

Chapter One

Sport History, Historiography and Postmodern Social Theory: An Introduction

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Steven Pope and John Nauright somewhat proudly proclaimed that Sport history had surpassed its adolescent years and was now a flourishing, legitimate and fully respected field of study. [1] The sub-discipline, they added, was no longer viewed as a “curiosity” and sport historians were not “forced to encounter the smirks and repressed laughs from so-called (and professed) ‘mainstream’ historians.” [2] Pope and Nauright argued that underpinning this maturation process had been the active engagement of sport historians “with wider historiographical trends within social and cultural history along with a latent interest in critical social theory.” [3] Yet they also cited two prominent sport historians, Douglas Booth and Mike Cronin, to illustrate that not all shared their sense of optimism about the contemporary state of sport history. [4] Booth provocatively questioned in the late 1990s whether sport history was in its death throes, and Cronin decried the field for its insularity, theoretical vagueness and uncritical celebration of sport. Cronin stated, in scathing fashion, “we are still dominated by too many fans with typewriters.” [5] Underpinning Booth and Cronin’s critiques of the field, in diametric opposition to Pope and Nauright, was their belief that the prime problem with sport historians was that they had not kept abreast with important historiographical debates and develop-

ments in social theory. Murray Phillips' content analysis of sport history journals supported their concerns in finding that "attempts to evaluate, summarize, or critique the subdiscipline ... have been miniscule in comparison to the total number of published articles." [6]

Despite the differing opinions on the current state of sport history, it is clear that Pope and Nauright, Booth, Cronin and Phillips all agree it is important for sport historians to engage with contemporary theoretical and methodological issues to ensure the vitality and social relevance of sport history. In similarly accepting the importance of this assumption, we have co-edited this text to enhance discussion and debate concerning sport historiography or the study of the methods and theoretical approaches used to produce sport history. Within this text we aim to promote understandings of postmodernism and its links to social theory as we believe it is one area of historiographical importance that remains under-examined by sport historians. More specifically, we view that by adopting and/or critically examining postmodern sensibilities the studying of the past will be enriched rather than eroded, yet we also recognize that conflicting understandings and assessments of the value of postmodern theory exist.

Since the 1960s, numerous "turns" (e.g., linguistic, rhetorical, narrative, poststructural, ethical) have shaped the manner in which social science research has been conducted and represented. These multiple turns, which some refer to broadly as the postmodern turn, have blurred in a manner to disrupt universal truth claims, the possibility of researching from a position of "nowhere," and transcendent assertions of validity. Although history has been noted as slow to adapt to these epistemological challenges, a number of sport historians have warmly engaged with postmodern social theory. [7] Booth argued that the 'postmodern' turn has indirectly acted to invigorate the writing of history as researchers have been encouraged to reflect on methodological issues, the contemporary relevance of their research and its associated ethical implications:

Far from threatening history, the ethical injunctions in postmodernist ethical history will make the discipline more relevant to contemporary needs and, by extension, more intellectually and politically secure. This is the allure of postmodernist sport history. [8]

Traditional sport historians, in contrast, are critical of postmodern theory and warn of its dangers associated with extreme relativism, downplay reflexive writing as navel gazing, and are cynical of the claim that there is no such thing as a "real past." [9] Allen Guttman correspondingly revealed

what he claimed was his sense of ‘visceral horror’ in witnessing the devastating advance of postmodern arguments:

Nearly 40 years ago, while still officially a member of Amherst College’s Department of English, I watched helplessly as postmodernist theorists, waving the banner of transgression and shouting battle cries—mostly in French (e.g.; *à bas la rationalité*)—conquered the field of literary studies. I fled—as a scholar—to sports studies and I have never for a moment regretted the move. Then I watched, helplessly, as postmodernist theorists seized the field of sport sociology. And then I watched, helplessly, as an advance guard of postmodernist theorists, led by Sydnor, Booth and Phillips, invaded and began to devastate the field of sports history. [10]

