

REVIEW ESSAY

THE MODERNIZATION OF SPORTS HISTORY

IAN TYRELL

UNIVERSITY OF N.S.W.

Melvin L. Adelman, *A Sporting Time: New York City and the Rise of Modern Athletics, 1820-70*. Urbana, Ill., University of Illinois Press, 1986. Bibliog. guide, illus., index. pp.388. \$24.95.

It was with a keen interest tempered only by some trepidation that this writer, who had dabbled in the specialised field of American sports history a decade ago, returned to the scene of his never-completed researches to review this thorough and interesting book. That I was, reportedly, the subject of some minor controversy in the text added a further dimension of curiosity, and I suppose with a degree of immodesty I consulted the index and discovered to my gratification - under the assumption that any publicity is good publicity - that of all the historians who have written on the subjects of cricket and baseball, my own first brief essay had been singled out for some praise, but mostly as a guage against which a new and supposedly different and superior interpretation of the origins of baseball had been erected.

I did not think thereby that a reply was called for, since the issues which divided us on the subject of the relationship between baseball and cricket seemed less substantial than rhetoric of the argument would suggest. But reading further, I discovered that Adelman's book was indeed worthy of extended methodological investigation, and critique, because it embodied a systematic attempt to apply the insights of modernization theory to American sports history, and represented a precious example of the ways in which American historians, under the influence of the social sciences and quantitative methodology, had interpreted historical reality. Within this context, some consideration of our divergent interpretations of the role of class differences in cricket and baseball is inevitable because, as labor historian David Montgomery has pointed out, modern-

ization and class interpretations are ultimately incompatible. According to Montgomery, modernization draws attention away from questions of power and ideology rooted in economic exploitation to the study of 'an impersonal, value-free process'.¹

Adelman's book certainly deserves the consideration of sports historians and other social historians and not just because of the way in which he fits his detailed research into a systematic 'theoretical' framework. Adelman suggests that the rise of modern American sports, usually dated from the late nineteenth century, had actually begun in the period 1820 to 1870, and that the shift from premodern to modern sports organization occurred first and foremost in New York. That city is depicted as the first modern city, and as the appropriate venue for the modernization of sport. But sport is not reduced to a function of larger social change. Rather, modern athletics is treated as an active agent of modernization. It also represents a response to the social and economic transformation that accompanied urbanization, industrialization and entrepreneurial development.

Specifically, these large scale social changes are (loosely) associated by Adelman with growing specialisation and differentiation in sports, especially the emergence of standardised rules, formal organisation, national competition, role differentiation with the emergence of professionalism, dissemination of information and emphasis on statistics and record-keeping. These characteristics of 'modern' sport are pitted against their polar opposites which are said to represent premodern sporting traditions. In an analysis underpinned by this familiar sociological scheme, Adelman explores the entire gamut of sports in mid-nineteenth century New York, though he gives pride of place to baseball and the turf sports. Interesting information is also included on rowing and yachting, and the curious case of pedestrianism, as well as boxing, billiards, and animal sports. The study concludes with a chapter on the ideology of modern sport and the role of the press.

Adelman's thesis largely stands or falls by the way in which he uses modernization theory. Aware that the concept of modernization has been the target of severe criticism from sociologists and historians in recent years, Adelman nevertheless favours those who persist in its use as a heuristic tool despite the inherent dif-

ficulties. Others such as Joseph Gusfield, James Henretta and Dean C. Tipps have explored the weaknesses in the modernization approach much better than this reviewer could ever hope to do, but after citing their work Adelman proceeds to discount the troublesome connotations of the concept, and rests all upon the ways in which careful use of modernization theory can illuminate the empirical data."

