

Leftist Theories of Sport
Revisited:
Morgan Versus Booth,
Round Two

*Circular Theories, Strong
Evaluation', and Sports: a
Response to Booth*

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I am grateful to Douglas Booth for his detailed review of my book *Leftist Theories of Sport: A Critique and Reconstruction*. It is in many respects a thoughtful review, and one, therefore, that deserves an equally thoughtful reply.¹ But I have another reason for wanting to respond to Booth, and that is to get a conversation going with other historians interested in the social criticism of sports. My interest in starting such a dialogue is because I am convinced that the social criticism of sports, or of anything else for that matter, can only succeed if it is not afraid to traipse across disciplinary boundaries, if it is willing to go historical or sociological or philosophical or whatever, when a critical treatment of the facts requires it. It is because I have this larger conversational goal in mind that I want to focus attention in my response to Booth on what I think are the more important arguments, that bear directly on how we critically theorise about sport.

The major fault that Booth finds with the theory of sport I develop in my book has to do with what he calls its 'extreme abstraction'. As he sees it, I am guilty of what theorists like Proudhon, at least according to Marx, are guilty of: confusing abstract logical notions and relations for real social and historical ones, leading to theoretical accounts that invert the real order of things, and in this particular case gloss over, if not miss

entirely, the historical forces that bear on sports. Booth breaks down this charge of excessive abstraction into two separate but related criticisms. The first is that my theory of sport trades in tautological reasoning, a fact, he underscores, that I concede and, ‘incredibly’, regard as unproblematic. The second criticism is that my theory lapses into a ‘vexatious idealism’.

Let’s address Booth’s first charge that I engage in the same sort of tautological reasoning that I accuse certain hegemonists of engaging in. I plead not guilty. This criticism misses the mark because it conflates tautological accounts with circular ones—indeed, this is how Booth was able to get this criticism off the ground in the first place. The conflation proves mistaken because these accounts turn out to be two different animals altogether. It is only because Booth ignores this fact that he misinterprets my concession that my theory is circular to be an admission that it is tautological as well.

Tautological claims are logical truths that, in the parlance of logical theory, admit only of true substitution instances.² What this means in less technical language is that tautologies are true by virtue of their logical form alone, quite apart from their historical content. To say that they are logical truths, therefore, is to say that they are not falsifiable, that there are no historical events, facts, or instances that could show them to be false. That is why when they are put to use in inquiries or circumstances that require historical validation—reckoning with historical facts rather than analytic (logical) truths—they prove vacuous. This also explains a common strategy of those who traffic in such illicit uses of tautologies, for by appealing to claims that are allegedly self-evident and unassailable, one is relieved of the onerous task of arguing for them—indeed arguing for them is seen to be quite beside the point. So when Booth accused me of engaging in tautological reasoning, of spinning out a theory whose truth only ‘exists by dint of definition’ (p. 138), he was claiming that my theory is tautologous in both of the above senses, that it is both vacuous and that it smuggles in logical truths under the cover of historical ones.

The theory of sport that I offer in my book, however, is a circular rather than a tautological one. This is an important qualification precisely because it puts my theory and all such theories of its kind squarely in the historical camp rather than the logical (tautological) one. It does so because what qualifies my and other such theories as circular accounts is

the same thing that qualifies them as historical accounts: namely, that the standards of criticism they deploy in their analyses are derived from some particular social site or vantage point inside, rather than outside, the culture they are criticising. That means that when objections are raised against these culturally-rooted standards the theorists who have put them to critical use will have no non-circular argumentative recourse; in other words, they will not be able to defend them by appealing to some further and final set of ahistorical, universal standards, to some supra-cultural vantage point—which the philosopher Thomas Nagel has famously described as ‘the point of view from nowhere’.³ So to say, as I explicitly did in my book, that there are no non-circular backups to my and all other accounts of sports as social practices is to say both that all such accounts must take their point of departure from somewhere within the prevailing social landscape and historical context of sports, and that when doubts are cast upon these points of departure, these social sites, we theorists will have no choice but either to try to defend them by showing that they have critical advantages going for them that other such sites do not, or to try out some other social site. Beyond this, we will have nothing more to say because we will have run out of things (cultural beliefs, values, standards, and the arguments they make possible) to talk about.

