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# The Beginnings of a Commercial Sporting Culture in Britain, 1793?1850

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Whatever happened to the history of nineteenth-century British popular culture? In the 1970s and 1980s, this was an exciting field that produced a series of invigorating and pioneering works.(1) Fulfilling the promise of E. P. Thompson?s *The Making of the English Working Class* (1963), historians traced the patterns of popular culture during the age of industrialisation as part of the project of reconstructing the voices of the poor. Given that the personal was political, it followed that it was possible to recover a political project in folk song, sport or the ?rough culture? of the common people. Social historians described how, during the nineteenth century, the carnivalesque dimensions of popular culture were subject to increasing social control by Evangelicalism, the new police force, the middle class and by the capitalist social order with its emphasis on time discipline; all energies had to be harnessed towards the labour process. Respectability was the watchword of Victorian Britain, leaving little room for the often disorderly world of popular recreations. This essentially Marxist approach was also shaped by the interwar Frankfurt School of cultural critics which led to a focus on the ways in which the working class was essentially bought off by capitalism in the form of

the cheap and harmless mass culture which became dominant in the later Victorian period: the world of the music hall, professional football, fish and chips, vulgar Sunday newspapers and occasional trips to the seaside. This apparently pacified the working class and compensated for its political setbacks during the Chartist years. It induced a culture of fatalism and a belief that political solutions would not work; instead, workers focused on the brief pleasures that life offered, what Gareth Stedman Jones memorably labelled ?the culture of consolation?.(2) Popular culture was no longer made by the people but was manufactured for them by the new culture industries. Football, for example, was driven off the streets by the police force and effectively taken away from the working class. It was then remade by the public school system, provided with rules and returned to the people in a commercialised form, played in stadiums for mass enjoyment. The participatory popular culture that existed up to about 1850 had given way to a culture of spectatorship.

Within this Marxist historiography, a formative text was Robert Malcolmson?s *Popular Recreations in English Society, 1700?1850* (1973) which represented the full flowering of the Thompsonian approach and complemented the kind of thinking that went into *The Making of the English Working Class*. Malcolmson might now be read as a contribution to the literature on uses of space. He lovingly described how recreations in his period took place in the open air on common lands, particularly during the numerous festivals and Saints? days that dotted the calendar. But his was a tragic story. These traditional customs and sports were reshaped first, by the coming of enclosure, which deprived the common people of leisure spaces, and second, by industrialisation which meant that their time was no longer their own. The elite, which had once participated in popular culture, now withdrew and sought to tame the rowdiness of the working class. By the early Victorian years, a ?vacuum? had emerged in which the traditional sports that had provided people with so much pleasure had been removed.

With some distinguished exceptions, the 1990s did not prove kind to the history of nineteenth-century popular culture.(3) A lot of the energy that went into the field evaporated despite the relative vibrancy of the scholarship on early modern popular culture. The reduction of scholarly interest partly reflected the problems that Marxism ran into as the whole world of the political left was challenged at the end of the twentieth century. Furthermore, the high quality of a lot of the scholarship described above induced a feeling that the nineteenth century had been covered and pushed increasing numbers of historians into examining the twentieth century. Moreover, Cultural Studies (which might have nurtured new approaches to the nineteenth century) proved heavily presentist as it developed in the closing decades of the last century. The time has now come for a new assessment. That is the context within which we should view Adrian Harvey?s *The Beginnings of a Commercial Sporting Culture in Britain, 1793?1850*. The book quite simply places a hand grenade under the old approach.

Adrian Harvey has written an important book that has implications far beyond his chosen theme of sport (I will return to this later). The book bears the hallmarks of its origins as an Oxford University D.Phil. thesis and does not feel as though it has been heavily revised. There are some laborious repetitions (for example, the author outlines his aims for chapter two on page 7 and then does it again on page 8). However, what the book lacks in elegance, it makes up for in clarity and scholarship. This is a major reappraisal based on extensive research in a wide range of archives.

