

SPORTS & CULTURAL POLITICS: THE ATTRACTION OF MODERN SPORTS

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The socialist tradition is based upon a vision of a society of "freely associated producers," a society founded upon cooperative productive relations and the extension of cooperation to the whole of social life. Consequently, the socialist tradition has tended to view competitive productive relations and competition in social life negatively. Progress in social relations (the progress towards socialism) is seen as a movement away from competition and toward cooperation. Socialists evaluate social progress as the elimination, "the withering away," of competition from social life. The struggle for socialism is the struggle to remove the competitive fetters to cooperation: first and foremost the competition of classes.

It is because socialists wish to eliminate competition in practice (i.e., wish that it were not there) that they also tend to erase it in theory and examine presently existing competition through a "biased" haze. This makes it difficult to consider competition *dialectically*, to examine the mutual relations, the interdependence of competition and cooperation in any particular sphere of social life. Nowhere is this undialectical consideration of competition clearer than in the critical analysis of *sports*, one of the areas of social life in which competition is most prominent and visible and to which it seems intrinsic under present conditions. Sports are an area in which the repugnance of critical socialists to competition is most manifest. Indeed, for a long time even the very importance of sports was ignored. However, as spectator sports have become one of the most prevalent features of modern societies, radical thinkers have turned their critical attention to it (albeit largely to deplore it). Competition in sports is seen as a mirror reflection of capitalist productive and gender relations. Examined *culturally* mass-spectator televised professional sports are part of the system of legitimation of contemporary capitalism. As British cultural critic Garry Whannel writes in his book *Blowing the Whistle*: "Sport offers a way of seeing the world. It is part of the system of ideas that supports, sustains and reproduces capitalism. It offers a way of seeing the world that makes our very specific form of social organization seem natural, correct and inevitable" (1983, 27). Spectator sports thus are *part of the problem* of contemporary social life and, aside from a few derogatory comments, their analysis is not high on the agenda of a progressive cultural politics.

Within the domain of progressive publications, ZETA magazine, a Boston-based monthly, is therefore quite unique in that it has a semiregular column that deals with sports in a serious way, and in the June 1989 issue Matthew Goodman poses a fundamental question to those of us on the Left who like/watch/follow/enjoy sports: are U.S. sports worth supporting? Positing two views of sport, one based on cooperation and camaraderie, the other on greed, individualism, and competition, Goodman notes with dismay that American sports are being pushed more and more in the latter direction, and consequently (and sorrowfully) he is having serious doubts about his fanship. In raising these important questions, Goodman is raising the paradox that Ike Balbus identified as long ago as 1973 (in his review of Paul Hoch's *Rip-off the Big Game*) when he pointed to the phenomenon of the "radical as sports fan"—the person who criticizes all institutions of capitalist society but who still loves sports.

While Goodman has raised an important point, he may have posed the wrong question. It is not a matter of whether one should or should not support sports but what form the struggle over their definition should take. Unless one simply wishes to abandon sport as an area of contestation, the question is really one of *cultural politics*: are sports worth struggling over? We believe they are, because sports may not simply be part of the problem, but also *part of the solution* to the transition to a more just society. Above all sports are a realm of *popular pleasure* in contemporary life. It is tapping into the nature of the attraction that may give us an answer to the question concerning the role that sports can play in a progressive cultural politics. Indeed, we believe that at the heart of the attraction of modern sports lies a vision of *socialism* and *socialist competition*. The struggle is over how to recover presently existing competitive sports for a positive socialist vision and to show how this vision is itself central to the attraction to sports, to the love of sports in the population. This requires that we examine closely the way in which competition presents itself in sports and daily life as both different and identical.

The Difference Between Sports and Life: The Heaven of Sports

There is an intrinsic relation between sports and competition. Sports are fundamentally about competition. Any attempt to clarify the nature of sports and their immense appeal must clarify the nature of competition. To do this we must first put away our petit-bourgeois panic about competition and ask the important question, "how does competition appear to the population in sports compared with daily life such that people identify and seek refuge in sports competition?" There are three aspects to the comparison:

First, in daily life, competition is very rarely direct but is experienced in a *mediated* form. We compete for jobs, raises, promotions, for security, for status, against a foggy field of competitors whom we do not even know. Most of our

behavior in markets is in just this situation. In sports, on the other hand, competition is most often *direct and unmediated*. We can see the competitors; we can see the interdependence of their performances. The competitors and their interdependence seem to us direct, in contrast to the pea soup of mediations that mask our competition in daily life.

Second, in daily life, the *basis* of competition is obscure. We are mostly in the dark about what it takes to succeed at it, to win or even to survive. The process of capitalism itself constantly mystifies the basis of success and constantly generates new mysteries. People have little secure basis that whatever they are doing will give them a better chance to succeed. The basis of competition is mystified. In sports the basis of competition seems to be present, to be open to observation. The rules are clear and there seems to an objective basis for the judgment of competition. This is rare in competition in daily life.