In contrast to Guttman’s narrative of relentless theoretical vandalism, Martin Johnes commented on the positive aspects of the postmodern turn: “It is pleasing that sports historians are finally beginning to engage in the methodological debate that has become so common elsewhere in history.” [11] Brett Hutchins similarly welcomed the challenge of postmodernism as he recognized that it has encouraged sport historians to critically reflect “on the processes and methods involved in writing about the past.” [12] Yet Hutchins and Johnes were both concerned with how the postmodern/traditionalist debate had been forged. Johnes was disturbed by its “acerbic tones” and that commentators have failed “to acknowledge what traditional and postmodern historians have in common.” [13] In a similar manner, Hutchins (2006) argued that the antipathy between postmodernists and the “empiricist-cum-scientific historians” has created disengagement and deadlock, which in part portrays the methodological approaches as “unbridgeable.” [14] Hutchins contentiously added that the current debate has neglected that “the majority of historians unavoidably exist between the modern and postmodern and that this situation is a healthy one,” which implies he believed that postmodern/modern epistemologies have considerable overlap. [15] Egon Guba and Yvonna Lincoln, in contrast, acknowledge that a process of blurring is occurring within various research paradigms (e.g., between the interpretivist, critical, and constructivist paradigms) but argued that commensurability is an issue when researchers attempt to mix positivist and postmodern theories “because the axioms are contradictory and mutually exclusive.” [16]

In recognition of the diverse range of understandings, tensions and uncertainties surrounding postmodernism and its connections to social theory, we concur with Susan Birrell who suggested that sport history is at

an important epistemological crossroads and, as such, is facing significant challenges. [17] Sport historians, for example, have recently been urged by a number of researchers to critically reflect upon and reveal their methodological assumptions in a more reflexive manner. [18] Johnes relatedly lamented that “much of the historian’s method of working is hidden” and subsequently encouraged researchers to overtly reveal their knowledge construction techniques:

History articles are not like science papers, with a complete method that can be followed faithfully by anyone seeking to replicate the research. Monographs have complete bibliographies of archives visited but most articles do not, and even books do not explain how the archives were found, selected and used. How long was spent reading the sources? Were they skimmed over in search of relevant information? Or was every word read and reread? Were all the notes taken double-checked for accuracy? Was every possible source available consulted or just those footnoted? [19]

The postmodern turn has, accordingly, encouraged sport historians to be more transparent with respect to how they collect, analyze and represent their interpretations of their “data.” [20] Yet the methodological challenges of postmodernism are not simply related to data collection and interpretation, as sport historians are also being urged to recognize that the archive is not a neutral source of data, [21] the “truth” of their findings is not discovered but constructed and that historical knowledge is tied to the workings of power and associated ethical issues. [22] In this manner, sport historians are being challenged to critically reflect on their foundational epistemological assumptions and associated knowledge construction techniques. They are also being challenged to answer questions of praxis and to discuss the practical and contemporary implications of their research. At heart, sport historians are being asked to critically reflect on what they do, how they do it, why, and what effect their research has. For these reasons, some see the postmodern turn as a threat as it is a potential challenge to existing practices, yet others see it as a vital stage in the further development of sport history.

The various challenges facing sport history are not simply theoretical but have very serious pragmatic implications. We correspondingly argue that sport historians have a vested interest in taking these challenges seriously, particularly with respect to the current climate of how universities are funded and managed. In recent years within the U.S., for example, a “methodological conservatism embedded in the educational initiatives of

George W. Bush's presidential administration have inscribed narrowly defined governmental regimes of truth." [23] In this context, the so-called "gold standard" of research has been heralded as the most credible approach for conducting research. [24] The gold standard "for educational research has become 'scientifically based research' ... defined in the 2002 U.S. No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act ... as research that is replicable, generalizable, empirical and preferably experimental...." [25] Similar recommendations about what counts as good research have recently occurred in Australia and the UK. [26] Thus, although postmodernists might be able to accept uncertainty, it appears that numerous others desire epistemological guarantees, notably government employees who allocate research funds to projects based on the tenets of traditional science. [27]