Even if we ignore the severe theoretical liabilities under which modernization theory labors, there are problems with its empirical application to the case of New York. The suggestion that New York was transformed from premodern to modern status from 1820 to 1870 is highly dubious. Partly because of its size, partly because of its commercial position and its mercantile economy, New York's industrial development was markedly uneven. The city was not characterised by massive industrialisation, for example, but by sweatshops and the survival of the preindustrial artisan trades. These points have been clearly developed by Sean Wilentz, in *Chants Democratic*, and by Christine Stansell as well, though the conceptual scheme on which these authors rely has been heavily influenced by the British historians Raphael Samuel and Gareth Stedman Jones in their studies of uneven capitalist development in nineteenth century England.' Adelman cites Wilentz, but has not reconciled the critique of 'modernization' in New York implicit in the pages of *Chants Democratic* with his own synthesis. To be sure, Adelman is not talking about industrialisation but rather about modernization. Yet the relationship between social and economic change and 'attitudinal' and organisational change, always a slippery problem in accounts of modernization, cannot be avoided. The cultural impact of New York's uneven development is clear enough from the wider context of social history. The heterogeneous character of New York society was perpetuated and in some ways reinforced by the capricious pattern of industrial development and its preindustrial survivals. Some of those 'survivals' were in fact imported by the process of immigration, which brought in a diverse population of working class people who, according to historian Herbert Gutman, maintained important elements of 'traditional' or 'preindustrial' cultures.⁴

All this would not matter so much if Adelman was able to show a consistent and clear pattern of modernization in New York sports. Yet this is not the case. Baseball triumphed over cricket, even

though the latter was a sport which because of its institutionalisation, professionalisation and standardised rules by the 1830s might conceivably have been better fitted to the rise of the more highly organised, and rule-oriented society. (It should be noted that Adelman has plenty of other good reasons to account for the demise of cricket and the rise of baseball, but these are not related convincingly to the issue of modernization.)

More important is the case of animal sports. If New York had truly modernized, one would expect to see a corresponding decline in the cruel and very unorganised blood sports of the lower classes such as cock-fighting and dog-fighting, sports which had been practised in much the same form since 'premodern' colonial days. These sports not only persisted up to and even in some cases beyond 1870; they thrived in the heterogeneous social atmosphere of the mercantile city, and the gambling associated with these games and with boxing became ostentatious social outlets for 'fast' young parvenus among the city's commercial classes. Only in the 1870s were these sports quite precipitously though imperfectly suppressed under the influence of the newly formed American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals. To explain such variation, Adelman in fact incorporates a class dimension in his work that sits uneasily alongside the emphasis on modernization. As Adelman himself concedes, the decline of blood sports entailed a conscious assertion of one morality over another, which 'took on class overtones'.⁵ The relationship between this class aspect and the more impersonal forces of institutionalisation and bureaucratisation is not made clear.

Equally troublesome is the way Adelman treats the various blood sports separately from the development of other, more 'modern' sports. This choice appears to be based on the assumption that each involved its own internal process of institutional adaptation. But the demise of blood sports was quite closely connected to the promotion of more wholesome alternatives, and of these none was more important than baseball. Harry Wright, the early advocate of professionalisation of baseball, for example, was also a critic of blood sports and a temperance enthusiast who preached the virtues of baseball as a form of manly athletics.⁶

Adelman's problems are compounded by his use of source materials. The coverage of the specialised sporting press and the gen-

eral press is extremely good, but the understanding of social history thereby gained is very much slanted towards the social elites, and towards the history of the individual sport rather than the social context. One could not expect to get a very good picture of artisan life and its contribution to sport without considering the community context of sport. In *Eight Hours for What We Will*, a study of turn-of-the century Worcester, Massachusetts, Roy Rosenzweig shows how the history of leisure, including sport, can be integrated with and illuminated by the study of the wider context of working class culture. True, Rosenzweig has been criticized by those who cannot see a class interpretation in his data, but my point here involves not the specific interpretation, but rather the ways in which the types of evidence and frame of reference deployed in Adelman's case stymies his study of social process.⁷ Despite its concern with social change, *A Sporting Time* too often degenerates into studies of the individual sports considered.