Third, in daily life, because the competition is mediated and because the basis of competition is obscure, our emotional involvement is highly *unpleasant*. We must compete against competitors largely unknown, on an unknown basis, with little idea of what we must do to win. And we *have* to compete. If we fail to compete, or if we do compete and then fail, very unpleasant things happen to us. We lose "face," money, position, power. . . even sexual attractiveness (for men). The field of competition is obscure, the penalties severe. Because we cannot see clearly, and because it matters so much, the state of our emotions is both intense and confused. The state of our emotions is unpleasant. But in sports this is not so. Our emotional involvement is highly *pleasant*. The competition seems clear to us, and we think we know what it is about. When we as spectators enter it, identify with it, our emotions are focused and not muddled. Best of all, we can "play" and not lose, just because we are spectators.

The secret then of the immense attractiveness of sports is that they present a *spectacle of unmystified competition*. It is around this image that people unite. In sport, it seems to us, that unlike life, we can see how society works, we can see who the competitors are, we can see what "it takes" to win. To see these things has enormous effects on us. It makes us feel smart, it makes us feel sane. In short it makes us happy. Sports cannot show us how our society *really works*. But they can show us how we *desire* it to work. We desire a society of unmystified competition. The attraction of sports is founded upon its seeming clarification of the alienated relations of competition of modern society.

At the same time, these sports also socialize us into tolerating and enduring competition as we experience it in daily life, by encouraging us to conceive our chaotic, obscure conditions of daily competition along the model of sports competition. But what is this model and whence does it come? We have argued above that

competition in sports seems to be unmystified and that we can "really know" how it works. Indeed, where in our everyday grapplings with competition are we granted the luxury, the clarity of an *instant replay*, a replay that gives us a basis to sit in judgment—*informed judgment*—not only on the players but on the very authorities constituted to judge the game? This constitutes power, the *power of reason*. (The controversy over whether to allow instant replays into the sport itself is itself very interesting, i.e., how to handle the contradiction between reason and constituted authority?) And we participate in this power of reason; it empowers *us*. Where in everyday capitalist life can we sit in judgment on the invisible powers who sit in judgment on us? The seeming reason of competition in sports empowers us in another way. Because the competition seems clear, *justice can be done*. The outcome is "fair," the win was "earned," the winner "deserved" to win. In sports competition, it seems to us that Reason prevails, Justice is done, and we can understand it all. And we hunger for this. Sports competition is the *Heaven* of competitive reason and justice, as life is its *Hell*. Hence sports are immensely attractive. They provide both an *escape* from Hell and a *socialization* into living with it. Hidden in our hunger for this Heaven is the hope that the present Hell could be remade in the image of Heaven. In fact, hidden in our love of sports is the hope of *socialism*.

We can see the great difference between competition in Sport and Life if we turn the tables. Try to imagine sports competition with the mystified characteristics we find in real life. We find it impossible to do. Sports would not work in such darkness. But capitalism does, day after day. This is the reason why our rulers propagate the image of competition in sports as indeed the image of competition in life. In every sphere of life (including war) Nixon, Reagan, and Bush reach for the language of sports to describe the most atrocious deeds. (To explain his intransigence concerning negotiations during the Persian Gulf War, George Bush reverted to the explanation of "having a game plan and sticking by it" and the jock-culture machoism of "kicking ass." Indeed, especially during the early weeks of the war, the language of sports was very visible in media reports.) The Terrible Simplifiers "make life clearer" by describing them as sport. There is a good basis for this: sports competition *is* clearer. Hence our rulers try to get us to imagine real competition, our real darkness, with the clarified characteristics we find in sports competition. We are attracted to sports because their competition is different from our present social life. Sports are clear, our social life is dark. But we are forced to live that life whose ruling ideology only makes it darker. We are constantly told that the dark competition of our lives is as clear as sport.

The Identity of Sports and Life: The Private Appropriation of Collective Activity

So far, we have stressed the difference between competition in sports and daily life. Where this life is dark there will be a limit to the light that sport can shed on the

nature of competition. It is important to discover this limit, this "boundary of light from darkness," because it is in fact a boundary between *resistance* and *submission* to the system of social life in the sphere of sport. To discover this boundary, we need to separate the *division of labor* in sport from its *appropriation*. We noted above that in sports one can see the competition in an unmediated fashion. In fact, examined closely, we can see that competition (any competition) is a *collective* activity, a collective labor in which the contributions of the winner and the loser are interdependent. The collective nature of competition is central to the experience of sports. One-sided contests in which the collective activity is subordinated are uninteresting. We need only ask the television networks about the drop in viewers during an event as one side overwhelms the other. As all professional sports leagues know, it is competitive balance that is vital to the health and profitability of a league. (In the United States the draft system is the most obvious tool towards this competitive balance.) The great sports events of our culture are those that have balanced competition at their heart.

