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CLASS, SPORTS AND TELEVISION

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R.S. Gruneau, *Class, Sports and Social Development*, Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1983, 208 pp.

Ralph Miliband once noted that even though a Marxist sociology of sport may not be the most pressing of theoretical tasks, it is not an insignificant one either.[1] Now, even though Richard Gruneau's *Class, Sports, and Social Development* is not a Marxist work, it is a theoretically sophisticated, critical study of the relationship between class power and sport and, ironically, the study goes further towards meeting Miliband's challenge than most so-called radical work in sport study.

Gruneau's book, however, is not written with just the sport sociologist in mind — by drawing upon the work of Giddens, Williams, Willis, Bordieu and others, Gruneau places the study of sport in the broader context of cultural studies. In fact, one of the book's major objectives is to "develop a set of guidelines for reorienting studies of the nature and role of sport in western capitalist societies" and demonstrate that future work in sport study must break out of its parochial sub-disciplinary confines and locate itself in what C. Wright Mills identified as the classical tradition.[2] This dimension of the book makes it germane to social and political theorists because Gruneau successfully demonstrates not only how sport study can benefit from the classical tradition but also how central questions in the tradition receive refreshing new insight when examined in the context of sport.

Class, Sports, and Social Development is organized around two central problems in social and political life: (1) the question of human agency (or freedom versus determinism), and (2) the problem of class inequality and structural change.[3] The question of human agency is explored with great profit in a study of the paradoxes inherent in play, games or sport. Gruneau reviews Johan Huizinga's *Homo Ludens*, Michael Novak's *The Joy of Sports*, Jean-Marie Brohm's *Sport: A Prison of Measured Time*, and Allen Guttmann's *From Ritual to Record* and demonstrates how ludic activity (i.e. play, games or sports) can deliver special insight to the problems surrounding freedom and determinism.

In the context of his review, Gruneau examines all three forms of ludic activity.[4] He demonstrates that even play, which seems totally free, spontaneous, immanently creative and unstructured, is not immune to social

determination. When one examines play carefully, its constraints begin to emerge quite clearly. First, even play requires 'rules' to exist. "When people organize their play in order to play with or against others," Gruneau argues, "they create rules whose expressed purpose is to define standards for playing that are binding on all the players and insulate the activity from the society at large."[5] These self-imposed regulations, however, are not spontaneous creations; they stem from the lived experiences of the players "embedding play deeply in the prevailing logic of social relations and thereby diminishing its autonomy."[6] Thus, at a deeper level of analysis, an apparently generic activity — which seems to transcend social history — is shown to be no more autonomous than many other cultural practices. The prevalence of a dominant social logic is even more pronounced in the more institutionalized forms of ludic activity — games and sports — that are ostensibly played. Gruneau's discussion demonstrates a progressive curtailing of freedom and subjection to alienated forms of social practice as one moves from play through games to sport although he also notes that none of the forms of ludic activity is totally free and spontaneous.

In opposition to the bulk of sport literature which views sport as a voluntaristic realm of expressive freedom and creativity, Gruneau maintains that play, games and sports represent progressively limited constitutive social practices of individual or collective agents which are indissolubly linked to the social context in which they occur. Furthermore, these practices constitute the agents in particular ways and socially construct ludic activities into determinate historical forms. Consequently, the study of sport must recognize that agents, faced with expanding and/or contracting opportunities, exercise their expanding and/or contracting abilities to constitute sport closest to their perceived best interests.[7]

This leads to Gruneau's second major theme — the problem of class inequality and structural change. In this section of the book, the influence of Giddens and Williams is marked and while these theorists provide a sophisticated strength to Gruneau's argument, their positions also tilt the subject/object dialectic in a subjectivist direction.

With reference to the class theme, Gruneau points out that "people make history in the face of, or in conjunction with, previously established significative schemes (e.g. symbolic systems such as language) and habitualized patterns of social action."[8] The notion of signification is crucial because the symbolic meaning of sport is a dominant theme in Gruneau's analysis of its relation to class power. In essence, he maintains that ludic activities are the constitutive processes/products of meaningful agency rooted in previously existing signification schemes. These schemes in turn are linked to broader ideological systems. The habitualized patterns of ludic activities tend more often than not to reconstitute the now fetishized dominant meanings. Finally, the ability to alter (or maintain) either the habitualized/institutionalized patterns of ludic action or the symbolic meaning of the 'played' activity is unequally distributed in a class society, although this ability may change over time.[9]

Dominant meanings, interpretations, and patterns of action are not easily reconstituted over and over again and Gruneau is careful to point out a number of

ways in which cultural hegemony in the realm of sport is always somewhat fragile.[10] In the end, he notes,

