

Essay Reviews

Spectators and Crowds in Sport History: A Critical Analysis of Allen Guttman's *Sports Spectators*.

Guttman, Allen. *Sports Spectators*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1986. Pp. 236. Notes, Index. \$24.95

A CLASSICIST'S VIEW

In his latest work Guttman turns his fine camera on the stands to examine the numerous and predominantly anonymous spectators who have played an increasing role in sport over its long history. Part I, From Antiquity to Modern Times, historically surveys spectators from ancient Greece to modern times noting their characteristics and behavior. It includes "Greek and Roman Spectators," a chapter with four roughly chronological sections: Before the Greeks; Greek Spectators; The Roman Arena; Roman Circus and Byzantine Hippodrome. The second chapter, "The Middle Ages and the Renaissance," has three sections on sports affiliated with three classes: Tournament into Pageant (nobility); Contests for Archers and Musketeers (bourgeoisie); Medieval and Renaissance Football (peasantry). The remaining two chapters of Part One continue this historical treatment into the modern age. Part Two, "Contemporary Spectators," shifts methodologically into a sociological and psychological discussion of aspects of modern spectatorship including influences of and on, motivations, and related violence. That it takes two of us to review this work should indicate its breadth and scholarship. As a pre-modernist with an admitted specialization in antiquity, my comments will concentrate on the first two chapters. As with any book of such scope, specialized viewers may see flaws concerning their own areas and so run the risk of appearing petty or parochial. Let me say at the outset that I respect Guttman's scholarship and I see this as a major work on a difficult and understudied topic. That I found the modern material in the book both fascinating in content and stimulating in methodology adds to my awkwardness about voicing some reservations about the pre-modern sections. The book deserves high praise overall but less so on the early part: my impression was that the book got better and better, in research, substantiation and persuasiveness, as Guttman moved ahead into more modern periods. Guttman uses Medieval manuscripts and romances better than ancient literature, but he really scores with the Nielsen ratings, modern sociological studies, and his critique of the Neo-Marxist indictment of modern sport.

Before getting to my reservations, I want to commend Guttman for his writing style, enthusiasm and honesty in the work, especially in his Introduction, Chapter Five's section I: Shifting Methodological Gears, and Chapter Eight's section I: Methodological Qualms. After justifying the need for this study, Guttman admits that there are evidential problems: "Reliable information about sports spectators of the past is in very short supply (p. 1).¹ He also admits problems with periodization and definitions: others might organize the historical material differently, and his definition of sports as autotelic physical contests (p. 4) does not work that well for pre-modern sport.² Guttman admits he is not an expert in all areas, and hence his sensible concentration on Western civilization. He further admits that he has focused upon certain issues of sociological (demographics, women, etc.) or psychological (motivations, violence, etc.) interest, and he openly admits his selectivity. Rather than a Herculean or boring summary of all spectators, "I have selected those sports which seem more representative of their historical moments and most illustrative of my argument" (p. 3). Guttman recognizes his debt to many scholars in his extensive and valuable notes, and he admits being especially influenced by N. Elias and E. Dunning (pp. 8-9). He knows he is intrigued by the idea (of Elias and others) of the "civilizing process"-that the rise of the modern state contributed to a decreased level of interpersonal, expressive violence. Finally, Guttman cautions that, rather than generalizations that are "too insipidly general" or "too intricately qualified" (p. 4), he will offer "speculations." Guttman, then, is to be praised for his awareness and frankness, but confession may not bring him full absolution from some pre-modernists. The early sections simply are not on the same scholarly level with, nor do they contribute a lot substantively to, the later and major sections of the study.

A work of this scope in history or the social sciences must try to establish similarities or differences in human experience over time, but the same type of work clearly demonstrates some major differences between pre-modern and modern research: the paucity vs. the plethora of sources; methodological conservatism and qualms about models vs. methodological ingenuity and the necessity of models; the need to expand upon and interpret all testimonia vs. the need to reduce and the ability to accept some materials. Such issues are highlighted in Sir M. I. Finley's last work, wherein he points out the "severe limitations" of ancient sources for cliometrics and the social sciences³ He criticizes the zeal of moderns to affirm the reliability of ancient historical

1. "The historical documents frequently omit the information one most wants because such information was of no interest to contemporary chroniclers." *Sports Spectators*, I.

2. Specialists in pre-modern studies may raise eyebrows at Guttman's lumping of Classical with earlier and much later Greek history, of Republican, Imperial, Late Roman, and even Byzantine materials, and of Medieval and Renaissance sports.