As I plainly stated in my book then, ‘circularity, not tautological reasoning, ‘is the price that must be paid when theory eschews a ‘God’s-eye perspective’ on practices like sport’ (p. 253). In denying this, in treating circularity as a synonym rather than an antonym for tautological, Booth not only turns my circular account of sport on its head, but worse, ends up on the wrong side of this logical/historical divide: talking up (non-circular/transcendent) theories he should be talking down, and talking down (circular/immanent) theories he should be talking up. However, what is most problematic about his misreading of my theory is that it obfuscates what is the central issue that confronts critical theories of sport today, and about which I tried to say something in my book. That central issue can be phrased as follows: what site in the present social playing-field is best suited to the criticism of sports? Is it, as neo-marxists think, the economic infrastructure of advanced capitalist society, or, as hegemonists think, the class negotiations that go on between dominant and dominated social groups in such societies, or, as I suggest, the social logic and ethos of sports practices themselves and

the deliberative capacities of their communities, or, as Booth thinks, the multiple subjectivities of the individuals who engage in sports and the narrative meanings conveyed in certain sports?

Now my row with Booth is not over the substance of these replies, indeed since both Booth and I take the autonomy of sports seriously, as a historical fact that needs explanation, we both reject the answers given by neo-marxists and hegemonists. Rather, my row with Booth is that he failed to engage my argument at all, at least this particular feature of it, but simply dismissed it as a meaningless logical abstraction, a tautology. Had he engaged my answer as an argument about where best to launch and justify a critique of sports, I believe he would have seen that this is an argument that can be won on the historical facts or not at all, and further, that our substantive positions on this issue are actually much closer than he was prepared to concede in his review.

Booth's second criticism that my theory of sport succumbs to a 'vexatious idealism' shadowed his first tautology criticism. But I want to pick up on this second criticism at the point where he turns it against my use of the liberal device of separation, which tries to remedy the corruption of social practices like sport by slotting them in the right social contexts so that they might flourish (much as liberal theorists tried to remedy the corruption of statecraft by soulcraft and of soulcraft by statecraft by separating the affairs of state from those of church), by impugning my normative use of sports practice-communities, which are asked in my theory to wrestle with 'deep' questions regarding the moral character and significance of sports so as to determine what these right social contexts are. Booth took issue with my entrusting this normative responsibility to practice-communities on two main grounds: firstly, that the historical evidence undermines the strong evaluative role I ask them to play, and, secondly, that the narrow 'inalienable right to play' orientation of sports practice-communities '*invariably* leads [them] into weak evaluation' [my emphasis] since strong evaluation typically requires consideration of 'broader moral positions' (p. 139). He concluded, therefore, that my appeal to these communities enjoins a troublesome political idealism.

But I do not think my appeal enjoins any such thing. Showing this to be so would, alas, require a paper in its own right. I can at least begin to make such a case first by arguing that much of the historical evidence Booth marshaled to verify that sports practice-communities are allergic

to strong evaluation misses its mark,⁴ and secondly, by arguing that Booth's characterisation of strong evaluation is both wrongheaded and incautious.

In claiming that Booth's historical observations regarding the strong evaluative tendencies of sports practice-communities are off the mark I am not claiming that they misstate the facts, but that they fail to show that the moral role I assigned to these communities is one they are manifestly incapable of performing. It does not show the latter because my reason for ascribing this moral task to these communities had specifically to do with their special practice vantage point, with their first-hand knowledge of sports and their train of goods, and not with any claim that they provide fail-safe moral counsel, that they are fated somehow always to succeed in the execution of their normative tasks, and, therefore, immunised somehow against failure in that execution. I offered no such guarantees, metaphysical or otherwise, because there were none to offer. So I am neither surprised nor persuaded to change my view by Booth's observation that the track record of practice-communities on this normative score is a spotty one. Booth's point about 'scanty evidence for strong evaluation is really my point recast, better miscast, as a criticism. For one would expect even in the best of times the evidence that practice-communities think and deliberate about sports in moral ways would not be all positive. But a central theme of my book was that this is not the best of times for sports nor for most of our other cherished social practices, that, in fact, corruption of such practices is nowadays rife. Far from shying away from this unflattering historical picture or downplaying its significance, I tried to show in my book why I think this is happening in sports and elsewhere, why it is that athletes, politicians, artists, the clergy (the readers can add their own examples) seem to be selling themselves out, willfully if not gleefully, to the highest bidders.

