

Richard Gruneau and David Whitson, *Hockey Night in Canada: Sport, Identities and Cultural Politics*. Garamond Press, Toronto 1994. \$C29.95 cloth; \$C21.95 paper.

Specific sports are often said to embody the ‘character’ of a nation or region. Soccer in Brazil, cricket in the West Indies, and rugby union in Wales and New Zealand are examples that immediately come to mind. Similarly, Gruneau and Whitson state that ice hockey has often been portrayed as having an ‘enduring link to the idea of “Canadianness”’. But as they skilfully demonstrate, ideas about hockey representing a unified Canadian identity are mythical. Gruneau and Whitson use Roland Barthes’ definition of myths: stories we tell ourselves about ourselves. Myths are not total delusions or utter falsehoods, but partial truths that accentuate particular versions of reality and marginalise or omit others. Myths embody fundamental cultural values and character-types and appeal to deep-seated emotions. Myths depoliticise social relations by ignoring the vested interests surrounding whose stories become ascendant in a given culture.

The authors divide their investigation of hockey myths into three main parts, each of which contains four chapters. The first section (‘Hockey, Culture and Social Development’), is devoted to two main sub-themes. Chapter 1 sketches out the differences between high and low culture and the reluctance of Canadian intellectuals to accept hockey as a legitimate cultural form, despite (or perhaps because) of its popularity. This chapter, which relies heavily on the work of Raymond Williams, views sport as a site of cultural negotiation and struggle among dominant and subordinate groups. The next three chapters trace the evolution of hockey from an amateur pastime to an international cartel. Chapter 2 locates the incipient institutionalisation of hockey in the larger context of the development of industrial capitalism. This theme is continued in more detail in Chapter 3, which examines the qualitative shifts that occurred in both the form and content of hockey around the turn of the nineteenth century. The authors stress that hockey (and Canadian sport

in general) was shaped by a host of contradictory social and cultural forces (for example, a rational ethic of leisure that co-existed uneasily with consumerism and pleasure; an amateur credo but also ‘creeping professionalism’ and the commodification and commercialisation of sport). Chapter 4 documents how hockey was moulded by the mass media, especially television, which concentrated on stars and heroes, emphasised action and drama, and played a key role in mythologising the sport.

After this valuable historical overview, Section 2 (‘Exploring the Post-war Hockey Subculture’) addresses some contemporary topics. In Chapter 5, the authors suggest that hockey can be seen as a form of work that is based on displays of physical prowess and male bonding. The authors claim that this homosocial regime has a ‘dark side’ with respect to its links to misogyny and sexual assault. They also show how romantic myths such as ‘the good of the game’, ‘club loyalty’, and ‘family’ have been used in paternalistic and punitive ways by managers and owners. Chapter 6 examines the myth of ‘making it’ as a professional athlete, and juxtaposes this theme with failure, injuries, alcohol abuse, downward mobility, and the problems of retired players who futilely try to trade on their past glories. Chapter 7 examines amateur hockey and the minor professional leagues in Canada and the USA, and how increasing participation by women poses a threat to hegemonic masculinity. The section concludes with an excellent chapter on masculinity that covers theories of violence in sport, the subculture of violence in hockey, and how violence has been marketed to audiences. Gruneau and Whitson claim that a major problem with hockey is not that it is a place where boys are turned into men, but that it inculcates conservative, paternalistic and aggressive masculine identities.

The final segment (‘Hockey and the Remaking of Community’), analyses how hockey has been shaped by the Americanisation and globalisation of the entertainment industry. Without romanticising the good old days, Gruneau and Whitson show how owners have gentrified

and commodified the local and regional bases of hockey on the one hand, while appealing to the ‘rhetoric of civic loyalty’ on the other. They describe how the ‘supernatural worship of the market’ among National Hockey League (NHL) owners and executives has entailed a shift away from live audiences to alternative sources of revenue. This has meant that some Canadian communities have been denied franchises and grass-roots followers have been priced out of the market. For instance, American ownership and control of the NHL has meant that the sport has tended to expand on the basis of lucrative television markets in the sunbelt regions of the USA, rather than in traditional hotbeds in ‘peripheral’ Canadian areas. Gruneau and Whitson show how the NHL moguls were even able to snub pressure from the Federal Government to grant franchises for ‘Canada’s national sport’ to Canadian cities. As hockey becomes increasingly subjugated to the imperatives of the global entertainment market, and hence de-Canadianised, it becomes more and more difficult to sustain the myth that it epitomises a distinctive Canadian identity. The authors suggest that hockey may eventually resemble soccer, where national sentiments co-exist in an international framework.

The book could have been enhanced in several ways. First, although mention is made of the ‘two solitudes’ of English- and French-Canada at several junctures, it would have been useful to have more details on Francophone versions of hockey, especially the role it plays in constructing French-Canadian masculinity. The authors cite the use of hockey in a Canadian Spirit Whisky advertisement as one of many examples of how myths are constructed in everyday life. It would have been worthwhile reproducing and deconstructing examples of such advertisements and other representations of what Gruneau and Whitson call hockey’s ‘apparent naturalness’. Although the work of Pierre Bourdieu is referred to, I felt that the book could have benefited from his work on habitus,

taste and distinction. Finally, a lot of information about Leagues and Associations is contained in the text, some of which could have been summarised in tables, possibly in the form of Appendices.

Nevertheless, these are minor quibbles about a highly impressive book. Gruneau and Whitson adroitly deploy history, sociology, feminism, men's studies, political economy, and cultural studies, while also drawing on fictional and popular sources. Moreover, the book is written in a highly accessible style. The authors also are even-handed in their critique. They exemplify Barthes' dictum that if one is to be an insightful critic it also helps to be a fan. The book has been handsomely produced and quality of the print is superb. The jacket could serve as a generic signifier of gender relations and sport: the front cover consists of a living room scene of a father and son rapt in the glow from a television set that is presumably telecasting a sporting event; the reverse side shows a woman washing dishes at the back of the house.

In summary, this book sets a new standard of scholarship - not just in the area of sport studies - but in the larger field of popular culture.

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