
Certain books have a “landmark” status. E.P. Thompson’s *The Making of the English Working Class* (1963) is an obvious example, occupying its privileged position largely for having taken social history out of its junior status in departments of “economic and social” history and giving it an independent identity. In the study of sport two titles with a similar impact spring to mind: Tony Mason’s *Association Football and English Society* (1980) and Allen Guttmann’s *From Ritual to Record*, which Columbia University Press has just re-issued with a new afterword by the author. Guttmann’s study has been immensely influential and particularly beloved of students for the elegance of its prose, the ordered logic of its argument, and its evident scholarship. It sets the world of sports to right in a beautifully clear way. Whether or not one agrees with the thesis, which is a compelling one, it is still an astonishingly good model of how to write.

We have to remember that the book is nearly thirty years old, and that Guttmann, who was writing his first book on sport, was one of the first academics to turn our attention to the subject in the grand synoptic manner. “One reason,” he states, “that sports [the plural form is still rather strange to British ears] are not understood is that familiarity has made their significance seem obvious when it is not” (p. ix). By stripping away the veil of obviousness, Guttmann ensured that sport became a serious subject for academic analysis, placing it squarely in one of two great traditions of western social analysis—in this case the
Weberian one. Much has happened in the study of sport since the book appeared in 1978, but author and press clearly felt that a re-issue—rather than a new edition—was the appropriate step to take. Thus, apart from the afterword, which is essentially the author’s reply to his perception of (mostly) just and (occasionally) unjust criticism, nothing is added. On the crucial issue of the difference between ancient and modern sports Guttmann’s position has not changed. He clearly feels that the basic oppositions still apply, and probably most readers would agree that his characterization of modern sport hits the nail on the head.

To remind ourselves: Ritual to Record has two main aims. One of them is to identify the quintessential nature of modern sport, and this is done by contrasting it with sport as understood in Greek and Roman times. The argument of chapter 2, from which the book takes its title, is that sport to the Greeks was a sacred enterprise, and something that existed for the moment of its performance; for the moderns it had become an activity by which human achievement was measured, its records proclaiming, as Richard Holt has put it, “the triumph of the scientific and bureaucratic world view” (Sport and the British, 1990, p. 361). Sport is thus a manifestation of Weber’s process of rationality. The other aim, which Guttmann himself notes has received far less attention, is to offer some comparisons and contrasts between American and European sport. Both aims require a degree of systematization, and they certainly get it; one of the book’s distinguishing features is its propensity for categorizing. The general patterns are what stand out, not so much the exceptions to the perceived trends. There is, in other words, rather more of a sociologist’s method at work here than a historian’s. Inscribed within its considerable learning is an exercise in model-building (or “paradigm” creation, as Guttmann would prefer to call it).

Because of this we have to recognize that some historians have always approached From Ritual to Record with a degree of skepticism; doubts have been expressed similar to those which once greeted Neil J. Smelser’s work on industrialization, with its hint of “empty boxes.” The focus of contention has been “modernization,” a concept that Guttmann did not mention by name though it is implicit in the text, and he has since affirmed his faith in its explanatory power. There is no need here to rehearse all the pros and cons of modernization theory, except to say that for historians, with their concern for the empirical, it has presented some especial difficulties. There has been, for example, a tendency for it to be used teleologically—or “whiggishly”—to read the past from the perspective of the present, as if history is actually going somewhere. There was a whiff of this in the views expressed by some members of the Leicester School at a recent conference at De Montfort University on the origins of football codes. Guttmann quite rightly rejects the tendency, at least in any sense of moral improvement or “progress.” Equally, though, there is the practice of creating helpful paradigms such as “modern sport,” defined according to seven characteristics. Is the world really so clear-cut? A favorite charge of historians against the sociologists is that they make the facts fit the model, and Guttmann is not entirely absolved of this. From Ritual to Record gives us two snapshots of history—ancient (traditional) and modern—without much sense of how we got from the one to the other. “Modern” sport might acquire a particular characteristic when compared in general terms with ancient sports, but how applicable is the modern typology for all the sporting activities—elite and recreational, local and national, commercial and voluntary—that occur in the “modern” pe-
riod? And once the “modern” form has come into being, is that it? Does it remain in that form for evermore? No wonder Eric Hobsbawm once criticized sociology for its failure to explain change: “how humanity got from caveman to modern industrialism” (“From Social History to the History of Society,” in Essays in Social History, eds. M.W. Flinn and T.C. Smout [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974], 7-8). Guttmann has since regretted his own failure to discuss the sports of the Renaissance, and there is no doubt that with a stronger chronology the process of historical change would have received closer scrutiny. But this is the way sociologists work, and we historians have to accept that their methodology is different.