The rise (or resurrection) of the gold standard poses a recognized challenge to social science research that draws on qualitative research approaches (such as archival or textual analysis), as these approaches can be misconstrued as "soft" forms of research and as less worthy of funding. Indeed, Donmoyer has stated that within the U.S., "the federal government's Institute of Education Sciences have made it clear that the term non-scientific is, in fact, a synonym for non-fundable, at least in the federal context and in other contexts that federal officials are able to influence." [28] The experimental quantitative research approach is, however, patently inappropriate for examining the complexities and contradictions of social histories. Sport historians cannot simply adopt scientific or experimental methods. Indeed, the past cannot be directly observed, measured, quantified or statistically managed. [29] Phillips further acknowledged the "epistemological fragility of sport history" by explaining that although historical sources can be checked we cannot "check a history like we can a map of a city by walking out the areas it covers." [30] Given that sport history is dependent upon researcher "interpretations" of limited sources of data one might ask, "What can historians do to counter the heralding of the gold standard?" We suggest, at the very least, that sport historians need to be aware of the epistemological arguments that prop up their interpretive research approaches so that they have the ability to better defend their methodological choices and quality of research.

In association with the rise of the "gold standard," there has been an increase in what Ben Carrington has called "neoliberal managerialist ideologies" within universities. [31] These ideologies have acted to enmesh researchers within an audit culture that encourages university management to appraise the quantity and quality of researchers' outputs. Greater

attention is subsequently paid, for example, to the “rating” of the journals within which researchers publish, the number of associated citations, and size of research grants gained. These surveillance techniques designed to judge the pragmatic value of researchers and their associated field of study are primarily used as a means for deciding upon the distribution of scarce resources (e.g., time, labor, and money) within universities. Perhaps needless to say, the sub-discipline of sport history has not been privileged by the rise of this audit culture. Silk, Bush and Andrews argued that the heralding of the gold standard and neo-liberal management style is of particular concern for qualitative sport scholars as they become marginalized via research approach and discipline:

Not only are sociology, and indeed the social sciences more generally, under threat as an amalgam of neoliberal, neoscientist, and neoconservative forces frame higher education, “safeguarding science” and medicine at the expense of arts, humanities, and the social sciences ... academics who research on “trivial” or “pointless” subjects, such as sport, which are deemed by Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) to have no “relevance to the real world,” are under increasing pressure to prove their work has “demonstrable economic impacts” ... As such, the critical social study of sport sits, rather uncomfortably, at the confluence of two rather arid streams; the nascent discipline has perhaps never been more vulnerable given its position at the nexus of two ghettoized (one empirical, one disciplinary) domains. [32]

Although Silk, Bush and Andrews wrote with specific reference to sport sociology, we believe that sport history is similarly situated in a somewhat precarious position.

Sport history has been further marginalized by reconfigurations of academic departments and schools that focus on sport and physical education. From the 1960s, a host of political, ideological and nationalistic factors aligned to foster the emergence of sport science in schools of sport and physical education. Sport science has become a dominant component in many curricula, as evidenced by name changes from departments of physical education and sport studies to sport science, exercise science and kinesiology departments, and by the relocations from education and arts faculties to science, applied science and health faculties. [33] Since the new millennium, “moral panics” about physical activity, obesity and related diseases have fostered the emergence and growth of health-related disciplines that have, once again, reshaped departments of sport science, exercise sci-

ence and kinesiology. [34] Both sport science and health align very neatly with the “gold standard” of research and audit culture of contemporary universities and, as a consequence, are prioritized in the curriculum and in the allocation of scarce resources. While there is no Machiavellian plot at hand, the rise of sport science and, subsequently, the health-related disciplines have marginalized the credibility of the social sciences of sport, including sport history.