Booth's protestation that the historical evidence does not support the strong evaluative role practice-communities play in my theory misses the mark for two reasons: firstly, it does not, show that such communities are incapable of strong evaluation because their intimate acquaintance with sports invariably turns them into weak evaluators, and secondly, it wrongly supposes that if practice-communities were capable of strong evaluation then their failure rate would not be striking, then corruption of social practices like sport would be rare not rife. It is this latter

supposition that I have been criticising as off the mark because it sets too exacting a standard of proof. For I dare say one would have to struggle mightily to find evidence of strong moral evaluation in any sphere of life today. Yet, it would be a mistake to treat this lack of evidence as proof that human agents are incapable of moral agency rather than as proof of the powerful forces arrayed against such agency. Analogously, I have been arguing that it would be a mistake to claim that since sports practice-communities often stoop to simple weighing in their deliberations about sports they are, therefore, incapable of strong evaluation and ought to engage in some other kind of deliberation about sports.

My claim that sports practice-communities are best equipped, and positioned to be strong evaluators of sports does clash headlong with Booth's second, conceptually-based criticism of these communities, with his counter-claim that these communities are best equipped for weak reevaluation. Booth reasoned so because he alleged that these groups are held captive by a powerful belief in the 'inalienable right to play', which he averred prevents them from considering the 'broader moral positions' of their actions.⁵ And since for Booth the 'usual' mark of strong evaluation is that one takes the broader rather than the narrower view of one's actions, he concluded that 'the narrow self-interests of practice-communities are rarely compatible with strong evaluation' (p. 139).

I believe that Booth's attempt to drive a wedge between sports practice-communities and strong evaluation is both mistaken and incautious. It misinterprets the cut between weak and strong evaluation as coincident with the cut between the (narrow) local, insider perspective of practice-communities and the (broad) non-local, outsider perspective of some unnamed, larger community. In fact, the cut between weak and strong evaluation is coincident with the absence or presence of a certain qualitative dimension in our evaluations, a dimension captured best not by the breadth of our positions but by their depth. Weak evaluations lack this depth because they involve what Taylor calls the simple weighing of different consummations of *de facto* desires, in which the point of evaluation is to sort out which desire is more attractive to us.⁶ So when I deliberate about whether to take a glass of red or white wine with my meal I am engaging in weak evaluation because all that is at stake in my deliberations is which glass of wine I most desire. In making this choice I am presuming at least two things: firstly, that my judging either the red

or white wine to be good is synonymous with my desiring either the red or white wine, and, secondly, that when I make up my mind and decide, for example, on the white over the red it was not because the red wine was a less worthy choice but because it was ‘circumstantially’ incompatible with a more desired alternative (for if I were not worried about enhancing the taste of the main course, or about drinking too much so that I would not be able to enjoy my meal fully or prepare my lecture after it, I would have chosen both). When, however, I am faced with a choice of acting in a just or unjust way I am engaging in strong evaluation because what is at stake in my deliberations is the weighty matter of how certain members of a culture should treat one another. In this case, my judging something to be good, the right way to act, is not synonymous with my desiring it but with the kind of life I aspire to model and the kind of person I wish to be, and in spurning the option to be unjust I do so not because it is less desirable but less worthy, that is, not because it is incompatible with a more desired alternative but because it contravenes what it means to be a just person.

Strong evaluation plumbs deeper than weak evaluation, because it goes beyond a simple consideration of the desirability of our present desires and asks us to reflect on what sort of people we want to be and what sort of lives we want to live. This is of capital importance to my argument that we should entrust such difficult moral tasks to sports practice-communities, because it shows that the insider, practice-specific perspective these communities bring to the evaluation of sports is, contra Booth, not an obstacle to, but a necessary (though not, of course, a sufficient) condition of such evaluation. For in order to determine what counts as a morally disabling or enabling influence upon sports, what is or is not morally compatible with their practice, one must have some intimate understanding of their forms of life and of the social meanings that underpin them. That is to say, one must have some qualitative grasp of the point of such practices and of the good of the kind of life they exemplify. This is a job, therefore, best suited to those closest to the action, to those who in virtue of their ‘thick’ understandings of the rules, ethos, and goods internal to sports are able to deliberate about them in the deep manner that Taylor argues, and I after him, is the mark of strong evaluation.⁷ And that is why in asking practice-communities to undertake the strong evaluation of sports I took myself to be displacing the moral deliberation of sports not only from the low,

