

SATURDAY AFTERNOON THEORY

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I

The editorial preface of *Sporting Traditions* 3 (1) solicited responses to Brian Stoddart's *Saturday Afternoon Fever*, Bob Stewart in that edition of the journal contributed a review essay. I will try not to repeat his comments, except in two areas - the book's marketing strategy and its anecdotal approach - which I wish to develop.

Lest my comments be viewed as overly negative, I should stress that there is much that is impressive in Stoddart's book. The breadth of his knowledge of the area is incontestable and he displays a flexible, suggestive and inquiring approach to sport as a social phenomenon. Yet, ultimately, I find the book unsatisfying, even frustrating. This is due to two factors which may or may not be linked. The first is the book's uneasy positioning in the marketplace and the second its theoretical shortcomings. It is possible, perhaps probable, that the decisions made concerning the former have detrimentally affected the latter. I will consider these points in turn.

II

Stewart points out that Stoddart was "apparently persuaded that 'marketable' sports books are not complicated by foot-noting"¹ and that as a result the book is less academically useful than it might have been. Decisions about how to write a book and target a readership are difficult, particularly in a field like sport which is so much a part of everyday discourse. As Stoddart points out, "sport has been *eulogised* rather than *criticised*"² and the writer is faced with the choice of joining the throng of hagiographers or the coterie of po-faced analysts. To negotiate a path between these admittedly stereotypical extremes is difficult, particularly under the gaze of publishers. *Saturday Afternoon Fever* emerges as a compromise which attempts to appeal to sports fans, the mythical

'intelligent' lay reader and the secondary/tertiary sport, leisure and cultural studies sector. It seeks to be sufficiently 'personal' in its approach to attract the sports fanatic who enjoys potted biographies of present and past sports stars. At the same time it is designed so as not to daunt or put off the generalist book-buying public whilst also containing enough 'meat' (including a lengthy bibliography)³ for a more specialist educational audience.

This safety-first strategy, which seeks to cover all bases and maximise readership, is understandable in view of the prevailing economics of book publishing.⁴ But it also means that the book is pulled in different directions. The results are sometimes curious. There are academic discussions alongside biographical tittle tattle. There are quotations from works but no precise references until we reach the twenty-seven page bibliography. Perhaps *Saturday Afternoon Fever* would have been more successful if it had aimed more directly at a particular audience. Implicit in this suggestion is the rather pessimistic assumption that no book on sport can have sufficiently universal appeal to embrace largely segregated markets. I hope that this is not the case. But as one type of reader writing in a journal for presumably like-minded souls, I will state that Stoddart's book is rather restricted as a research and teaching source. This assumption of my typicality may, however, be unwarranted.

III

In the previous discussion I have speculated that a set of authorial, editorial and marketing decisions have produced a particular kind of book. Another possibility, however, is that what I take to be self-imposed limitations may, in fact, be more thorough-going. That is, the theoretical weaknesses which are apparent in the text may have more to do with the intellectual background and orientation of the writer than any instrumental decisions about approach and content. I am a sociologist not an historian and so, perhaps, am not representative of this journal's readership. However, I hope that my comments will not be viewed simply as engendered by inter-disciplinary rivalry. As Peter Burke argues:

Sociologists and historians each see the mote in their neighbour's eye. Unfortunately, each group tends to perceive the other in terms of a rather crude stereotype.

In Britain at least, many historians still regard sociologists as people who state the obvious in a barbarous and abstract jargon, lack any sense of place or time, squeeze individuals into rigid categories and, to cap it all, believe that these activities are 'scientific'. Sociologists, for their part, see historians as amateurish myopic fact-collectors without a method, the vagueness of their data matched only by their incapacity to analyse them. In short, despite the existence of a few bilinguals... sociologists and historians still do not speak the same language. Their dialogue, as the French historian Fernand Braudel has put it, is usually a 'dialogue of the deaf'.⁵

Burke (a 'bilingual') goes on to point to the rise of social history (or historical sociology) and the increasing convergence of the disciplines in the production of a synthesis which would be:

concerned both with understanding from within and explaining from without; with the general and the particular; and which would combine the sociologist's acute sense of structure with the historian's equally sharp sense of change.⁶

I am in full concurrence with Burke's argument. The artificiality of the split between sociology and history is readily apparent. In sociology there is an increasing impatience with the poverty of synchronic theory wholly divorced from the empirical realm, while in history there is an apparent move towards more overt and sophisticated theorising.⁷ Stoddart is by no means blind to theory and lists (with due acknowledgement of oversimplification) five major groups of "contemporary social approaches to sport". These are:

- the heroic view
- the mirror view
- the conservative cultural view
- the progressive cultural criticism
- the radical Marxist (p5)

I will briefly criticise these categories and then consider the application throughout the book of Stoddart's preferred approach.