> We are led to focus on two issues (1) the nature of dominant, residual, and emergent cultural practices and interpretations, including the limits and pressures associated with each; and (2) how all of these practices, interpretations, limits and pressures appear to be incorporated into the hegemonic process at any given historical moment.[11]

With his theoretical apparatus in place, Gruneau proceeds to a case-study based outline of the development of sport in Canada from the colonial period to the present. In essence, this empirical overview "focuss(es) upon the capacity of certain classes and class fragments to structure the playing of games and sports in certain ways, and to mobilize particular forms of bias through this structuring."[12] Thus, for example, Gruneau argues that colonial games contained "deep" meanings that were "indissolubly connected to imported continental traditions of ascription, folk culture and class domination."[13] However, as the Canadian middle class grew in size and power, it used the technological developments in transportation and communication associated with industrialization and the ethos of rational-utilitarianism to create a new framework within which sport forms were constituted and understood.[14] Nevertheless, the new liberal meritocratic ideology was not well suited to open competition because the lower classes could view victory in the contest as proof of their equality (or even superiority!). Hence the establishment of an amateur/professional distinction which successfully distanced the upper class elite from the lower class 'professionals'. Circumscription of this latter category also created a potential pool of talent for entrepreneurial exploitation, although commercial sport would not be viable until the turn of the century.[15] In the post World War I period, it became necessary to incorporate as clubs and sport businesses. The National Hockey League, set up in 1917, was the first league to shift from an individual entrepreneurial orientation to one of full corporate cartelization, a process achieved by 1930.[16] Gruneau writes that,

> . . . for the working class, the change from the bi-national *player-controlled*, or *club-oriented* commercial sports that one occasionally found in the late nineteenth century to the slick American-dominated corporate sports of the present day, has been something of a cultural betrayal. . . . Actual working class influence on decision making became limited as mobility into executive positions became restricted to individuals with capital; working class athletes generally became transformed from journeyman players to contractually bound labourers; and what began as a dramatization of meritocracy and greater freedom revealed itself, paradoxically, to also be an abstract symbolization of constraining commodity relations.[17]

In the final section of the chapter Gruneau overviews the movement of the state into the area of international, high performance sport and surveys the consequences of upper class hegemony here as well.

Gruneau's study is more informative than most about sport and its socio-historical structuration and in the formulation of the analysis, he also sheds new light on the broader issues of human agency and class domination. But as I mentioned earlier, the subjective bias of his theoretical framework creates some problems for his analysis — mostly problems of omission. I will mention three.

First, even though Gruneau is careful to point out in a number of places that working class groups did not passively accept the transformation of their leisure practices, he does not go very far at all in addressing Gareth Stedman Jones' claims that struggles over leisure were often no more than epilogues to struggles fought out in the work place.[18] The introduction of new work processes changed the whole rhythm and structure of social life and it is only through a detailed understanding of these objective changes — more detailed than Gruneau's discussion of the shift from mercantile to industrial capitalist domination allows — that we really understand how habituated practices resisted, modified and/or eventually gave way to ascendent work/leisure patterns.

Second, although Gruneau spends considerable time early in the book looking at the freedom and constraints involved in play, games and sports, he never looks at any specific instances of the objective practices of particular sports to elucidate how that dimension prepares players to accommodate to, or resist, dominant forms. Two examples will make my point.

Although hockey was incorporated in 1917, cartelized by 1930, and was the first sport to take full advantage of the broadcast media, there was no movement to unionize players until the Doug Harvey initiative of 1957. Why? A large part of the answer, I suspect, would be revealed by a study of hockey at the level of the social relations of its production. First, as Harvey noted, the intense rivalries within the league made it almost impossible for the players on different teams to even *think* they shared common interests. Second, while it is not true that at training camp sixty players compete for thirty spots — rather thirty-four compete for four spots and twenty-six are relatively assured of returning to the team — there is a constant turnover of players and a stratification of players at various points of progression in short careers (averaging less than five years at the major league level). Thus, powerful individual interests divide each team internally creating problems for unified action. In addition, any labour dispute has the potential of wiping out substantial *career* earnings (National Football League players lost ten percent of their career earnings in their fifty-seven day strike in 1982). Furthermore, a single long term union contract, which in most industries can be built upon several times during a worker's career, is likely the only one an athlete will work under. There is no incentive to bargain collectively in the same way that there is in other industries. Finally, as Ken Dryden notes, sport is not centred around language or abstraction; sport is constituted physically by each player every game.[19] The objective production of a hockey game is the *skilled act* of wage earners and it is this exposition of skill that ensures a player ice time and

the team victory. The full dynamic needs to be worked through more fully, but *individual* skill is the root of each player's presence on the team and the criterion of individual performance — in some cases obviously and in others arbitrarily evaluated — creates an inertia away from collective solidarity rather than towards it.