Harvey?s argument is essentially contained in his title and can be simply stated. He finds that the world of commercialised sport was not something that emerged in the second half of the nineteenth century. Instead, he detects a lively and popular market-based sporting culture in the first half of the nineteenth century. He therefore contradicts the approach of Malcolmson and also of Marxist historians who see this period as the ?last hurrah? of a traditional popular culture. For Harvey, working-class people enthusiastically embraced commercial sport in the form of horse racing, boxing and much else. In terms of sport, there was no resistance to the market place. Nor was this sporting culture locally based. He documents the way in which sporting events were followed all over the country. This is, of course, not entirely an original discovery. We have long been familiar with the world of Regency pugilism that Pierce Egan celebrated in his journalism. However, Harvey takes in many kinds of sports that were organised on a commercial basis and demonstrates how these had developed sophisticated rules and codes which were not always put there by the public school system, as had been previously assumed. The obsession with sporting skills and with record keeping was

much in evidence in the early nineteenth century. At a time when we are used to hearing about the ?long eighteenth century?, Harvey provides us with a view of the early nineteenth century in which we see a modern leisure culture emerging in a very distinctive form. The book implies that the period between 1793 and 1850 witnessed a new leisure pattern. Although he refers to earlier examples of sport in the eighteenth century, it is unclear from Harvey?s text as to whether there really was a major breakthrough to a new sporting culture. How much continuity with earlier forms of leisure was there? And if there was a change, what exactly produced it? Harvey is suspicious of economic determinism and sticks to simply tracing how sport changed but he lacks a broader explanation of what forces really unleashed this culture that he describes so impressively. What I infer from his book is that his is a market-based approach in which commerce gave the people what they wanted. In this sense, his approach is not all that different from Golby and Purdue?s *Civilization of the Crowd*, although they come in for some mild criticism.

Whilst Harvey signals his distance from the Marxist school, he has no problem with the significance of class. However, his approach could be described (in an inversion of Edward Thompson?s celebrated article), as ?class without class struggle?. His is a relatively consensual world in which all classes (but particularly the upper and working classes) enjoyed the thrill of sport. This, I think, accurately captures the atmosphere of the sporting world. Harvey goes on to show that there was little social mixing and, to this extent, leisure was marked by class differentiation. Moreover, many criticisms of sport at the time had class dimensions, as we will see.

Whilst he employs different kinds of sources, the book is predominantly shaped by extensive reading of newspapers. Indeed, it is his contention that one way of measuring popular interest in commercialised sport is the way it generated and was fed by a specialised sporting press. Harvey?s decision to start his book in the 1790s appears to have been determined by the launch for the first time of specialist periodicals such as the *Sporting Magazine* (1792?1815) and the *Racing Calendar* (1793?1815). He employs periodicals such as *Bell?s Life in London* for the later period. These newspapers provide the data that allow him to measure the volume of sporting activity and subject it to quantification. He commences the book with an impressive series of tables that show the increase in sporting events as well as the expenditure upon them and the regional variations. This culture of commercial sport was initially more evident in the south of England but it quickly spread and was distinguished by its independence from the traditional calendar for recreations. A new weekly pattern for events was established as opposed to one based on local customary days for recreation. After 1816 sport became a truly national affair. Harvey is not insensitive to the local dimension. He produces statistics about expenditure on sport in Manchester and Oxfordshire. The Manchester evidence allows him to critique the notion that the growth of industrial society reduced the time available for leisure as sporting activity increased in the city between 1793 and 1850. Data from Oxfordshire allows him to suggest there was no strong rural/urban divide in sport (the weekly pattern of events took over after 1816 from annual or customary meetings across the country).

