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978-1-107-01269-1 - Sport and Democracy in the Ancient and Modern Worlds

Paul Christesen

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## Sport and Democracy in the Ancient and Modern Worlds

This book explores the relationship between sport and democratization. Drawing on sociological and historical methodologies, it provides a framework for understanding how sport affects the level of egalitarianism in the society in which it is played. The author distinguishes between horizontal sport, which embodies and fosters egalitarian relations, and vertical sport, which embodies and fosters hierarchical relations. He also differentiates between societies in which sport is played and watched on a mass scale and those in which it is an ancillary activity. Using ancient Greece and nineteenth-century Britain as case studies, he analyzes how these variables interact and finds that horizontal mass sport has the capacity to both promote and inhibit democratization at a societal level. He concludes that horizontal mass sport tends to reinforce and extend democratization.

Paul Christesen is Professor of Classics at Dartmouth College. He is the author of *Olympic Victor Lists and Ancient Greek History* (Cambridge, 2007) and co-editor (with Donald Kyle) of the *Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Sport and Spectacle in Greek and Roman Antiquity* (forthcoming).

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# Sport and Democracy in the Ancient and Modern Worlds

PAUL CHRISTESEN

*Dartmouth College*



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## Preface

Living on top of a fault line tends to make people uneasy. Consciously choosing to do so may seem more than a bit perverse, and the architecture of this book, which is built astride two distinct fault lines, merits brief explanation.

In general terms, scholars who study sport fall into two broad groups: historians and sociologists. Given that they share a passionate interest in a similar body of material, one might well expect there to be a constant, fruitful interchange between sport historians and sport sociologists, but in practice such interchanges occur with less than optimal frequency. The divide between the two groups is evident in the existence of two separate professional associations, the North American Society for Sport History and the North American Society for the Sociology of Sport, which hold annual conferences, at different times and in different cities. In 2011, for example, sport historians came together in May in Austin, sport sociologists in November in Minneapolis. Sport historians are few and far between at the conferences organized by the North American Society for the Sociology of Sport, and sport sociologists equally scarce at North American Society for Sport History gatherings.<sup>1</sup>

This situation is less inexplicable than it might seem at first glance. The relationship between history and sociology has been complicated ever since these disciplines coalesced in a formal fashion in the nineteenth century. Despite the fact that scholars in both disciplines explore and seek to explain human social activity, particularly within the bounds of complex, literate societies, and despite repeated calls for a symbiotic relationship between the

<sup>1</sup> I am aware that the preferred usages are “sociology of sport” and “sociologist of sport” and will, throughout the text that follows, regularly (though not exclusively) employ the former but not the latter. The reason for this is purely stylistic – “sociologist of sport” is less than an entirely elegant phrase. On the reasons why these are the preferred usages, see Malcolm 2012, 27.

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two,<sup>2</sup> history and sociology remain largely separate enterprises.<sup>3</sup> Among the many reasons why this is the case, two stand out.

First, historians tend to emphasize human agency as a key factor shaping social activity, whereas sociologists stress the importance of social structures. A satisfactory resolution for what might be called the agency/structure dilemma has remained elusive. As Philip Abrams put it more than three decades ago:

It is the problem of finding a way of accounting for human experience which recognizes simultaneously and in equal measure that history and society are made by constant, more or less purposeful, individual action and that individual action, however purposeful, is made by history and society. How do we as active subjects make a world of social objects which then, as it were, become subjects making us their objects?

Abrams concluded that the dilemma “is easily and endlessly formulated but, it seems, stupifyingly difficult to resolve.”<sup>4</sup>

Second, historians tend to have an idiographic orientation, sociologists a nomothetic one. Although there is enormous variation among individual scholars, it is probably safe to say that historians typically focus on “the meanings of the complexity of lived experience” and assume that “God is in the details.” Sociologists, on the other hand, “aim to cut through the messy details that make up real life” and seek “to find underlying general structures and principles.”<sup>5</sup> That is not to say that historians are disinterested in theoretical approaches and that sociologists are disinterested in detailed factual information, but that historians tend to see theory as a means to the end of understanding the material they study, whereas many sociologists see the generation of theories as an important goal of their work. Historians and sociologists can thus have considerable difficulty in agreeing on either what to do or how to do it.

Nonetheless, the potential value of a hybridized approach incorporating both history and sociology remains significant. This book seeks to untangle the relationship between democratization in society and democratization in sport by using an approach that draws heavily on both sport history and the sociology of sport. Thus, Chapters 1 to 7 draw heavily on the sociology of sport, Chapters 8 to 16 on sport history. As a result, the work that follows rests directly on the fault line between the history of sport and the sociology of sport.

<sup>2</sup> See, for instance, C. W. Mills 1959, 143–64.