The best chapters discuss baseball and cricket, and particularly in the baseball chapters, Adelman does make a significant contribution that goes beyond the efforts of other authors. But even in this strongest part of the book, difficulties remain of a methodological character. Adelman is constrained to refute this writer's alleged 'class' interpretation of American baseball offered in 1977 at a conference held at the University of New South Wales.⁸ But the presentation of data makes the effects of his interpretation unclear. Adelman presents much statistical information on the 'class' character of baseballers and cricketers to disprove this author's suggestion that baseball triumphed in part because it was a game that developed its appeal to the artisan classes, while cricket increasingly expressed, especially from the late 1850s onwards, its exclusive English and class character as the game for gentlemen. It would be impossible to settle this issue without reference to comparative data for Philadelphia, where cricket was strongest, and where the gentlemanly character of the game had its clearest manifestations. Adelman's case study of New York renders such comparisons off-limits, but the New York evidence is not convincingly presented. For reasons unclear to this reviewer, the occupational data for cricketers and baseballers is not rendered comparable in the statistical tables. Baseballers are divided into 'professional-

high white-collar', 'low white collar-proprietor', skilled craftsman', and 'unskilled worker' while cricketers over the same period are merely described as 'merchant', 'financier', 'professional', 'skilled craftsman', 'manufacturer', 'clerk', 'consul', 'executive', and 'gentleman'.⁹ To make matters even more difficult, cricket data is presented in the form of a time series which allows trends in the occupational structure of the sport's participants to be easily assessed. Baseball data is on the other hand fragmented through the text.

To defeat any lingering 'class' interpretation, it would be useful to show that baseball did not become increasingly popular among the artisan classes from the early 1850s to the 1870s, and that simultaneously cricket's character did not become more socially exclusive. Even the data presented, difficult to compare though it is, appears to move in a different direction from the stated interpretation. Baseball's occupational profile shifts from one that is predominantly middle class in the early 1850s to one in which artisan participation had become pronounced by 1870. Over the same period, a precipitous decline is shown in artisan participation in cricket.¹⁰ Nothing is made of this shift, which is consistent with the interpretation offered by this reviewer ten years ago. Nor does Adelman make much of the heavy participation in baseball of those types of artisan such as the butcher workmen, whom Bruce Laurie has called 'traditionalists'. Given the evidence in Sean Wilentz's magnificent work, one would not be surprised to find such people turning up in baseball in the 1850s, but their participation raises questions about the 'modernization' of New York, and of baseball, which are never settled in this book.¹¹

Of course the 'class' interpretation of New York baseball which may be extrapolated from such data could not stand on such evidence alone. There are severe difficulties in using purely occupational categories in class analysis. As in so many other matters, Adelman notes the unsettling critique of the methodology of social stratification offered by Michael Katz. Yet Adelman continues to infer class from static occupation categories.¹²

Finally, there is the question of the 'ideology' of sport. It is regrettable that Adelman treats ideology as something to be tacked on to the interpretation at the end of his book, and as an im-

'position of entrepreneurs, journalists, health activists and moralists on more traditionally minded groups. Under this formulation, it is well-nigh impossible for other groups such as the many artisans who played baseball to contribute anything to the sport's developing value system. Ideology is treated not as a product of the actual conditions of people's lives and the subject of conflicting interpretation, but as an object of elite manipulation.

A *Sporting Time* has been hailed, as the dustcover announces, as one of the finest achievements in the historiography of American sports history. If by this we mean the assiduous collection and presentation of interesting and informative data, the book certainly is impressive. So too is Adelman's willingness to go beyond the threadbare explanations (or non-explanations) often cited for the rise of American mass spectator sports, and to explore the connections of his topic with larger issues of social history through the use of sociological theory. In this respect, Adelman has done the study of sports history good service, and one which will be of use for the history of leisure and popular culture beyond the boundaries of the United States. But as a new interpretive framework for sports history, this book merely illustrates the absence of an effective synthesis or theoretically-informed analysis.

