

# One-Dimensional Sport<sup>1</sup>

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When members of NASSS, North American Society for the Sociology of Sport, met in Tucson, AZ, in 2004 for the annual NASSS conference, there was a panel on the program entitled “Critiquing Sport: What is the relevance of Marxism?”. The panel was initiated and organized by Ian McDonald, University of Brighton, and had three presentations, by McDonald himself, by Alan Bairner and by Rob Beamish. The panel was well attended, and indicated a renewed interest in Marxist theory within sociology of sport. After the conference, a proposal to create an informal network, “International Network for the Marxist Study of Sport”, was published, signed by Ian McDonald and 23 other internationally reputable sports sociologists, among them Grant Jarvie, Alan Tomlinson, Henning Eichberg, Tomas Peterson, Tobias Stark and Gerd von der Lippe. The NASSS conference 2006 offered an eponymous panel by the network, conveners of which was McDonald, Bairner and Beamish, and providing presentations by Cathy Bray, Hiroshi Fukasawa, and Ian McDonald. [idrottsforum.org](http://idrottsforum.org) is proud to present McDonalds paper, “One-Dimensional Sport”, in this update.

Ian McDonald’s understanding of modern sports is inspired by Herbert Marcuse’s One-Dimensional Man from 1964. Marcuse (1898–1979) was associated to the Marxist Institute for Social Research in Frankfurt when Hitler gained power in 1933, and like many of his colleagues, notably Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, he fled Germany for the United States. After the war, Marcuse developed his Marxist critique of Western capitalism as well as of Soviet communism. One-Dimensional Man introduces a theory of advanced industrial societies, where “mechanics of conformity” erase critical thinking and analyses, resulting in a one-dimensional universe without contradictions and conflicts. Critical thoughts can only come from outside this universe. In his article, McDonald observes that while Marcuse’s analysis is insufficient for an understanding of contemporary society, it offers a suitable theoretical framework for a critical analysis of modern elite sport, which is characterized by commodification, bureaucratization, and the obsession with points, times, lengths and heights at the expense of qualitative aspects of sports – how it looks, what it feels like. McDonald concludes that the proper dialectical approach to modern sports involves denouncing sport, while resolutely continuing to perpetuate it.

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If it achieves nothing else, I hope that the establishment of the INMSS at least provokes some reflection and re-evaluation of Marxist theory and sport. In this paper, I want to make some broad comments that are intended to do just this. How are we to understand the nature of Marxism as it has developed in the sociology of sport, and how might the Marxist approach be delineated as we seek to develop this perspective in the future? Addressing these two questions is the over-ambitious aim of this paper: I will make two key points. 1) That the Marxism that has developed in the sociology of sport can be located in the tradition of Western Marxism, which while providing the possibility for opening sport as an arena of enquiry, has also undercut Marxism from its roots as revolutionary political project. 2) That the material base for this shift in Marxism corresponds to the historically conservative and incorporating role of sport in society, which has found its ideological expression in the rise of post-Marxist Gramscianism – a non, indeed anti revolutionary Marxist perspective that limits the possibilities of change to mere reform, resistance and subversion, but never transcendence.

Hitherto, the debate within Marxism and the study of sport has been framed within a series on dichotomies, often posed in Manichaen terms. Thus, we get economic Marxism (bad) versus humanistic Marxism (good), or determinism (bad) versus voluntarism (good) or a class reductionism (bad) versus multiple identities (good). Essentially these debates are concerned with how we understand the place of sport in society. In an economic, deterministic and class based Marxism, (sometimes referred to in the literature as neo-Marxism) sport tends to be seen epiphenomenally and/or in functional terms serving the needs of capitalist society. In a humanistic, voluntarist and identity based Marxism, (or hegemony theory/Gramscian Marxism) sport is as a relatively autonomous and contested terrain of culture. However, I think both approaches are problematic: it's as if one is forced to choose between taking sport seriously but at the expense of eclipsing the notion of revolution, or to take the idea of revolution seriously but deriding the importance of sport. So I want to recast the debate and pose it another way. I contend that the challenge facing Marxists in the sociology of sport is to reconcile the fact of the irreflexibility of capitalism on the one hand (hence the need for revolution), while acknowledging the non-epiphenomenal place of sport in society on the other (hence the necessity for engaged analysis of sport) – in other words to be both deterministic and humanistic, to hold on to both the determining influence of the political economy of Karl Marx and the sociological relevance of cultural formations. The late Alan Ingham formulated it well:

A dialectical Marxism would require both a theoretical concern for the logic of capital and an empirical concern for experience. The logic, surely, is ever present and cannot be relegated to some last instance of determination. And experience, the mediator of culture, is not purely independent of the logic. Is not a concern for the relationships between capital's logic and lived experience integral to an adequate analysis of social formation, social being and social consciousness? Is this concern not the crux of Gramsci's contribution? (Ingham, 1982: 205-6).