<sup>3</sup> There are of course a number of notable exceptions, including much of the scholarship produced by *Annalists* such as Braudel, on which see L. Hunt 1986. For a discussion of the relationship between the history of sport and the sociology of sport, see Malcolm 2012, 117–34 (with the caveat that this discussion was written by a sport sociologist).

<sup>4</sup> Abrams 1980, 7, 8, respectively.

<sup>5</sup> Morris 2002, 8. On idiographic and nomothetic approaches, see Windelband 1894.

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This book also sits atop another fault line, this one within sport history itself, because it incorporates and juxtaposes both ancient and modern material. Chapters 8 to 10 explore sport in ancient Greece, Chapters 11 to 15 sport in nineteenth-century Britain and Germany, Chapter 16 sport in the United States in the twentieth century. Classicists specializing in the study of ancient Greek history have since the nineteenth century evinced an interest in sport, based on an awareness of the great importance of sport in ancient Greek society.<sup>6</sup> It was, however, not until the 1960s that the study of sport in more recent periods emerged as a distinct subfield.<sup>7</sup> Since that time, sport historians who focus on ancient and modern material have for the most part formed two distinct groups, with an amicable but functionally distant relationship. That distance reflects a commonly held belief, perhaps most evident in the influential work of Allen Guttmann,<sup>8</sup> that ancient and modern sport were fundamentally different, not just with respect to the sports that were played, but also with respect to the very nature of sport.

My decision to write a book that sits astride these two disciplinary fault lines was not driven by a quixotic quest to seek out and bridge scholarly divides. Rather it reflects my conviction that it is impossible to study the relationship between democratization in society and in sport in a satisfactory manner without drawing on a broad range of methodologies and material. Indispensable analytical benefits flow from simultaneously bringing empirical and theoretical perspectives to the same questions, and the juxtaposition of ancient and modern material makes it possible to clarify issues of causation in ways that would be otherwise impossible.

In carrying out this project I have had both the disadvantage and advantage of being in many ways an outsider. I was trained as an ancient historian, with a particular focus on the economic history of ancient Greece, and in the past decade I have worked extensively on the historiography and history of ancient Greece in the Archaic and Classical periods (700–323 BCE). I would describe myself as neither a sport historian nor a sport sociologist, but as a social historian with a strong interest in ancient Greece. My point of entry for this project had significant disadvantages, among them the need to familiarize myself with a considerable body of theoretical and historical material. On the other hand, I had the advantages of not being invested in any particular approach to studying the relationship between sport and democratization and of having a grounding in economic history, a field in which the intermingling of theoretical and empirical approaches is almost a given. Moreover, my familiarity with ancient Greek sport conferred a certain breadth of vision when it came to dealing with modern-day sport. As an outsider, I was in perhaps a better position than I otherwise would have been

<sup>6</sup> See, for instance, Gardiner 1910.

<sup>7</sup> See Struna 1985.

<sup>8</sup> See in particular Guttmann 1978.

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when it came to thinking about the most productive fashion of exploring the complicated interconnections between sport and democratization.

To endeavor to bring together sport history and the sociology of sport and ancient and modern material inevitably entails certain risks and could easily be construed as (and might well be) foolhardy. A text that draws on a diverse array of methodologies and material may attract the approbation of none and the ire of all, and individual readers, with varying areas of expertise, may find some parts of the text overly simplified, other parts overly complex. My hope is that each part of the discussion that follows has done sufficient justice to the subject matter as to satisfy specialists and enlighten nonspecialists. Rather than attempting to provide a comprehensive bibliography, I have cited only those pieces of scholarship that are most directly relevant. My expectation is that, for any given point, specialists will already be familiar with the full spectrum of pertinent sources, and that nonspecialists are best served by being guided to good starting points for further reading.

The appeal and the importance of the questions addressed in this book are, I think, apparent, and I hope that the same can be said about the possibilities created by bringing together sociology and history and ancient and modern material. Whether the promise inherent in subject matter and approach is realized is of course a matter for the reader to decide.



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## A Note on the Title

The title on the cover of this book is something of a relic. When I originally conceived this project, I imagined it to be an exploration of the relationship between sport and democracy. As the project moved forward, I discovered that it was much more productive to consider the relationship between sport and democratization. However, by the time I made that discovery the manuscript was already under contract, and a title had been irrevocably chosen. If I had to do it over again, I would give this book a different title: *A School for Democracy: Sport and Democratization in the Ancient and Modern Worlds*. Democracy and democratization are sufficiently closely related that the title as given is not, I think, fundamentally misleading. However, the reader should be aware that this is a book about democratization rather than democracy, an important distinction that is discussed in detail in the text that follows.

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