Classification of theories or approaches is never easy because few fall neatly into conceptual boxes. But Stoddart's taxonomy connects more than it differentiates. For example, the heroic view that "sport is sealed off hermetically from the rest of life" (p6) is often intertwined with the conservative cultural critique that "sport has unique social features just as do other social institutions like religion, politics and the arts" (p6). Similarly, the

mirror view that sport has "no generative power of its own, rather, it is tagged on to the coat-tails of the major social institutions" (p6) resembles in some respects the base/superstructure dichotomy in classical Marxist theory which sees the mode of production determining the cultural values and activities of any given society. This perspective is not discussed. The particular Marxist approach presented by Stoddart is Brohm's 'radical' Marxism, which is presumably to be contrasted with a 'non-radical' Marxism which is never identified. Perhaps a 'non radical' Marxism is implicit in the conservative cultural criticism which laments the "incorporation of economic values into sports" and romanticises a proletarian sporting past (p7). But it would have complicated the classification to admit this possibility.

Marxism of any kind is omitted (at least in name) from the progressive cultural criticism of which Stoddart clearly approves. In spite of progressive cultural criticism's focus on "the contribution of sport towards the production of social class" (p8), which is a Marxist preoccupation, the "mechanical severity" of Brohm is the only representative of Marxism's contribution to the analysis of sport. The contribution of Gramsci to progressive cultural criticism is ignored (perhaps suppressed), leaving Brohm's mentor Althusser as the bearer of the Marxist baton. This may be convenient for a "grave over-simplification" of current approaches to sport, but it is also a travesty of the overall intellectual configuration. Again, we may speculate that the origin of this approach may be traced principally either to the manner in which it is pitched (editorial orientation) or to the author's overall perspective. A further complicating factor is that it is often difficult to pin down precisely what the author's view is. This I will argue is due both to Stoddart's caution and also to the absence of a cohesive, unifying thesis.

IV

In *Saturday Afternoon Fever* we proceed through a series of elements which illuminate the sport/society relationship. Thus, we are acquainted with Australian sporting history, its class/status structure, its politics, media representation, commercialisation, gender inequality and ethnic dimensions. Each chapter lucidly discusses,

presumably within the framework of progressive cultural criticism, how sport is implicated in social life, its innate conservatism in Australia and the challenges to this conservatism. Stoddart uses the term 'conservative' wherever he encounters something of which he disapproves. It is probably the single most common complex noun in the book. Yet it is used in a manner which is often misleading and, at least, rather loose. At the same time, the author frequently distances himself from his discussion, often referring to the criticism of others without comment or evaluation. The result is a high level of both ambiguity and ambivalence in the analysis of sport.

At the root of Stoddart's account of "the basic patterns and social ramifications of Australian sport" (p23) is a duality - that of 'social education and economic value" (p23). Any view of sport which sees it as ennobling or "socially productive", which is imbued with the "traditional ideals of sport as fun and social education" (p108) is described as conservative. On the other hand, rejection of the conservatism which "has retarded progress towards sport becoming a recognised work category" (p126), an acceptance of its commercialisation and accommodation to "change during the course of the twentieth century" (p126) is generally viewed as progressive. For example, in the VFL club South Melbourne's transmutation into the Sydney Swans, "Old-timers saw the destruction of a rich club tradition; progressives saw economic survival" (p105). Similarly, Australian racing is seen as being "always economically if not socially progressive" (p95).

The problem with this binary framework is that it implies that the commercialisation and commoditisation of sport is somehow "progressive" (with all its favourable connotations) in the same sense that Stoddart's preferred approach is one of "progressive cultural criticism". That is, "the progressive view [which] underlies the unbreakable connection between sport and the social milieu which produced that sport" (p8) tends to identify the progress of commerce with sporting progress. This is a peculiar usage of a term like "progress", as it suggests the subsumption of sport by capital is somehow inevitable, perhaps desirable.

