

BOOK REVIEWS

Kendall Blanchard and Alyce Cheska, *The Anthropology of Sport*. Bergin & Garvey, South Hadley, Massachusetts, 1985. Index, illus., pp.xii + 306. \$U.S.16.95 paper.

As the title of this book implies, Blanchard and Cheska attempt to illustrate how our understanding of sport can be enhanced by an anthropological perspective. After outlining the genesis and development of anthropological perspectives on sport, theoretical and methodological issues and the 'culture approach' to sport, the authors use archaeological, ethnographic and ethnological evidence to demonstrate how anthropology can extend our knowledge about the meaning, structure and function of sport. They then conclude by suggesting how anthropologically-informed people can apply their knowledge to sporting contexts and also better understand some social problems surrounding contemporary sport such as age and gender discrimination, violence, and politics.

The book has several commendable features. Firstly, it has a certain degree of integration, at least for the first six chapters. Secondly, it contains a lengthy bibliography of mainstream and sub-disciplinary research in the area by anthropologists. Thirdly, it has discussion topics and suggested projects at the end of each chapter which students and teachers of sport should find useful. Finally, the authors' presentation of examples from a variety of preindustrial societies (e.g., Mayans, Amerindians, Australian Aborigines, Polynesians, Pentecost Islanders, Eskimos, the Chuckchi, the Dani, the Ashanti and Zulus) provide the unsophisticated reader with an acute awareness of how important cultural context is in understanding play, games and sport. These illustrations will also be very useful to philosophers, historians and sociologists who wish to complement or extend examples from their respective disciplines.

However, readers should be aware that the book has several prominent shortcomings. In the first place, although this book, unlike its precursor, *Play, Games and Sports in Cultural Contexts* by Harris and Park (see the review in *Sporting Traditions*, Vol. 2, No. 1)

mentions the exploitative, violent, oppressive, political, brutal and at times deadly aspects of sport, it is firmly encapsulated within the symbolic-normative approach to culture.

A second and related limitation is the author's concept of social and cultural 'evolution'. Blanchard and Cheska propose a model of 'sociocultural adaptation' which suggests that evolution is a linear, additive and gradual process. As scholars like Giddens have demonstrated, social change is sometimes a *qualitative* leap involving massive transformations of social systems. For instance, in just under two hundred years, the preindustrial societies, in which nearly all human beings have lived, have almost been obliterated and supplanted by predominantly urban, secular, industrial states with formidable military and technological capabilities. Similarly, as Norbert Elias, Eric Dunning, Richard Gruneau and Alan Ingham have noted, the physical contests, mock battles, folk-games and 'leisure' activities of preindustrial hunters, gatherers, peasants, villagers and townspeople underwent a *metamorphosis* with the rise of industrial capitalism and bear only a prototypical resemblance to contemporary 'sport'. The book demonstrates an insensitivity to such fundamental historical influences and needs to explain 'evolution' in a much more sophisticated manner.

A third deficiency is related to the authors' ethnographic bias. Although the final two chapters and sections of others deal with industrial societies, the authors consistently favour ethnographic research which has been conducted in preindustrial settings. Ethnographies of play, games and sport which have been completed in industrial contexts are underrepresented, as are references to mainstream ethnographic journals such as *Urban Life* and *Urban Anthropology*.

Finally, the book will be a disappointment to scholars who view anthropology as a form of *critique*. Despite containing material on sexism, ageism and inequality, the book is squarely situated within a liberal-conservative perspective. For example, 'politics' is viewed as an entity 'out there' that 'intrudes' into or 'interferes' with the apolitical institution of sport, instead of a phenomenon that is inherent in everyday life and all institutions. Little attention is devoted to economic and political anthropology

and references to critical journals like *Dialectical Anthropology* are non-existent.

In summary, the book really should be called something like 'An Ethnographic Perspective on Play, Games and Sports in Preindustrial Societies'. We still await a critical and hermeneutic approach to sport that is historically sensitive and unafraid of propagating an ethnographic perspective that is at home in both preindustrial and industrial contexts.

Jim McKay
Human Movement Studies
University of Queensland