My second example comes from the Workers' Sports Movement (WSM).[20] Wheeler points out that the movement was confronted by a fundamental paradox. As a leftist, overtly political organization, the WSM had few resources; yet if its political dimension was downplayed in order to increase its athletic programme then there was no reason for the movement to continue because athletic opportunity existed elsewhere.[21] To some extent, Gruneau's discussion of the struggle over rules and resources is helpful in understanding this dilemma but again, by underplaying the objective side of resource creation, he provides only partial insight into the movement's struggle over resources both in the field of sport and more importantly in the work place. Furthermore, the political dimension of the WSM was only partially directed at the critique of bourgeois sport; a far more significant dimension was the struggle for control of the objective processes and procedures of resource creation and allocation. Here Stedman Jones' admonition about the danger of studying leisure relatively autonomously because it tends to ignore the primacy of the work place is one that must be heeded more fully.[22]

My final reservation concerns the relationship of modern sport to television. Because monopolies and oligopolies compete through the sales effort and not at the level of price, television rapidly became an adequately developed medium to reach large numbers of consumers with a technical capacity to convey particular forms of information. It is the limited technical capacity of television that needs further analysis because not only does sport represent Canadian content to television producers,[23] but many sports — though not all — are activities that are highly suitable to the medium's limited technical capacity. What I am suggesting is that to fully understand the resources that accrue to sports from television, we need to start thinking of sport and broadcast more as divisions *within* the same industry. The live gate does not sustain sport or structure its product. The bulk of revenue for the National Football League, the United States Football League and major league baseball comes from television; television revenues constrain the Canadian Football League and the National Hockey League. Thus the *constitutive practices* which yield sport are becoming progressive more like loosely scripted, highly ad lib forms of studio audience soap opera. Understanding this development requires a deeper analysis of how the broadcast commodity is produced and structured, and not just an analysis of its symbolic meaning for participants.

Despite these reservations, however, *Class, Sports, and Social Development* deserves careful attention both by the sports studies community and by those interested in socio-political theory. For the former, Gruneau has shown how a sophisticated sociological approach rooted in the classical tradition can illuminate sport in ways not fully exploited by the majority of sports researchers. For the social theorist, Gruneau's work in a frequently ignored realm of social life adds

to our sense of its complexity and forces some re-thinking. Sport, he suggests, is not merely drawn into the prevailing logic of social praxis, but provides a kind of generative paradigm for it. In examining the interplay between rule and exception we do more, therefore, than illuminate the structure of organized play, for we make possible a clarification of such fundamental social issues as those related to the puzzles of agency, inequality and change.

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Notes

1. R. Miliband, *Marxism and Politics*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1977, p. 52.
2. R. Gruneau, Class, Sports, and Social Development, Amherst, University of Massachusetts Press, 1983, p. 3.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 19.
4. For the purposes of Gruneau's discussion, play, games and sports are best thought of as forms of physical activity across a continuum which represents progressive institutionalization, rationalization, and instrumentalization. Play is participant generated, with considerable freedom to innovate and the sensory-motor schemes enjoyed are ends in themselves, although, as Gruneau points out, all of this activity is embedded in and circumscribed by a socio-historical context. Games are more estranged from the participants; they are habitualized forms of activity, legitimated by tradition and ritual-like in character. *A* way of playing has become *the* way. Sport is a wholly modern form of activity which is characterized by its highly institutionalized, bureaucratic regulation, instrumentally rational in character and alienated from its participants' control. Sport is a part of mass culture sold to mass publics which has lost virtually all of its play character.
5. Gruneau, *op. cit.*, p. 20.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 21.
7. *Ibid.*, pp. 50-51.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 55.
9. *Ibid.*, pp. 54-59.
10. *Ibid.*, pp. 60-68.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 70.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 133.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 97, see pages 94-96.
14. *Ibid.*, pp. 99-102.
15. *Ibid.*, pp. 109-117.
16. *Ibid.*, pp. 119-120.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 121.

18. G.S. Jones, "Class Expression vs. Social Control? A Critique of Recent Trends in the Social History of Leisure," *History Workshop*, 4, 1977, p. 169.
19. K. Dryden, *The Game*, Toronto, Macmillan of Canada, 1983, pp. 20-27.
20. Gruneau, *op. cit.*, pp. 125-28.
21. R. Wheeler, "Organized Sport and Organized Labour," *Journal of Contemporary History*, 13, 1978, pp. 203-7.
22. Jones, *op. cit.*, p. 170.
23. Gruneau, *op. cit.*, pp. 122-25.