The Poverty of Logic: William Morgan's Theory of Sport

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William Morgan, *Leftist Theories of Sport: A Critique and Reconstruction.* **University of Illinois Press, Urbana, 1994. pp. xiii + 267 paper.**

The past decade has witnessed, in Jeffrey Alexander's words, a 'powerful re-emergence of theorising about democracy':

> Liberal ideas about political life, which emerged in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and which were displaced by the 'social question' of the great industrial transformation, seem like contemporary ideas again. Dismissed as historically anachronistic in the anti- and post-modern decades, they have become quite suddenly *à la mode.*[1]

William Morgan's *Leftist Theories of Sport* reflects this new theoretical mood. After deconstructing New Left, or Neo-Marxist, and hegemony theories of sport, Morgan constructs an elaborate theory of sport as an autonomous social practice. He builds on liberal ideas about civil society and the separation of social spheres.[2] This new mood is not purely theoretical, it is also historical. Alexander locates it in the 'juxtaposition between ... modernity, socialism, and capitalism'. This point is critical in evaluating Morgan's theory because, as Alexander reminds us, 'we must understand both together ... if either contemporary history or contemporary theory is to be understood at all'.[3]

Just as Morgan's work resonates with contemporary theory-cum-ideology, New Left theories of sport resonated with antimodernist ideas. Emancipation was the existential problem of the 1960s and, not surprisingly, it 'captured the ideological imaginations of [a new] cadre of intellectuals'.[4] In this climate several theorists on the Left, including Rob Beamish, Jean-Marie Brohm, Richard Lipsky, Paul Hoch and Bero Rigauer, analysed sport 'as a prop for the status quo (p. 20)': sport

maintains and reinforces the establishment because its 'very logic and innermost structures ... are bound up with the dominant mode of production (p. 25)'. Today, few would dispute that Neo-Marxists built their theories around 'a narrowly conceived base-superstructure interpretative model which consigns virtually all determining power to the productive forces of society (p. 62)' and which ignores 'social interaction in the production and reproduction of human life (p. 39)'.

Postmodernism emerged as the 'successor ideology to radical social theory' in the 1980s, 'animated' by the failure of antimodernist emancipatory expectations.[5] Hegemony theory also developed at this juncture, partly in response to the deficiencies of Neo-Marxism. It rapidly 'achieved intellectual domination' among critical approaches to sport (p. 60).

Hegemonists analyse sport as a social practice—a socially constructed and historically grounded set of actions framed by rules and a system of defined roles. They view sport practice as the negotiated outcome of class struggle in which social classes contest the definition and conduct of sport. While the outcome is an historical question, on balance, the superior resources, strategic advantages in mobilising those resources (largely through control of the media), control over the mechanisms of social incorporation (notably education), and an ability to define the terms of negotiation, ensure that the dominant class retains hegemonic control of sport. Although less dogmatic than New Left approaches, hegemony theory also struggles to find emancipatory potential in sport.

Morgan acknowledges the contributions of hegemony theory, in particular, its ability to 'provide a powerful explanation of the daily detail, of the interior, intrahegemonic conflicts, struggles, and proceedings that are necessary to hold together any dominant social order (p. 108)'. Nonetheless, he finds a major flaw. The concept of sport as a social practice leads to an untenable position whereby the founding rules and logic of sport cannot be partitioned off, without loss of intelligibility, from the founding rules and logic of larger society. They are all of the same piece and so occupy the same space as all the other social practices of life that make up the material wellspring of society. It follows, therefore, that a study of sport in and for itself is not only a conceptual blunder, but a fundamental irrelevancy (p. 66).