So what can we make of this book today? In spite of the furious engagement by all and sundry with it—and scarcely can a work on sport have been so assiduously picked over—few have considered its legacy. This is perhaps the biggest question to ask of From Ritual to Record a quarter century on. It can be tackled in two ways, one to do with its empirical content, the other to do with its theoretical validity. Of the two the latter is perhaps the more fruitful approach. The book’s empirical base is probably too insubstantial to bear the weight of “legacy,” although there are aspects that should not be missed. Its focus on ancient Greece, for example, has surely sustained those relatively few classical scholars who work in what is otherwise a field (sport history) overwhelmingly given over to the modern area. There is also a willingness to examine literary (fictional) representations of sport; Guttmann was predictably criticized for turning to “unreliable” evidence for his discussion of the contrasts between American and European sporting mentalities through works by writers such as Bernard Malamud, Brian Glanville, and Alan Sillitoe. Historians are never completely comfortable with fictions though as a result of Guttmann’s imaginative leap, and the work of others through the Sport Literature Association, the method now has an established if not dominant place in sports studies, and it works alongside approaches to television, radio, and the press to provide insights into the ideological power of sports.

But in general it is the book’s contribution to the question of how sport should be studied, rather than the material used to study it, that provides the test of its long-term impact. If Thompson’s refining of a brand of voluntaristic Marxism inspired a generation of disciples to go out and fashion the genre of social history (and if at around the same time Guenther Roth achieved something similar though more finite for the study of German social democracy), what did Guttmann’s work achieve? In brief, the answer to this question is probably: “a great deal in the classroom, but very little in research.” In research terms some members of the Leicester School have followed a similar path to that of Guttmann, but in the shadow of Elias and the “civilizing process,” although this too bears a Weberian imprint it is not a direction much explored by Guttmann. In other respects a great deal of what now constitute the core topics of sport history—women, gender, studies “from below,” race and ethnicity, identity, representation—seems a world away from the pages of From Ritual to Record. Guttmann himself is, of course, still active in this new work, ever-present at North American Society for Sport History, criticizing, encouraging, and shaping, developing new paradigms. His own studies have moved on from the focus of From Ritual to Record, and it is perhaps because his method is eclectic and given to synthesis rather than being fixed in a particular empirical furrow that the idea of a “Guttmann School” seems inappropriate. The man moves too quickly for disciples to keep up.
In one area, however, the methodology of 1978 stands firm and certainly deserves more attention than it has been given. This is in Guttmann’s insistence on taking a comparative view and essaying bold statements about international differences. If his contrast between the individualism of European sports and the American preference for team games might look a little shaky in the light of subsequent research, it is nonetheless shameful that in a world of international sporting organization and experiences we still have so little empirically-based comparative sport history. There is, for example, still no proper history of European sport, as opposed to the history of sport in separate European countries. The panoptic vision that Guttmann has offered us is there to be applied and is especially needed against the contemporary liking for bland general assertions about “globalization.” The European tradition of physical education studies, with its focus on national historical frameworks, provides a starting point for such a project, and there is a methodological model to be found in Pierre Lanfranchi and Matthew Taylor’s work on sport migration (Moving with the Ball: The Migration of Professional Footballers [Oxford: Berg, 2001]). It is in this area that we would all benefit from the Guttmann legacy.

The afterword deals with some of these issues but is less a reflection on the direction of sport history since 1978 than a reply to specific points that have been raised about the book. Something more expansive—from the master of expansiveness—would have been deeply fascinating, and its absence leaves an irritating sense of having been deprived. Finally, a criticism of the press for producing this reprint in such a way that the afterword stands out on the page like a sore thumb; the typeface is the same as the original, but the print is less dense, and this gives the new section a much lighter tone and the appearance, therefore, of something tacked on: an “afterthought” rather than an “afterword.”

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