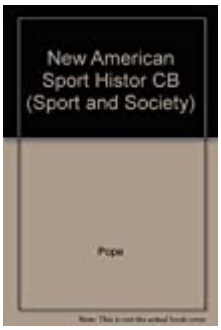
H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences



S. W. Pope, ed. *The New American Sport History: Recent Approaches and Perspectives.* Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1996. xv + 423 pp. $27.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-252-06567-5; $42.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-252-02264-7.

Reviewed by Alan Gordon (Queen's University at Kingston)

Published on H-Arete (July, 1997)

Sport history is a relatively new academic discipline. It would be understandable, then, for a casual reader to wonder at the decision to title a collection of articles, *The New American Sport History*. One might be forgiven for wondering if there is indeed a unified "new" perspective. Fortunately for the novice, the editor has included a well-crafted overview of American sport history in his introduction. S. W. Pope outlines the development of sport history in the United States from sputtering interest during the First World War to the emergence of a distinct discipline in the 1970s.

Has anything new come along in the past decade? Indeed, in comparison to the pioneering works of the seventies which emphasized modernization, recent titles are on a novel track. It is a track that holds true to the discipline's debt to the social history focus on the "history of everyday life" which has been especially advanced by the French scholar Philippe Aries and popularized by both the French Annales school and the cultural studies of British Marxists.[1] Sport history is a classic example of the "history from below" championed by the practitioners of these methods. By the mid-1980s, sport historians borrowed from Marxist and Annaliste schools to criticize the teleological aspects of modernization theories. They rejected conventional periodizations and a focus on institutional developments; they turned away from the effects of urbanization, technology and modernization as explanatory forces and sought out more human themes. With modernization thus discredited, Pope argues that sport history needs a new paradigm and suggests that the way might be found through the "more inclusive" themes of race, gender, ethnicity and class. While I am unconvinced that sport history–or any field of inquiry for that matter–needs a paradigm, I applaud Pope's division of his suggestion into categories that emphasize sport as "contested terrain." His categories include: (1) national culture, (2) gender and the body, (3) class, race and ethncity, and 4) markets and audiences. These themes are striking, not for the obvious implications for the nature of the contest, but rather for their remarkable connectedness under the broader heading of hegemony. This is not really new. The study of hegemony began in the 1970s as European and British Marxists, such as Raymond Williams and Chantal Mouffe, rediscovered and interpreted the writings of the Italian communist Antonio Gramsci.[2]

In his 1920s writings, Gramsci proposed hegemony as a replacement for older conceptions of class domination. Gramsci contended that only weak states need to rely on the threat or use of force to maintain control. Most states rule almost exclusively through hegemony–a consensual form of class rule whereby the ruled are per-

suaded to follow the lead of their rulers and convinced to see a coincidence of their interests and those of the ruling classes. Hegemony, thus, clarifies the complexities and nuances in domination and subordination but it has been used mostly to celebrate the cultural autonomy of the dominated. Many of the papers in this collection apply such an interpretation to American sport. One pairing of articles, in particular, drives home the uses of sport in building and countering the hegemonic rule of American capital. William J. Baker's piece explores the Chicago Counter-Olympics of 1932, a Communist Party event designed to protest that year's Los Angeles games and the imprisonment of California labor activist Tom Mooney. Baker wisely inserts the games into the broader Comintern policy and thus presents one of the more naked examples of the uses of sport in the American left's effort to build a counter-hegemony. However, as Baker concludes, communist-sponsored sports were no match for their company- and school-sponsored rivals. Moreover, while Baker's article reveals the inability of the left to use sport to offer a counter-hegemony to capital even during the crisis of the 1930s, Gerald Gems portrays a successful use of sports by the Chicago Catholic Church to counter any potential influence by the Chicago games and the disillusionment of the Depression. Indeed, this pair of articles intertwine nicely as a portrait of the negotiated nature of hegemonic rule.

Since the 1980s, and especially following the work of T. J. Jackson Lears, North American scholars have adapted the more purely Gramscian notion of political hegemony to a wider selection of subjects. In a 1985 article in the *American Historical Review*, Lears proposed Gramsci's work as the starting point for rethinking many aspects of American history and, in particular, argued that the concept of cultural hegemony "offers intellectual and cultural historians an opportunity to connect ideas with the social matrix that they are constantly being urged to locate."[3]

Sport, being such an integral part of American popular culture, was an obvious candidate for such a rethinking. Indeed, Mark Dyreson's contribution (perhaps the strongest piece in the collection) explicitly "rethinks" the rise of sporting culture as more than a product of American consumerism. Dyreson reconnects sport to the wider cultural history and argues that Progressive Era reformers (whom he likens to Gramsci's "organic intellectuals") linked the language of athleticism and the gospel of fair play to social norms and thus helped popularize economic and social interventionism. In sum, Dyreson suggests the route to linking sport to knowledge/power structures and to firmly implanting sport and leisure into a Lears-Gramscian notion of cultural hegemony.