largely amoral ground of athletic bureaucracies and institutions, but equally from the high ground of abstract moral theory. So if there is an idealism that informs my recourse to sports practice-communities in this regard, it is, I contend, the social idealism of dedicated practitioners themselves and not any heady, theoretical idealism of the sort Booth identifies with ‘classical’ liberalism.

Finally, what I find incautious about Booth’s claim that it is the insider perspective of practice-communities that taints their moral judgment and ‘invariably’ turns them into weak evaluators, is that it intimates that there is some larger, extra-practice vantage point to which we can repair to evaluate social practices like sport. This implies that breadth not depth is the true mark of strong evaluation, and that the wider the purview the more penetrating the grasp and the more powerful the evaluation of sports. I think it wise to reject this promise of a ‘broader’, morally unobstructed view of sports because it comes perilously close to the ‘God’s-eye perspective’ I earlier cautioned must be given up if history is to play a meaningful role in our critical treatments of sport. So I close my response to Booth at the point where I began it by reiterating my first claim that if our theories of sport are to have real critical and historical bite they must eschew any trace of such a ‘God’s-eye view’. If, as I also declared earlier, circularity is the price that must be paid for doing so, then I only wish to add that that price comes with a real benefit: evaluations of sports that ring true precisely because they speak directly to those lived elements of sports that make them the compelling, gripping, and, yes, flawed human affairs that they are.

NOTES:

- 1 I am unable, however, to respond as fully as I would have liked to Booth’s criticisms because of word limitations imposed by the editor.
- 2 Hence, we must distinguish historical claims of the sort that John F Kennedy was assassinated in 1963, whose truth rests on certain historical facts, from tautologous claims of the sort ‘Either Kennedy was assassinated or else he wasn’t’, whose truth rests on its logical form alone.
- 3 Thomas Nagel, *The View From Nowhere*, OUP, New York, 1986.
- 4 I should note here that that portion of Booth’s historical evidence which does not miss the mark is too selectively drawn to be persuasive. Thus, Booth’s mention in the last part of his review of Tatz’s work on Aboriginal sports, which provides, according to Booth’s own reading, an example of a sporting community in good working athletic and moral order—indeed, of a sporting community that has successfully reconstructed modern sports in ways that overcome their social and moral divisiveness, is, curiously, not cited when he considered the credentials of sports practice-communities as strong evaluators. Moreover, Booth’s example of the New Zealand Rugby Football Union’s defiance of the United Nations sponsored

boycott of South Africa, which is an especially egregious example of weak evaluation, is not generalisable because it depicts too narrow a slice of the political history of sporting boycotts. For if we were to interrogate that history more fully, we would find that often it is the political interests that lie behind such boycotts that are morally suspect (the sports boycotts of the Cold war era in general and the US boycott of the 1980 Moscow games in particular come quickly to mind), and not, therefore, the athletes' assertion of their right to play.

- 5 As already noted, we do have reason to question the historical evidence Booth adduces for this 'right to play' claim. There is no reason to reprise this point since the target here is Booth's conceptual rendering of strong evaluation.
- 6 I am indebted here to Charles Taylor's book *Human Agency and Language*, CUP, Cambridge, 1985.
- 7 It is here that Booth attacked my claim that when practice-communities are unable or unwilling to regulate sports in the moral manner required we can turn to the state as a court of last appeal. Booth treated my invocation of the state in this regard as plainly incoherent since I earlier argued that practice-communities stand alone in their ability to deal with the moral subtleties and complexities of sports. All I have the space to say in rebuttal is that Booth would be right if I asked the state to act, as it were, as a surrogate for practice-communities. But I did not ask it to serve as a stand-in for these communities but only as a back-up, which means that it must rely on the prelapsarian moral ideals of these communities when pressed into action—much as, by the way, the New Zealand High Court did in Booth's example when they ruled that the Rugby Union violated its own constitution.