We can get some sense of the proportions and importance of commercialised sport from the way it attracted crime and corruption. Gambling often led to heated arguments about the outcome of events or, in some cases, to actual sabotage. The links between the criminal underworld and sport were dramatised by the press which meant that some sports, such as horse racing, often had a ?low life? image even when patronised by the aristocracy. The press was integral to the way that sport was perceived. Journalists such as Pierce Egan helped create a cult of sporting celebrity (though I was surprised that Hazlitt?s great essay ?The Fight?, published in 1822, did not rate a mention, despite being one of the most admired pieces of sporting journalism). The press not only created a national sporting culture but enhanced sport?s commercial viability. Harvey argues that the focus on criminality (as well as complaints about cruelty to animals) deepened upper class disapproval of commercial and professional sport and led to the promotion of the amateur ideal. This, he argues, led to a fragmentation in sport in the twenty years after 1850 which impeded its growth, although the later nineteenth century witnessed an accommodation between the amateur ideal and commercialised sport. We find this set out in a very brief epilogue to the book of less than one page (although it is prefigured at various points in the text). This interesting argument (beyond the chronological scope of this book) remains an assertion as he does not have room to document it.

The book?s critique of the older Marxist account is most evident in its treatment of the law, the subject of two chapters. Harvey argues that Marxists have overestimated the impact of the repression of sport by either the government or by local forces. By and large, parliament was supportive of sport because it was believed to uphold the social structure and barely attempted to provide any kind of supervision. The army came to value sport and increasingly provided facilities. Local government also supported sport except when it attracted criminal elements (as in the case of pugilism, although even here very few fights were actually prevented). This contrasts with the old picture of the middle class trying to repress the pleasures of the common people. Perhaps the most startling piece of revisionism in the whole book comes when Harvey critiques Anthony Delves?s well known article about Shrove football in Derby.(4) This memorably recounted how Shrove football was a popular pastime in the streets of Derby played with few rules. This truly democratic game, in which all could participate, was suppressed by local authorities (in Delves?s view, a blatant attempt to control the customs of the people). However, Harvey has found that many who petitioned against street football were themselves working class, whilst there is evidence that not all of the players were proletarians. Remarkably, even the Chartist *Northern Star* newspaper approved of suppressing street football. What we should take from this is an understanding that episodes like the suppression of Shrove football were never clear cut in social terms.

Harvey acknowledges that there were many groups who were out to suppress sport (including Sabbatarians, industrialists and purveyors of rational recreation) but even these people admired certain kinds of sport such as cricket for their alleged character building qualities. There were attempts to restrict sport but they were usually unsuccessful and easily evaded by the working classes. Despite a vigorous offensive against cruelty to animals in sport, activities such as dog fighting survived in Lancashire. Harvey does, however, hold that class was very important. He criticises Brian Harrison?s argument that the campaign against cruel sports lacked class bias because of the way hostility to mistreatment of animals was diffused throughout society. For Harrison, the cruel sports issue was a ?culture-conflict? rather than a ?class-conflict?.(5) Harvey argues that we cannot ignore the fact that the vast majority of people who were prosecuted for involvement in cruel sports were working class whilst aristocrats who overrode their horses when hunting were never acted against, despite being the object of popular hostility.

Harvey also defends sport in his period from accusations of being primitive and lacking the sophisticated systems of rules that would be the gift of the public school system. He has little time for the argument that codification was a form of social control from above whose purpose was to civilise or tame the unruly working classes by teaching them to literally play by the rules (although the book oddly does not engage with the well known critiques of social control by Gareth Stedman Jones or F. M. L. Thompson).(6) Instead, we find that rule-based sport had long preceded any intervention by the public school system. Even before 1793, there were elaborate sets of rules that were promoted by aristocratic patronage, specialist clubs, leading experts, the press or by reference to older customs of ?unknown origins?. However, even if these