In recognition of the various theoretical, methodological, and pragmatic challenges facing the state of sport history, we reiterate our belief that sport historians can gain tangible value via engaging with historiographical debates and theoretical developments. Through this process of engagement we suggest that researchers become critically informed and more discerning in judging the quality of research and research approaches, more capable of producing higher quality research, better able to publish in a broader range of journals (e.g., be less insular) and have greater capacity to transgress disciplinary boundaries. In this text, to help with these somewhat grand goals, we engage with an important and timely historiographical debate by interrogating postmodern social theory. We do not, however, intend to examine postmodern social theory in an objective manner, as our broad aims are to demystify postmodernism and promote its value for knowing, transforming and politicizing the past into a narrative that “we choose to call history.” [35] In this overtly polemical manner, we support Keith Jenkins’ contention:

The idea of writing an objective, neutral, disinterested text, where explaining, describing and “introducing” something is done from a position that isn’t ostensibly a position at all, is a naive one. For to put something “under a description” in what might appear to be the most innocent of ways is still to privilege that description over another; it thus throws down a challenge; it stakes a claim; its “objectivity” is spurious. To do this is to forget that nothing is given to a gaze, but rather is constituted “in meaning” by it. [36]

Although we have revealed our bias toward postmodern social theory, we nevertheless encourage sport historians to critically interrogate postmodernism, as we recognize the great variability in the various postmodern claims and research approaches. We are also well aware that numerous theoretical commentators believe that the postmodern “moment” in social research is over and can now be thought of as nothing more than a theoretical memory. [37] Yet it is also widely believed that the challenge of postmodern social theory has revolutionized how social research is conducted,

represented and evaluated to the extent that the “doing” of social research has been profoundly changed.

Historiographical Journeys: Introducing Ourselves and the History of This Text

Before we introduce how this text is structured and even before we explain what we mean by “postmodernism as a form of social theory” (this is discussed in detail in Chapter 2), we reflexively discuss, via a narrative style, our own interests in sport historiography and the factors that led to the production of this book. We decided on a reflexive auto-ethnographic style as it is reflective of a particular, but not dominant, postmodern representational style. Norman Denzin reported that an important shift within postmodern research has been a more general growth in a *reflexive* stance toward writing that openly acknowledges how and why research decisions were made. [38] Such an approach is regarded as advantageous because it provides readers with additional information for judging the “legitimacy” or value of the research. Gill, for example, argued that as a feminist researcher she was not aiming to find some universal social “truth” about gender but was interested in social justice and promoting change. [39] She accordingly made her political values explicit in her writings with the intention that they could then “be *argued* about.” [40] Gill labelled this stance as “politically informed relativism” and suggested if research values were not transparent that this could lead to political paralysis and a stagnation of social transformation: an untenable position for politically motivated researchers. Given that our broad aim for co-editing this text was also tied to promoting change (e.g., encouraging more reflection and debate within sport history) we thought it prudent to reveal our theoretical “biases” and how they developed to provide readers with more information for judging the value of the broad arguments in this text.

Richard: In the late 1990s, in order to answer my prime doctoral research question—“How does the cultural significance of rugby union within Aotearoa/New Zealand shape men’s understandings of masculinities?”—I needed to understand more broadly how a sport that routinely injures participants’ bodies, developed over time to hold a dominant place in New Zealand society. In accepting the wisdom of Karl Marx’s insightful but pessimistic view that “the tradition of all dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living,” I turned to history and various accounts of how rugby and sport developed. [41] Although impressed by the erudite and meticulous scholarship of the various rugby/sporting histories, I was

also somewhat perplexed with how they were represented. The narratives were typically written in a matter-of-fact manner with little discussion directed at how the historical sources were discovered, interpreted, and represented. The impression given was that the researchers were somehow removed from the process of constructing or writing the histories and that the truth of the past had been objectively revealed through rigorous excavation of historical sources. Dunning and Sheard, in their seminal work first published in 1979, overtly revealed this epistemological position by reporting that their ‘sociological’ study of the development of modern rugby consisted of ...