The failure of antimodernism may have dashed the dreams of the Left but, notes Alexander, it 'rekindled ... the intellectual imagination of others'. The New Right, an amalgam of conservative and liberal doctrines, and postmodernism coexisted for much of the 1980s but by decade's end the former had triumphed. Its victories included the collapse of Communism, 'the privatisation of nationalised capitalist economies' and a shift from 'authoritarianism to democracy'.[6] Accompanying the resurgence of neo-liberalism was a 'revival of the concept of "civil society", the informal, non-state, and non-economic realm of public and personal life'.[7] This is the historical context in which Morgan theorises. As a member of the neo-liberal movement, he subscribes to a strong civil society as a prerequisite for democracy. But Morgan evades history at every conceivable turn, refusing to locate either sport or his theory in their historical contexts.

Underpinning Morgan's theory is an assumption about sport's 'transhistorical essence (p. 64)'. Sport demonstrates a universal, transcultural, constitutive logic: despite their multifarious forms, all sports are 'contrived pursuits that seek to overcome unnecessary obstacles'. The rules of sport 'always prohibit the simplest, easiest, most direct ways to achieve the goal of the game in favour of more complex, more difficult, more indirect ways to achieve it'. In other words, 'the *permissible* means of attainment are always narrower than the *possible* means of attainment' (emphasis added p. 211). For example, golfers must hit, rather than carry, the ball to a cup.

Morgan transposes this logic into an alternative concept of social practice. Here he applies Alaisdair MacIntyre's definition of social practice as 'a special kind of rule-governed activity defined by the standards of excellence and the internal goods that make it up (p. 130)'. The crucial components of this concept are internal goods and virtue. The former are 'socially held goods ... defined by the particular practice'. They are distinct from those goods 'defined by the culture, subculture, or particular group to which we belong'. All social practices share one internal good: the pursuit of excellence. This is decisive in 'shaping the rational complexion and demeanour' of social practices: 'when we pursue [excellence] in a serious and committed way we are able to realise "the good of a certain kind of life" that is embodied in that pursuit, and that gives it its allure and charm (p.131)'. The pursuit of excellence has a price: 'if one desires to achieve the standards of excellence and to grasp

the kind of life peculiar to a practice, then one must be ... able to resist the allure of external goods', notably money, power and status, which corrupt and distort social practices (p. 133).[8] At this point readers will foresee the relationship between an internal good and virtue: if one desires to achieve excellence within a practice then 'one must be prepared to exercise virtues like courage, honesty, justice, and temperance (p. 133)'. Hence:

> unless practitioners of sports ... act in ... virtuous ways, they will not be able to obtain the goods that are internal to those practices, and, insofar as such goods supply us with reasons to take them up, they will jeopardise ... the very rational standing of [the] practice (p. 134).

Morgan attributes the corruption of sport to its institutionalisation. Again he follows MacIntyre, this time by distinguishing between practice and institution. The conclusion is again predictable: 'the kinds of goods that institutions deal in ... are almost exclusively external ones'. Institutions are 'structured in hierarchical terms of power and status' and as such are 'wedded to a distribution scheme in which money, power, and status are dispensed as rewards for services within both the organisation and the practices they govern (p. 136)'. Logically, this makes institutions 'ill-suited as habitats for the development of virtues (p.139)':

> The quest for excellence embedded in the ways of life that constitute our modern sporting practices has been regularly subjected to institutionally sponsored commercial and bureaucratic pressures dating back to the late nineteenth century ... [when] wealthy factory owners began to band together into professional sport franchises and to apply their managerial savvy to the conduct and promotion of sports, turning many into profitable business enterprises. Rules were changed and styles of play altered to suit the tastes of paying customers and self-discipline was replaced with managerial discipline (p. 140).

Morgan wants 'a society in which institutions cater to and serve, rather than usurp, the goods specific to practices (p. 161)'. His 'remedy' is Michael Walzer's 'liberal art of separation—carving up the social world in ways that protect particular spheres of life from outside interference (p. 169)'. Society must 'barricade practices behind carefully constructed,

heavily fortified partitions that institutions can't penetrate'. Ultimately, this will involve 'wrest[ing] control of practices from bureaucratic types and turn[ing] them over to practice-communities (p. 208)'.

