

J. Harris and R. Park (eds) , *Play, Games and Sports in Cultural Contexts*. Human Kinetics Publishers, Champaign, Illinois, 1983. pp. ix + 521. \$US24.95.

Traditionally, books on the anthropological aspects of play, games and sports have been conspicuously scarce. For some reason anthropologists have lagged behind historians and sociologists, who have published most of the texts on the cultural dimensions of play, games and sports. Consequently, our understanding of these ludic activities has largely revolved around the *stranger's* point of view, due to historians' and sociologists' reliance on 'etic' (that is, an 'outsider', 'external' or 'objective') methodologies. An anthropological approach that emphasises the 'emic' (that is, 'insider', 'internal', 'subjective') perspective has long been needed to complement historical and sociological accounts. To a certain extent, the book under review does enable us to gain some insights into play, games and sports through the eyes of the natives. After reading Geertz's famous and spellbinding analysis of Balinese cockfighting, one's mind reels with the number of insights he provides about Balinese people. This and several other articles in the text are useful in demonstrating how ethnocentric and temperocentric our own cultural definitions of play, games and sports really are.

Overall, however, *Play, Games and Sports in Cultural Contexts* is disappointing for a variety of organisational, methodological/epistemological and conceptual errors of commission and omission. Due to space limitations I will only briefly mention problems associated with the first two points and then discuss the major conceptual deficiencies. From an organisational standpoint the book

lacks coherence because the editors have reprinted a collage of research that was written over many years about widely different types of societies and for different purposes. Moreover, the five sections of the book ('Games, Sports and Interpretations of Cultures', 'Sports and Rituals', 'Play and Interpretations', 'Socialization and Enculturation through Play, Games and Sport', and 'Acculturation, Cultural Pluralism, Games and Sport') overlap considerably.

Epistemologically/methodologically the book is unbalanced because the editors highlight the advantages of hermeneutic analysis without informing the reader of its considerable problems and drawbacks (for example replication, inference, proof/plausibility, reactivity, subjectivity/detachment, ethical considerations).

The most glaring deficiency worth exploring more extensively is the editors' conceptual/definitional approach to play, games, sport and culture. Culture is defined mainly in terms of symbols, values, beliefs, meanings, ideas, rituals, interpretation and communication. The authors go on to stress that culture is not some reified entity 'out there', but a reality that is constructed, shared and interpreted by *people* (p.14). Furthermore, they emphasise that in studying culture it is essential to ask people (that is, 'the natives') what cultural artifacts (in this case play, games and sport) actually *mean* to them (p.24). There are probably few social scientists who would argue against this approach as a *starting point* for cultural analysis. However, unlike Harris and Park, there are many who would wish to push the analysis further by asking questions like '*Which people's* cultural "interpretations" are the *dominant* ones?' or '*Whose* cultural "meanings" *hold more sway* than others?' Such questions cannot even be asked by Harris and Park because they focus on the *normative-symbolic* dimensions of culture and disregard its *material* and *social* components.

What Harris and Park fail to mention is that people do not make culture 'just as they please'. Any culture at any time is inter-related with historical tendencies, material exigencies and social structures that cannot be 'wished away'. Likewise, people do not 'play' exactly as they wish. For example, what real cultural alternatives are available to youths in advanced industrial societies who play (or work) in a sporting culture characterised by

values such as rationalisation, achievement, quantification, linear progress and technical efficiency - orientations that mirror the normative-symbolic order of a bourgeoisie-dominated society?

For Harris and Park culture exists in an economic, political and ideological vacuum. They have sanitised culture by almost completely severing it from any association with constraint, domination, conflict or social control. Thus, with a few exceptions (the articles by Lipsky and Coakley) the readings they have selected conform to this bowdlerised notion of culture, despite the fact that literature is available on the following topics: the 'culture of consent' characteristic of Italian Fascist sport (de Grazie), the 'ritual power' of English fox-hunting (Howe); the 'subculture of violence' in North American ice hockey (Faulkner, Vaz); the 'contested cultural terrain' of English soccer (Taylor); the 'games ideology' of Victorian England's ruling elite (Mallea, Mangan, Lansbury); the 'cultural capital' of modern sport (Bourdieu); and the 'cultural politics' of West Indian cricket (James, Patterson, Manning). I am not calling for a replacement of the editors' one-sided subjective idealism by some equally reductionist, objectivistic theory of economic or political determinism. I am merely stressing that the patriarchal, racial, political and class inequalities, hegemonies and ideologies that are contained in the play, games and sports of societies must be dealt with by *dialectically* theorising idealism and materialism.

The editors are not only *idealistic* in their approach, they also propagate a tendency that Brian Sutton-Smith, a leading play theorist, has warned against - the continual *idealisation* of play. By this he means the traditional emphasis on the positive, functional and idyllic sides of play, to the neglect of its dangerous, nasty, cruel, and violent elements. With a few exceptions, the editors have selected articles that emphasise features such as flow, ecstasy, conviviality and freedom. Almost absent are examples of coercion, manipulation, savagery, resistance, conflict and social control.

A final disappointment worth mentioning is the authors' failure to locate satisfactorily the cultural analysis of play, games and sport in the mainstream concerns of hermeneutic science. This is somewhat surprising since both authors have recently published

state of the field articles in the history of sport (Park) and hermeneutics of sport (Harris) in which they do relate subdisciplinary and parent discipline themes. In this book one searches the introduction, epilogue and index in vain for references to the major scholars and competing schools of thought associated with cultural studies. For instance, Raymond Williams and scholars attached to the *Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies* are not even mentioned in the book.

Near the end of their introduction the authors ask, 'How might beginning students as well as mature scholars come to know more about the meanings and functions of these cultural phenomena' (that is, play, games and sports)? they then conclude by suggesting that the papers in their book 'should prove useful in helping us to move toward answering these questions' (p.26). I am afraid that our movement will not be too far or too fast unless both students and teachers are exposed to a much wider perspective of cultural studies than is contained in this reader.

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