preceded the heyday of the Victorian public school system, it is difficult to deny the role of the elite in determining the rules and indeed in shaping the culture of sport. Harvey offers a typology of the development of rules from informal verbal agreements to rendering the agreements in manuscript and then to their formal printing by sporting clubs. Surprisingly, he finds that attempts to construct national codes for different sports had less impact in the 1816?50 period than they had during the Napoleonic Wars. Attention to rules and concern to avoid disputes led to the creation of various kinds of referees or supervisors for sport. In turn, Harvey argues that the understanding that rules should not be broken led to a concentration on the development of skill and expertise through a focus on training and (where relevant) animal breeding. In the early part of the period, referees came from higher social groups but the elite began to withdraw from this role, evincing a distaste for commercialised activities (part of Harvey?s overall thesis) leaving the development of sporting culture unsupervised.

Spectatorship receives a chapter to itself as Harvey considers how sport became a form of mass entertainment. Archery and tennis were the only sports predominantly patronised by the middle and upper classes alone. In any case, there was little social mixing. Working-class spectators at horse races from the 1740s onwards led to the construction of grandstands to prevent the elite from having to mix with the plebs. The rise of entrepreneurs (such as promoters of boxing) demonstrates that there was clearly a market for commercial sport and explains how sport expanded in the period. From the 1830s, more sports grounds began to appear. Railways and greater ease of travel facilitated the growth of a national sporting culture and increasing amounts of ephemera and equipment came on the market for the sports enthusiast. Harvey demonstrates that the distinction between ?traditional? and ?commercial? sports is frequently difficult to make as festival events became increasingly sophisticated in their provision of sports. Many non-commercial forms of sport continued. The book does confirm that gambling was intrinsic to the growth of sport (as was alcohol). People would apparently bet on anything from horses to sack races. Harvey assembles several sets of data to show the amounts staked on the most popular events. However, the book does not really attempt to describe the process of spectating. What kinds of pleasure did it offer (apart from the obvious)? What shaped the spectator?s gaze? To what extent did people attend because of ancilliary attractions (the prospect of a day out, the possibility of sexual encounter, the lowlife atmosphere of many events) as opposed to the desire to simply watch sport. These things are no doubt difficult to reconstruct but it should be said that spectatorship is a more complex matter than is implied here. Sport had a cultural politics that needs to be analysed further.

Social class was also important when it comes to the players themselves. The middle classes rarely competed against working-class players. As Harvey puts it on page 191, the ?different social orders played the same sports, but separately?. He argues that the distinction between ?amateur? and ?professional? was not clearly made before about 1830 but also criticizes the leading sport historian Richard Holt for placing the origins of the distinction in the later nineteenth century when it was clearly in use in the early Victorian years. He elaborates on the different ways in which sportsmen could turn professional and the various ways they supported themselves from providing tuition to putting on displays of their talent in theatres. There is also some tantalising but rather brief material about the participation of women in sport. Only wrestling specifically excluded females. Otherwise, Harvey finds evidence of working-class females participating in most sports. There were at least eighteen female prize fights during the Napoleonic Wars. A Mrs. Thornton won a horse race at York in 1804 making her apparently the ?only woman to have beaten a top class jockey in a horse race? (p. 198). Mary Drake (known as ?Scotch Moggy?) was a champion rower in the 1830s. One weakness of the book is that it makes no attempt to contribute to the literature on the construction of gender in the nineteenth century. Harvey does argue that middle-class women were expected to be spectators for the most part, although they could participate in gymnastics, archery and fox hunting; sport therefore had its own separate spheres to some extent. One might imagine that Harvey?s material could have been reworked to offer a reading about the role of sporting identities in the making of masculinity. Other historians have made the connections between sport and masculinity but few have Harvey?s exemplary knowledge of sporting history. This was an opportunity missed.(7)

