

Lost Without Facts: A Reply to William Morgan

Douglas Booth
University of Otago
New Zealand

I am delighted with William Morgan's reply: it proves my charges that *Leftist Theories of Sport* is ahistorical and tautological. Instead of presenting hard historical evidence to defend and illustrate his theory, Morgan repeats the same meaningless, abstract arguments found in his book. The only conclusion one can draw from this reply is that he is unaware of the role of theory in historical practice.

What should theory do in history? Arthur Stinchcombe says that 'one does not apply theory to history, rather one uses history to develop theory'.¹ Theorists who 'ignore most of the facts in order to get [their] concepts going', who 'ignore the details', Stinchcombe adds, produce only 'wind'.² Morgan appears to agree. In the opening paragraph of his reply he urges 'a critical treatment of the facts'. Further on, he says that arguments about the social logic and ethos of sports practices, and about the deliberative capacities of sports practice-communities 'can be won on the historical facts'. But when it comes to presenting the facts Morgan is mute. All we are told, in a particularly heavy-footed passage, is that the theory sits 'squarely in the historical camp . . . because . . . the standards of criticism [it] deploys in [its] analyses are derived from [a] particular social site . . . inside, rather than outside, the culture they are criticising'. Rather than a theory supported by empirical data, Morgan wants us to embrace a theory that relies solely on its own internal constructs for verification!

The search for facts and their interpretation drives historical practice.³ In *Leftist Theories of Sport* Morgan provides not one fact to support his theory that sports practice-communities pursue excellence and, by logical extension, virtue. Nor does his reply address this fundamental problem. Instead of offering hard evidence capable of withstanding rigorous cross examination, he mocks us with elaborate explanations of the differences between tautology and circular argument,

and weak and poor evaluation.

I refuse to gratify Morgan and follow him into his logician's lair. I will, however, reiterate one point. Morgan's theory is tautological: the arguments upon which it rests tell us 'nothing about how things are in the world, since [their] truth value is independent of the way things are'⁴ Morgan builds his theory on logical truths rather than factual truths. For example, his argument that institutionalisation has corrupted sport is only true by dint of his definition that sport is a virtuous practice. Subjected to historical interrogation Morgan's theory crumbles: the historical evidence, stretching back to Ancient Greece, lays waste to any claim that sportspeople are inherently virtuous.

Morgan's response to my historical evidence also warrants comment. On the one hand, he concedes that I hit the mark. On the other, he dismisses it as 'too selectively drawn to be persuasive' (see Morgan's footnote 4). How, exactly, does one reconcile these two statements?

Some readers may dismiss this entire exchange as an historian and a philosopher talking at cross purposes. In some respects this is true by virtue of the fact that historical proofs are matters of judgement and embrace different standards of provability to philosophical proofs which are matters of logic. However, Morgan wants to promote 'conversation' with historians interested in the social criticism of sports'. I, too, believe that historians should pursue interdisciplinary research—but not at the expense of the discipline. *Leftist Theories of Sport* is abstract theory devoid of history and, indeed, life; there's no action, no spectacle, no emotion, no passion, no actually lived experiences, no contradictions, no ambiguities, no inconsistencies. In short, Morgan has nothing to say to social historians.

There is a second reason why social historians of sport, especially those who consider themselves critical thinkers, should be wary of embracing Morgan: his notion of critical thought reeks of neoliberalism. *Leftist Theories of Sport*, a grossly inapt title if ever there was one, merely dresses tired old liberal ideas in drag. This should come as no surprise. Social conditions always shape theory and the philosophy upon which Morgan builds his thesis, eighteenth and nineteenth century political liberalism, has recently returned to haunt political thought and policy.⁵

Morgan, whose social criticism is self-proclaimed, wants to hand responsibility for sport to self-regulating practice-communities: only

they know 'the right social context' in which sport 'might prosper and flourish'. Underpinning this policy is an implacable belief in the infallibility of practice-communities. Over the past decade and a half many neoliberal Western governments have likewise subscribed to this belief. In the name of deregulation and self-regulation, they ceded control of health, education, transport, science, education and so forth to practice-communities. Invariably this has left public policy in the hands of conservatives who, far from showing any great moral concern for either their practices or their communities, have tended to subvert the democratic process for personal and ideological interests. Sports practice-communities are no different as the Olympic movement aptly illustrates. It too propagates ideas about its own infallibility with the same result: conservatives (and assorted opportunists, ideologues, war criminals, carpet-baggers, thugs, hype-masters and flag wavers) have always controlled its governing body, the International Olympic Committee.⁶

Critical social thinkers would never subscribe to the infallibility of practice-communities without first asking questions such as, whose interests do these communities serve, and who is promoting them? Of course, had Morgan asked these very basic questions, and had he been more willing to examine the historical record, he would have produced an entirely different theory.

NOTES:

- 1 Arthur Stinchcombe, *Theoretical Methods in Social History*, Academic Press, New York, 1978, p. 1.
- 2 Stinchcombe, *Theoretical Methods*, pp. 16 and 21.
- 3 Lynn Hunt, 'History as gesture; or, the scandal of history', in Jonathan Arc and Barbara Johnson, eds, *Consequences of Theory*, Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 1991, pp.91-107.
- 4 Antony Flew, ed., *A Dictionary of Philosophy*, London, Pan Books, 1979, p. 350.
- 5 Jeffrey Alexander, 'Modern, Anti, Post and Neo', *New Left Review*, no. 210, 1995, p. 89.
- 6 John Hoberman, 'Toward a Theory of Olympic Internationalism', *Journal of Sport History*, vol. 22, no. 1, 1995, pp. 1-37.