... an attempt to free oneself from the interests and values of particular groups and to study something dispassionately and objectively, i.e., in a frame of mind similar to that of a physicist when he studies atoms or of the biochemist when he studies DNA. And the object of a detached study of that sort is to present an unbiased picture, an account of the subject studied that portrays it ‘as it really was’ in that way hoping to add to knowledge. [42]

Dunning and Sheard’s positivistic stance ran contra to the methodological research that I was reading at this time, which included Andrew Sparkes’s discussion of the paradigms debate, [43] Denzin and Lincoln’s edited work on qualitative research, [44] and Foucault’s theorizing on the politics of knowledge construction. [45] These readings, in simple terms, advocated that all researchers make interpretations about various forms of “reality” (e.g., about documents, interview transcripts, statistical tests, sporting performances, photographs) but they do not necessarily *interpret* or view these “realities” in the same way. Knowledge production via research, given this simple set of assumptions, was assumed to be constructed subjectively. Correspondingly, it was deemed prudent for researchers to reveal their biases and write themselves into their research accounts. In resonating with these epistemological assumptions, which are variously referred to as interpretive or postmodern tenets, I was somewhat perplexed as to why sport historians would align themselves with a representational style reflective of traditional science.

My interest in historiography was more directly stimulated by Douglas Booth’s appointment into the department in which I was working in 2004 (the Department of Sport and Leisure Studies, University of Waikato, New Zealand). Doug was in the finishing stages of writing his award-winning tome *The Field: Truth and Fiction in Sport History*, and he invited me to provide feedback on various chapters. [46] I happily did so, and after the

text was published, Doug supplied me with a copy of his book. I was impressed by its scope and depth of scholarship. I was also a little surprised by his assessment of the state of 'the field' in sport history. He concluded that "sport history generally remains firmly anchored to a bedrock of empiricism and to an unshakeable belief that historians can recover the past, its realities and truths" and suggested that the deconstructionist approach, which rejects assumptions that knowledge can be collected in an unbiased manner, has failed to find many followers within sport history. [47] Booth even stated in a somewhat hesitant fashion that perhaps only one sport historian had heeded the deconstructionist call for overt self-reflexivity: "... one might say that Daniel Nathan cuts a pretty solitary figure in this regard." [48] This overview of sport history sparked my 'sociological imagination;' I questioned why many influential sport sociologists are writing reflexively, but the majority of sport historians are supposedly reluctant to reveal their biases. And, more generally, why have these epistemological and representational issues received considerable attention within the broad area of qualitative research, but seemingly had little critical impact on sport historians? At a broader level, I questioned why sport history, as an important sub-discipline for understanding processes of social change and contemporary sporting practices and issues, has received so little attention within sport studies more broadly?

These questions, amongst other factors, encouraged my desire to attend and present at the *Australian Society for Sport History* 17th biennial conference held in Wellington (2009). I was specifically intrigued with the theme of the conference (The Cultural Paradigm: Reinvigorating Sport History?) and whether sport history was really "awash with new theories and new approaches" as the conference brochure boldly declared. I was pleased to find that a sizeable number of scholars presented papers that grappled with various methodological issues posed by the cultural/postmodern turn. On the other hand, I also found that there was a sizeable contingent who employed traditional ways of knowing and representing sport history. Moreover, there appeared to be a divide between these two groups and associated elements of tension. For example, a well-known sport historian began his presentation by voicing his concern that the time slot of his paper (last session on the last day) was a deliberate strategy of the conference organizers to marginalize his traditional or 're/constructionist' research approach. Conversely, one of the delegates who had embraced the cultural turn asked me in a rhetorical and disdainful fashion during a coffee break, "What do the 'old guard' hope to achieve by trying to find out when the first game of