3. M. I. Finley. *Ancient History, Evidence and Models* (New York, 1985). Also see Finley's *The Use and Abuse of History*, rev. ed., (New York, 1987) and M. Crawford, ed., *Sources for Ancient History* (Cambridge 1983). Cf. recent sociological studies by K. Hopkins. *Conquerors and Slaves* (Cambridge, 1978) and *Death and Renewal* (Cambridge, 1983). In defense of the application of the social sciences to antiquity, see S. Humphries, *Anthropology and the Greeks* (London, 1978) and V. Hunter. "Classics and Anthropology." *Phoenix* 35 no. 2 (1981): 145-155.

accounts and he challenges the special place given to ancient texts—that they are to be accepted unless they can be disproved. He asserts the difficulty of writing a systematic history of any ancient institution over a substantial period of time when our written documents are “illustrative but neither serial nor synoptic.”⁴ Finley warns against the abuse of evidence, yet he also encourages us to create and test models, i.e. non-mathematical explanatory models or conceptual schemes, similar to Weber’s Ideal Types, which help control the subject of discourse by selecting variables to be studied.⁵ Where evidence permits and via asking appropriate questions, Finley favors simplifying assumptions over antiquarianism, but he rejects a *priorism* and wants us to admit that some questions are “lost.” Probably it’s unfair to take Guttman to task by the standards of the greatest ancient (social) historian of this era, but some questions need to be asked. Does Guttman exhaust or abuse the available evidence? Does he (implicitly despite explicit avoidance) use a model, schema, assumptions or generalizations, and does he test or enforce any such assumptions? Finally, what contributions are made to scholarship on pre-modern sports spectators?

Guttman’s questions about the sociology and psychology of spectatorship predictably apply less well in pre-modern areas where the sources are neither quantitatively nor qualitatively appropriate. A lack of scholarship on pre-modern spectatorship is understandable given that the relevant evidence is unavoidably limited, anecdotal and polemical: pre-modern sources generally give inadequate, random data in non-archival and subjective fashion. Guttman does not hide from the evidential problems: he knows that early estimates of crowd sizes are ballpark figures at best, and he is resourceful in using arguments from the capacities and seating arrangements of spectator facilities. He cannot research non-extant sources and he cannot mention everything, but within his own parameters some oversights and inconsistencies remain. An early example is his use of Homer, saying of *Iliad* 23 that Homer “scarcely mentions the spectators, except to say that they were numerous and that they laughed, applauded, and “thundered approval” (p. 14). In fact, as the first work of Greek literature, Homer is remarkable in discussing spectators at all, and he devotes some fifty lines (11.448-498) to the spectators at the chariot race. If Guttman’s questions include the excitability of spectators and the possibility of related violence, he might well have referred to the betting and the heated argument over who was leading, and also the adjudication before the spectators of a charge of unfair tactics. One might also discuss the spectators and arrangements for the Phaeacian Games in the *Odyssey* and perhaps also the parody of sport in

4. Finley, *Ancient History*. pp. 11-12. Our ancient sources “constitute a random selection in both time and place, and they often lack a meaningful context.” Cf. M. I. Finley and H. W. Pleket. *The Olympic Games: The First Thousand Years* (London, 1976).

5. Finley, *Ancient History*. p. 60, defines “model” as:

a simplified structuring of reality which presents supposedly significant relationships in a generalized form. Models are highly selective approximations in that they do not include all associated observations or measurements, but as such they are valuable in obscuring incidental detail and in allowing fundamental aspects of reality to appear. This selectivity means that models have varying degrees of probability and a limited range of conditions over which they apply.

the fight of Irus and Odysseus. Guttman admits the problem of using threadbare quotes from late sources like Epictetus and Dio Cassius as evidence for the classical age, but he argues: "It seems reasonable, however, to conclude in the absence of any evidence to the contrary that there was continuity rather than discontinuity in the patterns of Greek spectatorship" (p. 18). This involves overlooking far-reaching social changes in the Hellenistic age (e.g. the end of political autonomy, hollowness of ritual with increased skepticism, etc.) and ignoring archaeological evidence indicating a major change in arrangements for spectators at Greek stadia in the early Hellenistic era.⁶ Somewhat inconsistently, Guttman will later use Roman critics of Greek sport but he does not use famous criticisms by Greek authors, such as Xenophanes and Euripides, who blame the Greek spectators for the excesses of athleticism.⁷ Consciously or not, Guttman has been quite selective via his modern interests and analogies; while selectivity is essential in modern works, the paucity of pre-modern evidence makes too much selection questionable.