But as Terry Eagleton has argued, in social theory over the past decades, we have witnessed a jettisoning the revolutionary kernel of Marxism in the name of Marxism with Gramsci's contribution coming to mean "theories of subjectivity rather than workers revo-

lution” (Eagleton, 2003: 31). It is my contention that this narrative of decline (or progress, depending on your perspective) of Marxism away from a dialectal materialist philosophy so neatly articulated by Alan Ingham, to a version of post-Marxist identitarian approach, lies in the problematic nature of Western Marxism itself, such that the decline was built into the very framework as it emerged in the 1920s in the aftermath of the isolation of the Russian Revolution of 1917.

With a focus on the aesthetic and the cultural, Western Marxism offered a way out of the economistic, deterministic, and functionalist accounts of society in orthodox Marxism. However, as Perry Anderson (1976) argues, Western Marxism was also a response borne out of political disillusionment concerning the prospects of revolutionary change. Anderson notes that a consequence of its origin was that Western Marxism soon developed obscurantist tendencies that found a ready home in the academy but detached it from practical revolutionary politics. The drift away from an activist Marxism was built into the particular appropriation of Gramsci in the 1970s and 1980s. It was the incarcerated Gramsci of the obscure *Prison Notebooks* rather than the revolutionary Gramsci of the *Lyon Theses* that was seized on. Whereas the *Lyon Theses* written in 1926 left no doubt about the revolutionary commitment of Gramsci, and his admiration for Lenin and the Bolsheviks, the Gramsci of the highly ambiguous *Prison Notebooks* permitted plenty of room for interpretation. Though diverse, the theoretical innovations of ‘Western Marxism’ shared ‘one fundamental emblem: a common and latent *pessimism*’, concludes Anderson (1976: 88).

Pessimism here relates not to a psychological state, but to the rejection of the possibility of transcendence and a corresponding acceptance of the existing co-ordinates of society as the boundaries for social change. It is precisely this accommodation with reality that permeates current thinking in the critical sociology of sport and evokes the argument presented by Marcuse in *One-Dimensional Man*. Herbert Marcuse portrayed a theory of advanced industrial society in which a ‘mechanics of conformity’ systematically effaced critical thought and behaviour to produce a ‘society without opposition’. Marcuse claimed that the mass media, industrial management and uncritical modes of thought had created false needs that served to integrate individuals into the system of production and consumption. Resistance could only come from social forces outside of, and marginalised from, ‘one-dimensional society’, forces that in their ‘great refusal’ of repression and domination display the liberatory potential of critical and dialectical thinking. Is there an intriguing parallel between Marcuse’s ‘one-dimensional society’ and the institutions and culture of modern sport? Does modern sport – one-dimensional sport – produce its own ‘mechanics of conformity’ in which alternative and oppositional cultures *and voices* are ultimately negated? Are we, as radical academics, also subject to the mechanics of conformity? The fact that competitive high performance sport, the dominant culture of sport in most parts of the world today, can be characterised economically by commodification, politically by bureaucratization, especially under the shadow of nation states, and ideologically by linear record, has ensured a culture of non-acceptance and resistance over various forms of oppressions, representations and exploitative practices in sport. But these are essentially struggles within the existing and highly limited discourse of high performance sport.