This logic is nowhere more apparent than in references to the "Packer circus". In discussing Dennis Lillee's involvement with

Packer's World Series Cricket, the players (led by Lillee and others) are represented as exploited by the "traditional controllers and supporters of cricket" and for whom Packer appears to be a white knight (p30). In media circles Packer is presented as a lone "progressive" voice against the conservatives and their emphasis on the "social purpose of sport" in Australia:

The media, in the main, have been foremost in opposing social progress in Australian sport. A spectacular example developed in the late 1970s when most media sources railed against the changes wrought in cricket by their colleague, Kerry Packer (p85).

Even more perplexing was the Australian Cricket Board's rejection of Channel Nine's lucrative offer for the exclusive rights to televise cricket tests in Australia in favour of the Australian Broadcasting Commission, so that:

Kerry Packer was left pondering the unbusinesslike ways of tradition-bound sports administrators (p103).

This is a surprisingly uncritical view of the wholesale movement of business into sport. Stoddart is clearly correct in viewing the process as a key part of the development of advanced capitalism. Yet he does not apply the same rigour of judgement to Packer and his ilk as he does to his betes noires, the conservatives. Thus, there is little concern with the control and commoditisation of players which Packer achieved; there is a broad and unelaborated assumption that the changes Packer stimulated in cricket were beneficial and an apparent acceptance of pure economic instrumentalism as the motive force in cricket. Kerry Packer, it seems, is not the only person impatient with cricket's slowness in becoming an unalloyed part of the profit making enterprise. For, while he is critical of the view that sport has an edifying social purpose, Stoddart appears to be quite at ease when its social purpose is principally making money for a media magnate.

V

Yet it would be unfair and misleading to suggest that Stoddart is consistent in this hard-nosed unsentimentality. For much of the book he is noncommittal to the point of infuriation, quoting critical comments (often by anonymous authors) without any explicit

evaluation. For example, the 1984 Olympic Games:

comforted many observers who feared for the future of Australian sport...successes were generally considered to vindicate the new era of sports funding... The general view was that a start had been made in retrieving the national standards... It might be argued that by 1984 Australia had reached the latest stage...(pp31-32).

This impersonal commentary is taken from a single paragraph. There is similarly distanced exposition of issues and viewpoints concerning the Australian Sports Commission (p68), criticisms of Kerry Packer (p104) and arguments against the commercialisation of sport (p126). Stoddart's view can usually be surmised, when more direct commentary is called for, while the many "ghost" critics who are not named in the text make the analysis even more disembodied at times.

But Stoddart is not always so coy. Indeed, on occasions there are glimpses of residual conservatism! How else can we explain his description of the erosion of club loyalty as 'pernicious' (p127). Is it not consonant with his conception of progressivism that players should sell their skills to the highest bidder? Club loyalty is not seen as 'tradition bound' and conservative in spite of its predominance in the period when "players received little more than beer and pies plus modest expenses for their exertions" (p127). There are also surprising reservations about the roles of sponsors and advertisers who "will drive a further wedge between the upper and lower levels of sport" (p193). Again, this is surely an inevitable product of the market-driven developments of which Stoddart is seldom critical. As we have noted, it is the much vilified "conservatism [which] has retarded progress towards sport becoming a recognised work category" (p126). Yet by the 'Stumps Summary' there are severe reservations about the modern emergence of athletes as media stars which "helps propel sport further into the entertainment and work areas" (p193). Such progression or accommodation to "change during the course of the twentieth century" has lost some of its lustre.

The clearest and most ironic example of backsliding from the general thrust of Stoddart's approach is his criticism of private ownership of sports teams. This late twentieth century development:

should not automatically be assumed as being in the best interests of the sport... Management and playing staff will be required to be more professional, and sound business and management principles will predominate. Inevitably, the traditional recruitment of administrators from willing (or unwilling) volunteers will be undermined substantially, with the key positions going to professionally trained personnel (p191).

Here, the conservative, traditional sports administrators who have been mercilessly scolded throughout the book are suddenly seen as an endangered species. Their passing, surprisingly, may not "be in the best interests of sport", when the impression given in most of the book is that it would be eminently desirable.