If many of Guttman's questions cannot be answered for the pre-modern era, certainly not by modern social scientific procedures, one wonders if he is testing or imposing his model/generalizations/speculations. Selectivity by interest can lead to selectivity by argument. Guttman seems to begin with the anthropologist's reasonable assumption that human nature has remained fairly constant from early to modern times. This inclines him to accept assertions that Greek spectators were as partisan, volatile and excitable as those of other eras (pp. 16-17). Unless evidence or authority prevents him, Guttman prefers to seek and find continuity and analogies. In effect, he asserts some patterns in history. These are seldom explicit early in the book; they are there implicitly by selectivity and they appear as "speculations" later in the work. Guttman's "speculations" include: the demographics of spectatorship tend to be mixed unless events are elitist; lower class spectators are more inclined to violence; women may be in the minority but they are present (except in Greece). The pre-modern material does help make some points. That the motivations of spectators include such extrinsic interests as sex and gambling is shown concerning the Roman circus. That the level of violence in a sport is not the determining factor for spectator violence is well shown for Rome where chariot spectator violence was worse than gladiator spectator violence. However, any such points are made more easily and authoritatively for the modern era (e.g., concerning boxing and soccer). Guttman likes to demonstrate the development of sports from concerns with war, religion and utility to the more modern autotelic stage, as in the history of archery contests by the early fourteenth century (p. 46) and in the development of Medieval and Renaissance football from wild mêlées to

6. A. J. Papalas, "Sport Spectators in Ancient Greece," paper delivered at the Fourteenth Annual Meeting of NASSH, Vancouver, B.C., May 1986, pointed out that Dio's *Alexandrian Oration* about chariot races in first-century A.D. Alexandria does not apply to the Greeks of any classical period, and that the behavior of the Alexandrian crowd was more akin to Roman than Greek crowds.

7. Cf. Euripides *Autolykus* in R. S. Robinson, *Sources for the History of Greek Athletics* (1927; rep., Chicago, 1984), p. 117: "I blame the Greek custom of assembling to watch these men and honoring useless pleasures for the sake of a feast."

ruled and regulated contests, a process not completed “until long after the waning of the Middle Ages” (p. 49). He also likes to bring in the idea of the “civilizing process.” For example, on Medieval tournaments: “In the course of time, from the twelfth to the sixteenth century, as the “civilizing process” transformed the bellicose fragments of feudal society into something more organized and less violent, tournaments became more pageant and less contest. Eventually, they were “little more than a spectacle” (p. 37).⁸ Unfortunately, the “civilizing process” does not seem to apply to ancient civilizations.

An example of Guttman’s enthusiasm and selectivity going too far is found in his treatment (pp. 31-33) of Alan Cameron’s *Circus Factions* (Oxford, 1976). After good use of Cameron to outline the history of spectators and violence in the Roman and Byzantine circus, Guttman pushes continuity and rejects Cameron’s conclusions. Cameron said that factions formed only a minority of the spectators, that related violence was due to strong sporting rivalry, “riots pure and simple,” and that factions were not significant in the history of popular expression. Guttman feels that Cameron’s view that the Blues and Greens were “simply supporters clubs” and essentially non-political “can be debated.” He feels the idea “must be tested carefully against Traugott Bollinger’s contention that the spectators were often gatherings of a political character” (p. 33). Bollinger’s *Theatralis Licentia* (Winterthur, 1969), however, predates Cameron’s work and is not similarly regarded as authoritative on this topic. Guttman then continues his argument that factions were not wholly unpolitical by using a modern analogy to rugby in Bordeaux where four clubs appeal to four different social groups. He resorts to special pleading: “Cameron’s failure, despite his awesome erudition, to detect similar patterns in ancient Rome or Constantinople may well be due to antiquity’s lack of interest in such matters and to a consequent scarcity of documentary evidence” (p. 33). Guttman cannot accept Cameron’s conclusion that the factions were comprised of the *jeunesse dorée* and again he uses analogies to modern spectator violence in association with the socially deprived rather than the privileged. This leads him to criticize the expert in the field for not pursuing “the possibility that ancient disorders might have been instigated, as modern disorders are, not by the idle rich but rather by an alienated underclass” (p. 33). Regrettably, Guttman is forcing his own speculations here.⁹ As Cameron put it, somewhat prophetically, in *Circus Factions* (p. v): “If the traditional view is ever to be reformulated, it is likewise evidence, not dogma, that will have to be cited.”