But then, where is the space for a revolutionary intervention into sport? It lies in using the concept of the revolution as a heuristic device from which to construct a critique of modern sport. The concept of revolution is based on an understanding of the irreform-

ability of capitalism and the necessity for fundamental social transformation that starts with practical interventions, which are by definition reformist and progressive in nature. A revolutionary critique is not then, a justification for political quiet-ism and passivity, but on the contrary, a call for politically engaged scholarship, while recognising, what a well-established Marxist historiography has demonstrated, that sport has tended to play a conservative and incorporating function in society. Of course, there is always resistance, disruption and subversion, but transcendence, transformation, revolution? Sport will not provide this. **This is the Marcusean thesis transposed from society on to the world of sport.** *One-Dimensional Man* can be read as a global, totalizing theory of a new type of society that transcends the contradictions of capitalist society in a new order that eliminates individuality, dissent and opposition. All opposition has been absorbed into a totalitarian monolithic system. In terms of an analysis of society, Marcuse clearly underplayed the role of contradictions. But, it is an apt analysis of the social world of sport. “Contemporary society (*sport*) seems to be capable of containing social change – qualitative change that would establish essentially different institutions, a new direction of the productive (*sport*) process, new modes of human (*sport*) existence. This containment of social change is perhaps the most singular achievement of advanced industrial society (*modern global sport*)” (*italics inserted*) ([1964] 2002: xlii). As Marcuse states, “In the absence of demonstrable agents and agencies of social change, the critique is thus thrown back to a high level of abstraction. There is no ground on which theory and practice, thought and action, meet. Even the most empirical analysis of historical alternatives appears to be unrealistic speculation, and commitment to them a matter of personal (or group) preference” ([1964] 2002, Xliii).

So in the absence of historical alternatives, we are ‘thrown back to a high level of abstraction’. Lets go down that particular path. The study of sport, as Richard Gruneau notes, “is haunted by a fundamental paradox” ([1983] 1999: 21). Gruneau argues that rules in sport act to separate the activity from reality but at the same time have the effect of deeply embedding them in prevailing social relations. Depending on how it is structured, sporting practice can be enabling, by “opening pathways for various freedoms, pleasures, forms of disciplinary mastery, social bonding, and identity”, or constraining, by “directing pleasures and the meanings associated with them into social and cultural forms that sustain relations of domination” ([1983] 1999: 115). **Thus the very act of creating the autonomy of sport serves to undermine that autonomy. For a revolutionary critique of sport, paradox plays the same role as contradictions in wider society.** Thus, while paradoxes, as non-dialectical formations, tend not to produce their own gravedigger in the manner of contradictions, they do pave the way for a radical critique. “Critique” explains Alvin Gouldner (1980: 70/1) “throws light on the hidden, repressed, unspoken, possibilities, the possibilities that they may be hostile to “what is,” indicating what they are, why they have been hidden, and by whom”.

A political and philosophical critique of the practice of sport reveals a radical kernel that is missed in more formal sociological and historical analysis. Philosophically speaking, sport is premised on an acceptance of arbitrary rules and the establishment of gratuitous obstacles that prohibit the most objectively efficient means of winning, scoring, and/or performing. Therefore, on the one hand, sport is a pointless and inconsequential physical practice, what Christopher Lasch referred to as “the uselessness of Games” (1979:100). However, it is its very uselessness, futility and artificiality that give sports a moral dimen-

sion that exist alongside the more instrumental imperatives. It is these tensions, implicit with sporting practice, that pre-occupy the sports philosopher, William Morgan, in his latest book *Why Sports Morally Matter*.

In his analysis of sport in the USA, William Morgan has proved to be one of the few critics prepared to stake out a concrete political position, one that avoids “the dangers of hypercriticism and excessive romanticism”, to “explore the legacy of the Progressive conception of sports as a moral model for the criticism and reform of contemporary sports” (2006: 6). Morgan insists that sports still possess important features that encourage social, moral, and political values crucial to the flourishing of a democratic polity. Morgan’s methodological point of departure is to construct a narrative about sports in a ‘state of play’ that is ethically cleansed so as to highlight in a rudimentary and pure way the social settings in which sports are played and the motivational underpinning of participant actions. The description of sport in ‘the state of play’ acts as a heuristic device to “construct a counterstory and then deploy it against the dominant one in order to jar our present moral sensibilities regarding sports and, therefore, our stock moral conceptions of them as mainly instrumental pursuits chasing external goods as money and fame” (2006: 17).

