has its measure of truth.

In Chapter three the development of English sport under white male domination from pre-industrial festivals is surveyed. The historical survey of sport is continued in chapter four, where the author describes how different sports have coped, or failed to cope, with commercialism, sponsorship and television. Here a brief excursion into the topic of popular recreation begins with perhaps the most blatant of the unsubstantiated claims: 'recreation under capitalism is bound to be riddled by contradictions' (78).

Chapter five, headed *Sport and the State* is really a predictable criticism of the British Sports Council. The final chapter presents arguments for socialist sport focussing on the place of elite sport, nationalism in sport, and competition. Little that is new is offered here, but the author does avoid simplistic solutions by leaving the issues open. He is not prepared to say that nationalism and competition are bad, but suggests that in a rationally planned system of sport, things could be better. He is bold enough to consider the contention that some sports may be more worthwhile than others, but he can suggest only the class background of the usual participants as a criterion for selection. Luckily he realises the inadequacy of this consequence of his socialist perspective, but he does not pursue the implications of his doubts. Leaving the difficult questions for discussion is typical, and is one of the main reasons why the book will not convince anyone that such socialist analysis has anything to say about sport which has not already been said. The difficult questions remain poorly formulated and unanswered here as elsewhere.

The author is clearly an astute observer of sport as an institution, but seems not to have taken the time and the trouble to examine fully his impressions, except where he is talking about television. In addition, he seems to be hindered, in coming to any real conclusions, by his socialist perspective, which all the time diverts his attention away from sport to its sources of control. While it may well be true that it is necessary to understand how sport is controlled if one wishes to bring about change, it is equally necessary to show that the results of the changes are worthwhile and the proposed mechanisms likely to be effective. The book has little to say, and nothing new, about what sport would be like under socialist control, and the proposed ways of bringing about the changes are unconvincing. It is not very enlightening to be urged to make sport more humane, cooperative, non-racist and non-sexist, nor very convincing to be told that these may be achieved by social ownership and democratic control. He does not like amateur patriarchal sport; nor does he like the new commercial sport. Socialist sport may well be better but the arguments in this book are not convincing.

I do not believe the book will achieve either of its objectives. Non socialists will find too much taken for granted about socialism; socialists will find too much taken for granted about sport. Whannel would have done himself and his cause more good by making his promising lines of argument more substantial and by eliminating some of the socialist rhetoric which tends to obscure what could be worthwhile in the book.

In spite of these defects, the book has pedagogical value. It would serve well as an introduction to the social study of sport for the modern undergraduate, because it raises all the questions in a mildly provocative and colloquial way. When the students begin to think about sport, however, it will be time to move on to more substantial material.

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