Despite some slips, Guttman’s contribution to pre-modern sport scholarship is significant. He has added to his article of 1981 with a good synthesis of

⁸ Cf. p. 41: “The perfection of military prowess became ancillary and the tournament became a theatrical production in which fitness to rule was associated with fineness of sensibility”

⁹ In the absence of evidence Guttman readily resorts to analogy. For example, “Since almost no one in the past, other than a handful of moralists like Seneca and Tertullian, devoted much time to the psychological analysis of sports spectatorship, historians must infer motivation from contemporary attributions and from recorded behavior” (p. 175). In general, social scientists tend to be more eager than historians to explain ancient by modern behavior (and vice versa).

well-selected specialized studies.¹⁰ Yet the influence of traditional ideas and standard works remains clear. Guttmann still uses a lot of Finley and Pleket and Gardiner on Greece, Balsdon on Rome, Harris on chariots, and Jusserand on Medieval sport. Pedantically, one might suggest possible additions to his research, including: Romano on Greek stadia, since he asserts the early influence of spectator concerns; Lintott on the prevalence of violence in Roman society; Hopkins' sociological insights into Roman spectacles; and Frasca's chapters on Roman facilities and spectators.¹¹ Guttmann favors the adage of Greek participation vs. Roman spectatorship, but he might qualify this as stronger in ideology than in practice. On Roman sports customs and hostility to Greek sport, he might confer with revisionists who caution against over-reliance on the expressed views of a few famous conservatives.¹²

The final question about Guttmann's pre-modern material concerns its contribution to the total book. Arguably, human nature has not changed much but, aside from a few examples and cross references (pp. 102, 159, 164, 172, 177, 178, 184), Guttmann's points are mostly and best made in the modern era. Any historian faces the eternal problem of where to begin. If, as Guttmann states (p. 53), the birthplace of modern sport is England, he might better have begun there.¹³ No one can fully overcome the evidential and methodological problems Guttmann tackled. He fared better than most modernists who reach back, and certainly his work is more honest and coherent in its presentation.¹⁴

I would not have spent this much ink on only part of the work if I did not see this as a major study. It clearly is essential reading for any student of sport history of any era. I am left with a dilemma familiar to many a reviewer: I could not have done any better overall myself but I still wish Guttmann himself had done better on the pre-modern material.

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10. Materials added to his "Spats Spectators from Antiquity to the Renaissance," *JSH* 8 no. 2 (1981): 5-27, include: A. Hoenle and A. Henze, *Roemische Amphitheater und Stadien* (Zurich, 1981); George Ville, *La Gladiature en occident des origines à la morte de Domitien* (Rome, 1981); and L. Robert, *Les Gladiateurs dans l'orient grec* (Amsterdam, 1971).

11. D. G. Romano, "The Ancient Stadium: Athletes and Arete," *Ancient World* 7 (1983): 9-16; A. W. Lintott, *Violence in Republican Rome* (Oxford, 1968); K. Hopkins, *Death and Renewal* (Cambridge, 1983); L. Frasca, *Ludi nell'antica Roma* (Bologna, 1980). Guttmann's ideas on Greek professionalism might benefit from more use of David C. Young, *The Olympic Myth of Greek Amateur Athletics* (Chicago, 1984). He also might expand upon the view found in Otto Kiefer, *Sexual Life in Ancient Rome* (London, 1934); Balsdon, Carcopino and others, that Roman spectators derived sadistic delight from the executions in the arena.

12. Cf. I. Weiler, *Der Sport bei den Voelker der alten Welt* (Darmstadt, 1981); E. Machl, *Gymnastik und Arhletik in Denken der Roemer* (Amsterdam, 1974); J. Vaterlein, *Roma Ludens. Kinder und Erwachsene beim Spiel in anriken Rom* (Amsterdam, 1976).

13. Cf. R. D. Mandell, *Sport: A Cultural History* (New York, 1984). on qualitative differences between modern and pre-modern sport.

14. Minor slips: Ptolemy on p. 18; references to the Colosseum and arenas as stadia on pp. 20 and 23; reference on p. 27 to gladiators (venatores?) in the spectacles of Christian Byzantine emperors. Finally, if economy had permitted, a few illustrations of the excited crowds discussed would have been helpful.