Book Reviews

Sport and Fascism


A huge literature underpins the study of fascism and the last decade has witnessed a further growth in works focusing on all aspects of the twentieth century's most powerful and damaging ideology. In these two volumes J.A. Mangan has brought together a wide range of essays, first published in the *International Journal of the History of Sport*, that examine the links between fascism, sport and body culture. *Shaping the Superman* concentrates specifically on Nazi Germany; *Superman Supreme* casts a wider net, analysing nations such as Italy, which had a fascist government, and others such as Britain whose fascist party never achieved electoral success. The idea behind the two collections is sound, unfortunately the majority of the essays do not reveal the potential of this fascinating topic.

While historians generally encourage investigation of diverse areas, work published in academic journals and books should remain the preserve of experts with a thorough knowledge of the topic. No one would deny the scholarship of Mangan's work on nineteenth century British history, but one wonders how he can successfully leap from the public school to global fascism. Indeed, this departure into the unknown leads to fundamental errors in both volumes. These are especially pronounced in the introductions that are supposed to knit the essays together. At one point the editor claims that debates over what constitutes fascism are unimportant and distracting. Unfortunately, the majority of contributors follow this line and unquestioningly apply the fascist label to a host of different regimes and movements and in so doing fall into the trap of simple comparison. The striking liturgy that was such an integral part of fascism in Germany and Italy had its imitators across the globe. Equally, key ideological constructs based around questions of nationalism and race appear to tie different countries together. However, such liturgical and ideological concerns were common across a variety of political regimes and movements irrespective of their fascist tendencies. Both the editor and contributors should have engaged the central question, what is fascism? By ignoring this conundrum they have masked the clear differences that exist between a fascist regime, movements that adopted the imagery of fascism while still controlled by democratic structures, and those fascists who came to power through wartime collaboration. Bypassing such critical structural differences could leave the uninformed reader with the incorrect
perception that the circumstances under which different movements and regimes utilised sport and body culture were identical. Obvious differences existed between the sporting and bodily cultures that emerged under Mussolini's total rule of Italy, which lasted for over two decades, and that in Britain, where Mosley's British Union of Fascists failed miserably to attract popular support or gain electoral representation in a lifetime of barely six years. Such differences are marked across the whole of their histories, and most importantly here, in their approaches to sport and the body.

Apart from three chapters in Superman Supreme, and one in Shaping the Superman, none of the authors consider primary or contemporary evidence. Instead, they rely on dated secondary sources. For a journal that claims to champion cutting-edge research, the inclusion of so many articles whose authors have shied from archival research suggests that The International Journal of the History of Sport has moved away from first class historical research to one offering basic overview histories of the type so favoured in sports studies. The study of fascism, I would argue, is too important to be left in the hands of those who refuse to dirty their fingers in the grime of archives. This is especially true in Shaping the Superman. The study of Nazi Germany has been transformed by the post-1989 opening of former East German archives, as evidenced by the recent brilliant biographies of Hitler by Ian Kershaw. The contributors to Shaping the Superman appear to have chosen not to venture behind the former iron curtain. It is therefore difficult to take these collections seriously as useful original contributions to the study of either sporting or fascist history, given the limited endeavours of the editor and most of the individual authors.

Superman Supreme, the stronger volume, needed expanding to give other key countries due attention. Omitting Salazar's Portugal is a startling oversight, as is the absence of a meaningful discussion of the body politics of the far right in France in the inter-war period and the overtly racist neo-fascist movements of the late twentieth century. Neither collection adequately utilises the mass of writings, especially those produced in the 1990s, on different aspects of fascism across the globe. Once more, such a failure highlights the unfamiliarity of the editor and authors with their subject matter. The most startling error, far worse than the high number of typographical and spelling mistakes, was the use of a capital 'F' in fascism throughout the text. As Roger Griffin explained in his masterful Nature of Fascism, a book Mangan purports to have read, the only capitalised form of Fascism was that in Italy; all others should be referred to as fascist. This may seem a minor point, but it is a standard distinction in studies of fascism and one that follows clear intellectual protocol. Examiners would not accept this error from a doctoral student and it should not be excused in an academic text.

The over-concentration on late nineteenth and early twentieth century aspects of German history in Shaping the Superman leaves many questions unanswered. For example, how important was sporting and body activity in Nazi Germany? Key events such as the 1936 Olympic games, international soccer matches and other global contests featuring Nazi athletes, especially
those in boxing, deserve more attention. Placing the sporting and body culture of Nazi Germany, as Mangan attempts to do, in the context of artistic and intellectual vigour, constitutes a serious misreading of Nazism. By privileging the body aesthetic above all else, *Shaping the Superman* fails to acknowledge, or successfully deal with, the true legacy of Nazi body politics: the processes that led to the systematic destruction of six million people by a regime that, for various reasons, deemed them undesirable. The politics and ideals of Nazi Germany were radically different from those of nineteenth century English public schools. A scheme of self-improvement and discipline through sport within the school environment, featuring a relatively small number of socially elite boys, cannot be compared to the overarching ideology that transformed Germany and placed it on a destructive war footing where it attempted to liquidate complete groups of people. Mangan's intellectual inability to separate the function of sport and the body in his previous research from the context of fascism makes these collections of dubious value. Their uninformed simplicity will astound fascist scholars and most certainly offend those seeking proper memorialisation and remembrance of Nazi atrocities.

In short, the two volumes are best avoided although the chapters by Hoberman, Guttmann, Gori and Collins have merits. The salient lesson here is that while there is a need to broaden the study of sports related topics, quality is the watchword. Study is undertaken and expertise gained so that worthwhile opinions can be offered. Bringing together a collection in the absence of such expertise does not advance knowledge. These volumes, as with many in the burgeoning *Sport in the Global Society* series, seem to have been produced solely for their own sake. The series should concentrate on work emanating from serious scholarly research that makes a valid contribution to knowledge. Selecting a good topic worthy of investigation is one thing, putting together a worthwhile collection that will withstand close scrutiny is quite different. Expertise and quality control are the tools of all good editors and authors. Unfortunately these virtues are absent here. Fascism still awaits a worthwhile comparative study of its sporting and body culture.

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