The book as a whole lacks any explicit attempt to describe or theorise cultural change. In particular, the implications of Harvey?s work suggest that historians need to rethink the way they periodise and think about

mass culture. This volume implies that it began to shape everyday life much earlier than usually thought and that its nature was more complex than models derived from the Frankfurt School would allow. Another point of reference that is missing is any engagement with the history of consumerism itself. How did sport relate to the provision of goods more generally? To what extent was a new kind of consumer mentality at work in the enjoyment of sport? If anyone cares to restart the ?standard of living during the Industrial Revolution? debate, Harvey?s book could be ?Exhibit A? for the Optimists. In his account, the social and economic changes between 1790 and 1850 created new opportunities for leisure and thus presumably signal improvements in standards of living. Is this a reasonable inference? Harvey is not saying. A proper exploration of this question would need to focus on what kinds of working-class people were actually able to afford commercialised sport. Many would have been too poor to be able to attend ticket-only events. Even in early twentieth-century Salford, many working-class people could not afford the delights of mass culture, as Andrew Davies?s research shows. The Pessimists are not quite out for the count.(8) As it is, it requires a real effort of will to recall that the volume covers virtually the same period as Thompson?s *Making of the English Working Class*. Can there be two more contrasting accounts of proletarian life?

The book does signal the possibility of new arguments about the trajectory of popular culture that are slightly different from the generation of the 1970s. On the other hand, the older arguments are not completely banished by this work. Class clearly remains central. Furthermore, Harvey?s assessment of commercial sport can easily be squared with a Marxist interpretation that emphasises the way sport became a commodity. In terms of the history of sport, Harvey implies that the notion of a ?sporting revolution? in the later nineteenth century needs to be substantially rethought. This is clearly going to be a central text for all sports historians but, as I emphasised earlier, it deserves a wider readership as well. We should hope that the volume?s price will not restrict access to this subtle and challenging work. Ashgate have backed a winner here and should be congratulated for publishing it.

# Notes

1. E.g. Peter Bailey, *Leisure and Class in Victorian England* (1978); Hugh Cunningham, *Leisure in the Industrial Revolution, 1780?1880* (1980); *Popular Culture and Class Conflict*, eds. Eileen Yeo and Stephen Yeo (1981); *Popular Culture and Custom in Nineteenth-Century England*, ed. Robert Storch (1982); *Leisure in Britain*, eds. John Walton and James Walvin (Manchester, 1983); J. Golby and A. Purdue, *The Civilization of the Crowd: Popular culture in England, 1750?1900* (1984).Back to (1)
2. Gareth Stedman Jones, ?Working-class culture and working-class politics in London, 1870?1900: Notes on the remaking of a working class? in his *Languages of Class: Studies in English Working-Class History*, 1832?1892 (Cambridge, 1983), p. 237.Back to (2)
3. For recent examinations of the historiography of popular culture, see Peter Bailey, ?The politics and poetics of modern British leisure: A late twentieth century review?, *Rethinking History*, 37 (1999), 131?75; Emma Griffin, ?Popular culture in industrializing England?, *Historical Journal*, 45 (2002), 619?35.Back to (3)
4. Anthony Delves, ?Popular recreation and social conflict in Derby, 1800?1850? in *Popular Culture and Class Conflict*, pp. 89?127.Back to (4)
5. Brian Harrison, ?Religion and recreation in nineteenth-century England?, *Past and Present*, 38 (1967), 98?125; Brian Harrison, ?Animals and the state in nineteenth-century England?, *English Historical Review*, 88 (1973), 786?820.Back to (5)
6. Gareth Stedman Jones, ?Class expression versus social control?: A critique of recent trends in the social history of ?leisure?? in *Languages of Class*, pp.76?89; F. M. L. Thompson, ?Social control in Victorian Britain?, *Economic History Review*, 2nd series, 34 (1981), 189?208.Back to (6)
7. Neil Tranter, *Sport, Economy and Society in Britain, 1750?1914* (Cambridge, 1998).Back to (7)
8. Andrew Davies, *Leisure, Gender and Poverty: Working-Class Culture in Salford and Manchester, 1900?1939* (Milton Keynes, 1992).Back to (8)

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