For example, one of the most historic and memorable tennis matches in recent history was the 1980 Wimbledon final in which Bjorn Borg defeated John McEnroe. What that match indicated was not that Borg was a great player but just how great in fact he was. Borg needed McEnroe to push him to new heights of achievement. If Borg had routinely won in four sets as at one time looked likely, that match would not stand out in our collective sports memory. But because McEnroe won the fourth set tiebreaker 18-16, he forced Borg to be even better. Whatever *beauty* we perceive in the realm of sports is dependent on both competitors. In his superb autobiography *The Game*, Ken Dryden, ex-goaltender for the Montreal Canadiens hockey team, writes of how his greatest moments occurred against Boston teams, that without the tremendous opposition they provided he could not have performed as he did. He needed their competition for the fulfillment of his own dreams.

What people are attracted to in sports then is the beauty of collective activity. They are drawn to the *process* of competition rather than to its results. We see beauty as a property of the personality, of the competitor, *in competition*. Not apart from the competition but within it. Beauty therefore is a property *of the competition*, which is manifest through the competitors. When we perceive beauty in sports, the beauty of the competitors is the *figure*, the beauty of the competition is the *ground*.

In a capitalist society, however, it is the private appropriation of social labor that is the determining feature, and hence in capitalized sports it is the winners who appropriate the results of the process of competition. The winners go on to something better. They will appear again next week. They can convert their winning notoriety into sponsorship of commodities and so reap greater benefits and even more visibility for their appropriation of the results of collective activity. The losers disappear from view, their fate too desperate to be contemplated. As George Allen

remarked in reflecting the ethos of U.S. culture: "Losing is worse than death. You have to live with losing." The more this private appropriation occurs, the more the very existence of this ground, not to speak of its collective character, is suppressed and the more the beauty is presented to us *only* as the property of *the competitors*. It is the private nature of appropriation that suppresses the collective character of beauty. It suppresses the beautiful character of the competitive *process* and reproduces beauty as an "attribute" of the competing *subjects*.

The rejection of competitive sports by critical socialists is based upon a failure to distinguish the process from the appropriation of its results. When we cannot distinguish between the process and the competitors, it will appear to us that properties that belong to the labor process as such belong only to the competitors. The labor process, the cooperative-competitive process, then appears only as a scene in which these *pre-existing* properties of the competitors simply display themselves. Hence, what is really *social* labor appears decomposed into merely *individual* labor. Because the winner takes all it appears that he or she does all, a process that we can label as the "personalization of competition."

Personalization might almost be called a U.S. trademark, a concept at the core of all its major cultural conceptions. It is inevitable in a society that virtually denies that classes exist. This is the point of identity between our sports and our social life. Sports may be clear and open to everyone in specifying their competitors, in framing their rules, in recording and measuring their process and their outcomes. In all this they make competition "light." But they share the mystification, they reproduce the "darkness" of competition in the personalization of competition.

The North American sports-media complex embodies a highly *capitalized* system of sport. The more capitalized is sport, the greater the contradiction between the cooperative labor of the competitive process in sport and the private appropriation of its result. The greater this contradiction, the more the image of competition is personalized. This process of personalization is important; it forms the major basis on which the audience identifies with the sport. A particularly horrendous example is the behavior of many parents, contrasted with their children, in Little League. The kids, as often as not, focus on the competition. They want to play the game. But the parents do not. Wedded to the personification of competition is parental attachment to the child, perhaps through the child to the parent's own ego. The kids wish to be left alone to play and enjoy the game. The innocent want the process while their parents want the result.

To summarize: the image of competition in sport, unlike its image almost everywhere else, is an image of *fair* competition. This is not merely an image; to an important degree sport *embodies* this. But this is a limited fairness. Sports reproduce the social mystification of competition by personalizing a process of social

cooperation. In fact, we may argue, that in this fundamental respect, sports are "darker" than competition in everyday life. Precisely because sports competition is "fair," it personalizes competition *more* than does everyday competition, in all its darkness. Thus sports are an area of capitalist social life with contradictory possibilities for changing that life. And we can only begin to grasp the outlines of the nature of socialist sport and socialist competition. Socialist competition in sport is *uncapitalized* competition. As such, it makes manifest, makes visible what now must be extracted from the present structure of competition by analytical labor—the actual basis of competition as cooperative social labor. Such *unalienated, unmythified competition* is in fact compatible with the fact that competition continues under socialism: from each according to their ability, to each according to their work.

The Battle for Definitions of Sports

In this paper we have stressed the progressive possibilities that exist in sports. The visions that we see in sports, the visions that attract us to it (and there are others we have not listed, such as the cooperation involved in team sports), are visions of what a progressive socialist society would look like. Socialists should take advantage of these possibilities, for at the very heart of the mass spectacles that are designed to narcotize the population from open rebellion are images of what a transformed capitalism could look like. Sports provide images of what competition and cooperation would look like in another social setting. Role models with these potentialities should not be ignored. The definitions of what sports are about are definitions that should be fought and struggled over. As Gramsci noted, the "superstructures" are the *site* of class struggle, and we should not ignore an institution that shows in spectacular fashion the nature of a progressive society that might follow the present one. We should especially not ignore this possibility when people identify themselves so strongly with that world. If only the nature of the attraction could be made clear and a course outlined where life would imitate in a true fashion the utopian dream of sports. That is the political struggle over sports. It is one of the crucial sites of a progressive cultural politics.

References

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