NOTES AND REFERENCES:

1. David Montgomery, 'Gutman's Nineteenth-Century America', *Labor History*, 19, 1978, p.425.
2. Dean C. Tipps, 'Modernization Theory and the Comparative Study of Societies: A Critical Perspective', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 15, 1973, pp.199-227; Joseph Gusfield, 'Tradition and Modernity: Misplaced Polarities in the Study of Change', *American Journal of Sociology*, 72, 1967, pp.351-62; James Henretta, 'Modernization: Toward a False Synthesis', *Reviews in American History*, 5, 1977, pp.445-52; cf. Peter Stearns, 'Modernization and Social, History: Some Suggestions and a Muted Cheer', *Journal of Social History*, 14, 1980, pp.189-209.
3. Sean Wilentz, *Chants Democratic: New York City & the Rise of the American Working Class, 1788-1850* (New York, 1984); Christine Stansell, 'The Origins of the Sweatshops: Women and Early

Industrialization in New York City', in Michael Frisch and Daniel Walkowitz, eds., *Working-Class America: Essays on Labor, Community, and American Society* (Urbana, Ill., 1983), pp.78-103.

4. Herbert Gutman, 'Work, Culture and Society in Industrializing America, 1815-1919', *American Historical Review*, 78, 1973, pp.531-87.
5. Adelman himself provides evidence for these points for the 1860s. See pp.241-42. See also *Ball Players' Chronicle*, 22 Aug. 1867, p.6; *New York Times*, 8 March 1872; *Wilkes' Spirit of the Times*, 1 Feb. and 1 March 1862.
6. This theme is touched upon in Ian Tyrrell, 'Money and Morality: The Professionalisation of American Baseball', in R. Cashman and M. McKernan, eds., *Sport: Money, Morality and the Media* (Kensington, N.S.W., 1981), esp. pp.86-87.
7. Roy Rosenzweig, *Eight Hours for What We Will: Workers and Leisure in an Industrial City, 1870-1920* (Cambridge, Eng., 1983).
8. Ian Tyrrell, 'The Emergence of Modern American Baseball c. 1850-80', in Richard Cashman and Michael McKernan, eds., *Sports in History: The Making of Modern Sports History* (St. Lucia, Qld., 1979), pp.205-26; Adelman, *A Sporting Time*, pp. 92-93. In this respect, Adelman's work is consistent with that of other American sports historians who argue that the presence of large numbers of working-class cricketers in the 1850s 'weakens' the thesis that cricket 'was a more exclusive and elitist game. This is not the place to go into the finer points of the argument I first offered in 1977. But it is relevant to note that I conceded the existence of important working-class elements in cricket in the 1850s; I argued, and this point has been lost upon critics, that the trend over time was towards more exclusivity, and that the elitist elements increasingly 'dominated' cricket, particularly in Philadelphia after 1860. Domination and control over the 'leading clubs' does not necessarily mean numerical pre-dominance in the sport. A class structure also existed in English cricket which was quite compatible with the presence of working-class cricketers. The upper-class and their social inferiors were involved in a class *relationship* and

further research on American cricket might well focus on how this theme operated, and changed, in the American environment. Cf. 'Emergence of Modern American Baseball', pp.211-12; Steven M. Gelber, "Their Hands Are All Out Playing': Business and Amateur Baseball, 1845-1917', *Journal of Sports History*, 11, 1984, 16n.

9. Adelman, pp.117, 126. In fact, Adelman does not go as far as George Kirsch did in a study of Newark, New Jersey in the presentation of statistical information on cricketers. See Kirsch, 'American Cricket: Players and Clubs Before the Civil War', *Journal of Sports History*, 11, 1984, p.33.
10. Cf. Adelman, pp.117, 126, 138, 155, 177.
11. Bruce Laurie, *Working People of Philadelphia, 1800-1850* (Philadelphia, 1980).
12. Michael Katz, 'Social Class in North American Urban History', *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, 11, 1981, pp.579-605.