A practice-community is 'an internal good' of a social practice (p. 234): 'attachment ... to a ... practice-community is not something that can be contractually mandated or even agreed to', instead it must be 'realised, experienced, and lived out (p. 235)'. Therefore members of a sports practice-community share a dedication to 'the good of the kind of life embodied in sport, and the stands of excellence, values, and virtues that are an integral part of that life (p. 236)'.

William Morgan offers the most detailed and complete example of theory deconstruction and reconstruction yet produced in the area of sport. This is the book's strength. Its weaknesses are extreme abstraction and the privileging of logic over history.

Philosophers have long identified the limits of historical facts though they deal primarily in logical relationships rather than necessary relationships. Historical relationships are matters of judgement rather than logic and embrace different standards of provability to philosophical relationships. [9] For example, Morgan claims that leftist accounts of sport fail the test of real critical theory because, in the words of Francis Hearn, they 'merely reflect the society [they] seek to understand'. In other words, leftists believe that 'good social criticism is always a matter of undoing apparent distinctions between social spheres (p. 158)'. From a logical perspective Morgan stands on firm ground: a theory which merely offers an image of society is not critical. However, this ignores the historical context of New Left theories. Antimodernist visions of the future demanded a judgemental examination of society as a precursor to raising political consciousness and social change.

Logical relationships often degenerate into tautologies and this is the major problem with *Leftist Theories of Sport.* Interestingly, Morgan levels the identical charge at hegemony theory. Recalling John MacAloon's trenchant criticism, he notes that hegemonic approaches are 'short on real theory and long on "tautological labelling and description (p. 109)"'. Yet, ironically, Morgan candidly admits that his own model is tautological: 'it promises to provide a new ground for a critical theory of sport by petitioning its distinctive rational order and then proceeds to justify this new critical venture by petitioning this very same rational order'. Incredibly, he does not consider this significant: it is simply 'the

price that must be paid when ... one ... begin[s] with social practices themselves (p. 253)'. Here Morgan appears confused. His theory is tautological not because of where it starts, but because it rests on a vacuous proposition that the constitutive logic of sport practice necessarily involves virtue and that only virtuous people play *real* sport. The only 'truth' in this proposition exists by dint of definition.

Competition is also a hallmark of sport in which Morton Deutsch, for one, finds little virtue. He defines competitive relationships as those in which:

> one is predisposed to cathect the other negatively, to have a suspicious, hostile, exploitative attitude toward the other, to seek advantage and superiority for self and disadvantage and inferiority for the other, to see the other as opposed to oneself and basically different ... One is also predisposed to expect the other to have the same orientation.[10]

Of course, Morgan would reply that virulent competition stems from institutionalisation and is not constitutive of practice.

Does historical evidence support the idea of pure, non-institutionalised sports practice-communities? Morgan does not explicitly say although his reference, quoted above, to wealthy factory owners commercialising sport in the late nineteenth century suggests that he sees mid-Victorian amateurism in some special light. Did Victorian amateurs only play for the sake of the game? Did they really place respect for their opponents and the rules above winning? Of course not. Amateur sport was an institutionalised form framed by the English middle classes to stimulate their competitive streak and to differentiate them from the lower classes which they barred from participation.

Morgan's philosophical approach does not overcome the political idealism of classical liberalism. His remedy for corrupt sport is 'separation', that is, situating practices in 'the right social context so that they might prosper and flourish (p.204)'. But who decides what is the right context? And what criteria do they use? Morgan believes that this is the responsibility of sports practice-communities: they must 'wrestle with ... deep questions' about proper conduct. 'At issue', he adds, 'is not a simple weighing of preferences, but a strong evaluation of what shape and form we wish our sporting practices to take (p. 241)'.[11]

Again the historical evidence is scant. One struggles to find examples of sports practice-communities showing strong evaluation.