VI

Ultimately, the inconsistency described above can be traced to the theoretical shortcomings of the book. I am not convinced that these are due exclusively to editorial decision-making. Whatever the excuse, it does rankle to see such oversimplified comments such as "When people talk of 'class', they normally mean social position based upon income - an interpretation derived largely from the writings of Marx and Engels" (p33). These "people" are not identified, but it is clear that they know little of Marx's and Engels' conception of class, which is based on relationship to the means of production. Indeed, if Stoddart was more sensitive to this conception, he would provide a more systematic account of the class ramifications of the commercialisation of sport and the commoditisation of elite sportspeople.⁸

In spite of the emphasis on the "classed construction of Australian Sport" (p126) there is no real elaboration of the concept or systematic tracing of its contours. Tennis is described as "firmly middle and upper class" (p38), but the concepts are not defined or delineated, nor is any theoretical model acknowledged. This absence of a unifying theoretical approach hampers the analysis. In the end, it means that we have considered a range of social spheres, from class through ethnicity to gender, with no coherent view of how they may be articulated with each other. Progressive cultural criticism is, in the final analysis, banal if it does no more than assert "the unbreakable connection between sport and the

social milieu which produced that sport" (p8). This is an important first step, but an adequate theoretical perspective must also unite the disparate elements of society and culture within an overall explanatory framework.

There is little in the way of theoretical linkage between the different chapters and subjects in *Saturday Afternoon Fever*. Instead, each area is treated as relatively self-contained. For example, the chapter on "Class, Status and Community" is not effectively linked to the later chapter on "Commercialism, Amateurism and Professionalism". Furthermore, the chapters on gender and race/ethnicity are not tied into the earlier class analysis. In the case of "Playing Like a Girl" there is a one paragraph account of gender relations in production (p138), but the analysis of patriarchy and capitalism are quickly parted. In "Play an Australian Game, Mate", there is little consideration of the economic underpinnings of racism and ethnocentrism. Indeed, the major culprit is not the elite ruling class inflected conservatism normally discussed, but rather "ockerdom" (with its working class connotations) which acts as a "last bulwark...against massive social change in other areas such as food, drink and entertainment" (p182). This lack of theoretical rigour and consistency coupled with the inchoate exposition of progressive cultural criticism means that the book contains a number of important reference points but no large scale map for guidance across such difficult terrain.

VII

In concluding I would like to correct any misleading impression I may have given. I have written this review article from the position of the "academic" reader. It is eminently possible general readers and sports aficionados will not be as critical. But, as this journal acknowledges, academics and teachers will "contemplate using it as a text".⁹ I have written with this usage in mind.

Saturday Afternoon Fever is without question a most useful piece of sports history. It is the sort of book that can comfortably accommodate the needs of HSC and 'early' undergraduate students. At the same time, it is inadequate for such students (and also staff) who are generally forced to observe the academic conventions

of footnoting and referencing. The absence of such pointers in the text severely limits the book's effectiveness as a launching pad from which further studies may be made. That impressive bibliography is, as a consequence, rather wasted (in spite of its sub-headings). The theoretical underdevelopment I have criticised also restricts the text unnecessarily to the more "elementary" levels.

Thus, while *Saturday Afternoon Fever* is an impressive achievement, it is also a missed opportunity. It is not, at least for many purposes, the required reading it might have been. Perhaps under a more sympathetic publisher and editor Brian Stoddart will fill an obvious vacuum. For the moment his book shares the fate of many of our Saturday afternoon endeavours - a good deal of honest sweat has been expended with rather uneven returns.

NOTES:

1. B. Stewart, "Review Essay: Stoddart on Sport ", *Sporting Traditions* 3.(1), November 1986 , p.93.
2. B. Stoddart, *Saturday Afternoon Fever* (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1986), p.5.
3. The usefulness of the bibliography is adversely affected by the apparent lengthy gap between the submission of the manuscript and the publication of the book. There is a curious double dateline in the Preface (October 1984 and July 1985) as well as a mysterious move from Canberra to Barbados in the interim! But it appears that the first date is more significant for the bibliography. As a result, there are very few post-1983 references, which is ironic in view of the expansion of publishing in the social history and sociology of sport in the period.
4. See, for example, Kate Ahearne "Literature in the Marketplace" in *Australian Society*, September, 1986, pp 18-20.
5. P. Burke, *Sociology and History* (London, Allen and Unwin, 1980), p. 13-14.
6. *ibid.*, p.30.

7. This productive convergence is perhaps symbolised by the theme of the 1988 British Sociological Association Annual Conference "Sociology, History and Social Development".
8. For an elaboration of this argument, see Geoff Lawrence and David Rowe's "Cricket: The Corporate Pitch" in their edited work *Power Play: Essays in the Sociology of Australian Sport* (Sydney, Hale and Iremonger, 1986).
9. Editorial Preface by Wray Vamplew *Sporting Traditions* 3(1), November 1986.