Morgan argues that intrinsic to both sports practices and ethical societies is a mutual regard for and trust in others. Thus the competitive element in sport presupposes trust, cooperation and mutual regard for the rules and conventions, as well as a mutual commitment to pushing each other to the limits of performance: it is more than mere *collective* action but rather “a mutual attending, intending, reasoning, and acting that eventuate in a *common* action that requires a certain common or like-mindedness”. The sharing and mutual valuing of this kind of communicative activity results in the nurturing of relationships characterised by inter-subjectivity rather than instrumentality. This mix of instrumental and intrinsic goods stands as a critical measure against the trend of contemporary sport, especially elite level sports, in which instrumental imperatives are dominant to the point that they are “jeopardizing their standing as forms of life worthy of pursuit in themselves” (2006: 22). Morgan argues essentially for the play-like qualities intrinsic to sport to be celebrated. As his example of testimony of elite athletes like NBA star Bill Bradley reveals, elite sport need not necessarily be outside the state of play, but is less conducive to realising the child-like pleasures encountered in the earlier stages “on the moral ladder of sports” (2006: 24).

Following his belief in the moral power of sports, Morgan suggests that “there is no reason to bemoan Americans’ enthusiasm for sports, especially at their best, as such enthusiasm is not only fully justified but is a possible harbinger of good things to come” (2006: 209). Clearly, Morgan’s redemptive reading is premised on the extraction of the egalitarian and communitarian impulse in sport that in the face of the dominance of instrumentalist imperatives, can be understood as an essentially utopian rendering of the possibilities of sport in pointing us towards an alternative vision of society. Utopia is often seen in pejorative terms but it follows from the deployment of critique and so plays an important role in critical social theory. We can speak of two forms of utopianism: ‘bad utopianism’ that ‘fails to connect with actual historical process’ and is unable ‘to set in train transformative social action’ (Cooke, 2004: 414); and a post-metaphysical approach that attempts to ‘locate emancipatory potentials within actual historical reality’ that are contingent on ‘transformative social action’ (2004: 414/5).

Morgan's account is certainly not a form of bad utopianism, but it is compromised by the politics of his critique. For Morgan the communicative utopian aspects of sport can only be realised by appealing to political tradition of democratic America rooted in the Progressivism from the 1890s to the 1960s. Does this then become a nostalgic yearning for a by-gone era, since eclipsed by 'the great unravelling' and the rise of the neo-liberal consensus? Does it mark out Morgan's argument as more *nostalgic* than *utopian*? Even if the era of Progressivism were to return, as a form of social democracy it is still located with the existing co-ordinates of capitalist social relations. However, Morgan's analysis is vitally important, because it demonstrates what historically has been proven, that the utopian moment can only ever have a formal status in sport. The state of play can only be an abstraction, rather than a concrete possibility, this side of the revolution. But this is not a call for the denunciatory politics of sport that characterised the neo-marxist critique most closely associated with Jean-Marie Brohm (1978). It is a critique rooted in a revolutionary Marxist perspective rather than a social democratic one, and it calls for an 'active interventionism' (a phrase I have nicked from Alvin Gouldner) into the politics of sport. It reveals where the pressure points are. It encourages analyses that expose, for example, the rhetorical nature of government claims about sport, and so equips fans, players and professionals with greater self-understanding; but it always makes clear that the promise of sport as a realm of freedom can only be contested but never finally claimed within the context of capitalist social relations.

The paradoxical nature of sport – its inherent utopian dimension set alongside the essentially conservative role played by sport vis-a-vis revolutionary change – points towards the need for a dialectical approach to sport in modernity. Such an approach has been summed up by Frederic Jameson in his comments on culture in general. The methodological conclusion to be drawn from the view of culture as something more than a mere epiphenomenon, "[i]s that we must denounce culture (as an idea but also as a phenomenon) all the while we continue to perpetuate it, and perpetuate it while continuing tirelessly to denounce it" (1990: 47/8). Based on the notion of critique set within revolutionary Marxist politics, I suggest that a properly dialectical approach involves denouncing sport, while resolutely continue to perpetuate it. It is the idea that sport must be simultaneously preserved and overcome: preserved, because its paradoxical nature contains within it an inherent criticality that we can articulate as the utopian dimension of sport; overcome, it because sport contribute to the legitimacy of extant social relations of power, and serves to incorporate us into a system that causes immense human suffering. So, comrades, to invoke Marx's famous 11<sup>th</sup> Thesis on Feuerbach: sociologists have hitherto only interpreted the world of sport, the point is to denounce and perpetuate it.

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