On the contrary, a powerful belief in the inalienable right to 'play' invariably leads sports practice-communities into weak evaluation. In 1985 the New Zealand Rugby Football Union (NZRFU) announced that it would defy the United Nations and Commonwealth backed sports boycott and tour South Africa. This was despite a Springbok tour causing social upheaval in New Zealand just four years earlier and South African townships being in the midst of an insurrection. Two New Zealand rugby-playing lawyers challenged the decision in the courts. They claimed that the tour was not in the interests of New Zealand rugby and that the Union had acted unconstitutionally in voting to send the All Blacks to South Africa. They also brought an expert witness, Rev. Arnold Stofile, from South Africa who testified that sports tours were contrary to the interests of black people. The case went to appeal in the New Zealand High Court, which subsequently agreed that the NZRFU had not abided by its own constitution. Delays caused by the hearing forced the NZRFU to abandon the 1985 tour. Despite the court's decision, the following year a party of All Black players 'cocked a snook' at the rugby community and 'unofficially' toured South Africa. So much for virtue, so much for strong evaluation in the great (former) amateur game of rugby!

Morgan's appeal to strong evaluation as a device of separation suggests that he does not fully grasp the concept. Strong evaluators usually link issues and consider broader moral positions before making decisions. In short, the narrow self-interests of practice-communities are rarely compatible with strong evaluation. At this point, however, Morgan becomes hopelessly tangled. Despite repeated assurances that only practice-communities can judge correct conduct, he concedes that the state should fulfil the role of 'court of last appeal, one that kicks in if practice-communities are unwilling or unable to regulate sport in the required manner (pp. 237-8)'.

These are major problems in Morgan's theory. Nonetheless, the idea of sport as an autonomous social practice refuses to die and remains attractive in many quarters. Could it have substance without collapsing under the burden of tautology or into vexatious idealism? At least two alternative approaches seem worth exploring: ideology and culture.

Goran Therborn defines ideology as 'that aspect of human condition under which human beings live their lives as conscious actors in a world that makes sense to them in different ways':[12]

> A single human being may act as an almost unlimited number of subjects and in the course of a single life a large number of subjectivities are in fact acted out. In any situation, particularly in a complex modern society, a given human being usually has several subjectivities that might be applied, although as a rule only one at a time. Ideologies differ, compete, clash not only in what they say about the world we inhabit, but also in telling us who we are.

When sports people receive an invitation to play, the invitation may address them as fair minded individuals, as highly skilled practitioners, or ruthless competitors. The kind of address accepted', writes Therborn, 'has important implications for how one acts'.[13] In this sense perhaps there is an ideology of sport which encourages virtuous behaviour. Perhaps, over time, this ideology has even become an autonomous feature of material reality. Such an interpretation of ideology seems more fruitful than that offered by Neo-Marxist and hegemony sport theories which Morgan rightly criticises but offers no alternative.

Sport as a cultural text, with its own meanings and dimensions, offers a second potential route towards a concept of autonomy. Colin Tatz's recent analysis of Aboriginal sport offers an example. Aborigines, Tatz argues, have reconstructed modern sport. At their festivals Aborigines blend sport with traditional ceremonies, formal religion and rock music. Here they experience sport differently. When Aboriginal teams play they play '*with* each other': 'their spirit is fun, sharing, freedom—not war'.[14] At exclusively Aboriginal events participants experience 'the satisfaction of coming together, being together, of not having to worry about double consciousness' (an unpleasant discomfiting feeling in which 'one is *forever* aware that one is black and *forever* aware that the whiteman is aware that one is black').[15] The unique cultural context has also bestowed distinct playing attitudes. Aborigines disdain the mechanistic and mind numbing training schedules and the negative, or defensive, tactics of modern sport; they seek and explore the joy and freedom of play and movement. There is also Aboriginal style. 'Qualities like defensiveness, avoidance, acceleration and the ability to "read" a game', Tatz shows, have their 'basis in early cultural socialisation'.[16]

Discussion of sport as a cultural text appears in some hegemony theories. However Morgan, with specific reference to Richard Gruneau, erroneously claims that 'hegemonists ... reject interpreting sports as

cultural texts' (p. 64). In fact Gruneau merely posts a warning that 'one must be wary ... not to draw the conclusion that cultural texts should be considered *only* as metasocial forms'. The real problem, Gruneau says, is that explanations of sport as cultural texts often fail to detail the 'precise' relationship between the cultural and the social.[17] Tatz, for one, begins to tackle that problem.