However, there are clearly limitations to the use of Gramscian tools for the interpretation of America's sporting past. Concepts such as hegemony and middle-class values are all too often employed loosely and without rigour in cultural studies. For instance, while many of the articles rely on arguments of class culture and class domination, they too frequently presume class itself to be an understood category. The British Marxist tradition, from which the new American sport history has supposedly borrowed, shifted class analysis to the analysis of "class struggle" back in the 1960s. E. P. Thompson, among others, recognized that classes cannot be defined in isolation, but only through relationships with other classes.[4] This key element is too poorly established in this volume. Certainly, Baker's piece recognizes class struggle but in other cases, class is only loosely defined. Stephen Reiss's contribution, to single out an otherwise excellent selection, looks at sport as an expression of middle-class masculinity from 1840 to 1900. Although we learn that middle-class opposition to sport began to wane in the l840s and that sport had, by the turn of the century, helped redefine middle-class conceptions of manliness, we are left unsure of just what Reiss means by the "middle class." Moreover, he ascribes to it a range of ideals described variously as "traditional middle-class norms," and "future-oriented" and "martial values."

Secondly, Gramsci developed his idea of hegemony as part of a vast theory of power that emphasized interconnections. Hegemony cannot be found in a vacuum; yet in this collection, sport is often treated in isolation. Indeed, Pope's choice of articles reveals an uneven effort in this regard. Paradoxically, the articles that at first glance have little in common with the "inclusive" themes of racial, ethnic, class and gender hegemony (those in the section "markets and audiences") make the most explicit effort to remove sport history from its splendid isolation. Stephen Hardy encourages historians to look at sport as industry. Following this lead, Pamela Cooper's study of the New York Marathon connects the popularity of road racing in the l970s to both a peculiar marketing genius and changes in personal and corporate images. Perhaps, other sport historians might follow this lead and return, on occasion, to a more traditional aspect of the history of everyday life and examine leisure in relation to work.

A third drawback to the use of hegemony in analyzing sport history is related to the underlying nature of hegemony itself. Hegemony is not straightforward le-

gitimation, but emerges, sometimes spontaneously, from the interaction between cultural groups. Among other things, it is often expressed in deeply held social attitudes and notions of common sense. Hegemony is thus closely tied to what the French Annales historians have termed "mentality.." Of course, one of the many problems connnected with studying mentalities is that they only change over the long term (*longue duree*). Sport history, then, ought to take an interest in the *longue duree.* Indeed, one of the leaders of American sport scholarship, Stephen Hardy, has explicitly called for greater attention to the "long residuals" of sport, as Pope points out in his introduction. Yet, Hardy's leadership notwithstanding, few of the pieces Pope selected pay much attention to the *longue duree.* One notable exception, David Wiggin's intellectual history on the assumptions of the athletic superiority of Blacks, demonstrates just how long a time period one must examine in order to find only minute shifts in mentalities. Wiggins shows how even recently espoused theories of physiological superiority are rooted in the ninenteeth-century science of races and are closely tied to culturally and politically constructed racial stereotypes.

Nonetheless, the concept of hegemony remains a powerful tool for examining sport history because it emphasizes give and take. In the section designated "national culture," the emphasis might just as well have been on breaking down localized leisure traditions as on building a national hegemonic culture. The spread of New York rules baseball, documented by Melvin Adelman, and the predominance of Yale rules football, as discussed by Michael Oriard, demonstrate the sporting dominance of the northeastern states. Oriard's piece, in particular, reveals how Yale University's football mentor, Walter Camp, presided over the collegiate game, sending his disciples into the Midwest on proselytizing missions.

Curiously, despite its attention to the building of a national (or hegemonic) sporting culture and the influences of British and French theorists on the practitioners of American sport history, this collection reflects a continuing parochialism among American sport historians. Very few articles attempt to situate themselves in broader North American or Euro-American contexts. This is somewhat surprising as the footnotes to Pope's introduction reveal his own understanding of such broader, international context. Admittedly, Pope's mission of bringing together "American" sport history likely led to this focus. And there is some argument for American exceptionalism in sport history: American games have, by and large, only recently enjoyed success overseas and few purely "foreign" games have penetrated American popular culture. Indeed, Reiss documents a decline of interest in the trans-Atlantic sporting culture over the middle decades of the nineteeth century. But where Reiss, Allan Guttman and Pope make reference to a broader western culture, many of these articles would have benefitted from their lead. Oriard, for instance, mentions only one 1874 McGill-Harvard football contest and the resulting adoption of the Canadian rules by the Cambridge side. This much is already well known but Oriard pays it surprisingly little attention in a piece about how specific game forms are created.

Lest these quibbles give a contrary impression, *The New American Sport History* is an excellent book. S. W. Pope has put together a powerful representation of some of the best scholarship on American sport history. It is unfortunate that the spatial constraints of the internet do not permit a detailed examination of each article. While this text proposes no novel thesis, it has helped to lend shape to the otherwise disjointed current of debate in the sport scholarship community and has provided a useful frame on which future studies can be built.

NOTES

[1]. See especially Philippe Aries and Georges Duby, editors. *Histoire de la vie prive.* 5 vols. Seuil: 1985-87.

[2]. See, for example, Raymond Williams. "Base and Superstructure in Marxist Cultural Theory." *New Left Review* Nov/Dec 1973: 31-49; and Chantal Mouffe, editor. *Gramsci and Marxist Theory.* Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1979.

[3]. T. J. Jackson Lears. "The Concept of Cultural Hegemony." *American Historical Review* June 1985: 572.

[4]. E. P. Thompson. "Pecularities of the English." *The Poverty of Theory and Other Essays.* Merlin Press, 1978.

Copyright (c) 1997 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permission, please contact H-Net@h-net.msu.edu.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

/~arete

Citation: Alan Gordon. Review of Pope, S. W., ed., *The New American Sport History: Recent Approaches and Perspectives*. H-Arete, H-Net Reviews. July, 1997.

URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=1090

Copyright © 1997 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.org.