Morgan's refusal to place sport and sport theory in their historical contexts means that he presents both as 'essence' instead of 'form', that is, 'as the only real sense of the world'.[18] It is impossible to avoid Marx's assessment of Monsieur Proudhon in *The Poverty of Philosophy*: instead of recognising that 'economic categories are only the theoretical expressions, the abstractions of the social relations of production, M Proudhon, holding things upside down like a true philosopher, sees in actual relations nothing but the incarnation of these ... categories'.[19] Abstract logical relations impoverish Professor Morgan's theory. His removal of history denies both sports people the principal means by which they comprehend their worlds and intellectuals the principal means to understanding those worlds.

Notes:

1 Jeffrey Alexander, 'Modern, Anti, Post and Neo', New Left Review, no. 210, 1995, p. 89.
2 Morgan considers neither the juxtaposition of liberal and leftist theories of sport nor the title of the book out of place. First, he regards himself a fellow of the critical tradition; he even chides his 'leftist counterparts' for their lack of 'real critical bite (p. 179)'. Second, he defines his liberal theory as a 'liberal-socialist' position: 'it is socialist insofar as it turns over the substantive operation and control of sport to the democratic will of [its practitioners]. It is liberal insofar as it denies the state a central say in its conduct (p. 237)'.
3 Alexander, 'Modern, Anti, Post and Neo', p. 64. Alexander attributes the new theoretical mood to social conditions arising from the political revolutions and economic shifts over the past decade.
4 Alexander, 'Modern, Anti, Post and Neo', p. 78.
5 Alexander, 'Modern, Anti, Post and Neo', p. 81. For an excellent account of the 'dashed millennial expectations' of the late 1960s see Alex Callinicos, Against Postmodernism: A Marxist Critique, Polity, Cambridge, 1989' pp. 162-71.
6 Alexander, 'Modern, Anti, Post and Neo', pp. 85-6.
7 Alexander, 'Modern, Anti, Post and Neo', pp. 89-90.
8 Morgan defines external goods as those for which there are always 'alternative' ways of attainment and for which attainment 'is never limited to participation in a particular practice (p. 132)'.
9 E P Thompson, The Poverty of Theory and Other Essays, Merlin Press, London, 1978, pp. 229-42.
10 Morton Deutsch, Distributive Justice: A Social Psychological Foundation, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1985, p. 85. Cathection involves concentrating mental

energy on an emotion, idea or line of action.

11 'In weak evaluation, for something to be judged good it is sufficient that it be desired, whereas in strong evaluation there is also a use of "good" or some other evaluative term for which being desired is not sufficient; indeed some desires ... can be bad, base, ignoble, trivial superficial, unworthy, and so on'. Charles Taylor, 'What is Human Agency?' in, Theodore Mischel, ed., The Self: Psychological and Philosophical Issues, Blackwell, Oxford, 1977, p. 107.

12 Goran Therborn, The Ideology of Power and the Power of Ideology, New Left Books, London, 1980, pp. 1-2.

13 Therborn, Ideology of Power, p. 78.

14 Colin Tatz, Obstacle Race: Aborigines in Sport, NSWUP, Sydney, 1995, p. 328.

15 Tatz, Obstacle Race, p. 352.

16 Tatz, Obstacle Race, p. 185.

17 Emphasis in original. Richard Gruneau, Class, Sports, and Social Development, University of Massachusetts Press, Amherst, 1983, p. 72.

18 Alexander, 'Modern, Anti, Post and Neo', p. 99.

19 Karl Marx, The Poverty of Philosophy, London, Martin Lawrence, 1976. p. 92.