

BOOK REVIEW

Sport and Democracy in the Ancient and Modern Worlds. By PAUL CHRISTESEN. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2012. Pp. xviii + 309. \$99.00. ISBN 978-1-107-01269-1.

The title of this book is somewhat misleading. As the author notes early on, the proper title of this book ought to have been *A School for Democracy: Sport and Democratization in the Ancient and Modern Worlds*. The difference is an important one, as Paul Christesen explores the relationships between democratization and sport, particularly mass sport, in a number of societies with a particular focus on ancient Greece and several modern European countries and the United States. Christesen's ambitious goal takes "an approach that draws heavily on both sport history and the sociology of sport" (xiv). The result is a book with two distinct, but related parts. In the first part, terms and concepts such as "democratization", "mass sport", as well as "horizontal and vertical sport," are defined and explored. In addition, there are significant discussions of earlier work by scholars on sport and democratization, and the impacts of sport on society and vice versa.

Key to Christesen's central argument is an understanding of the relative historical rarity prior to modern age both of democracy and of "mass sport," which engages "large numbers of people from a broad socioeconomic spectrum" both as spectators and participants (17). He further argues that societies that practice mass sport emphasizing "horizontal" sport of the type that "embodies egalitarian relationships" (21) foster the creation of democratic citizenry (e.g. nineteenth-century Britain and the United States in the early twentieth century). Societies, however, whose focus is on "vertical" sports, such as drill and gymnastics, that emphasize the inculcation of "hierarchy and obedience" (e.g., nineteenth- to early twentieth-century Germany) create citizenries ripe for authoritarian regimes. Furthermore, Christesen recognizes the nuance and complexity of sport in that even the most vertical sports like soccer rely heavily on training drills and following the orders of team coaches and team captains. There is also a short chapter on the ways that sport, including the horizontal sort, impedes democratization by making its participants at times overly "docile," "hostile," "exclusive," and can emphasize the inequalities of the players, thus creating elites.

The second or “historical” half of the book begins with examinations of sport first in early Iron Age Greece and then in Greece in the Archaic and Classical Periods. The extremely limited range of source material for the early Iron Age (primarily Homer and some archaeological material) complicates the degree to which we can know about the practice of sport during this period; however, Christesen provides a solid, brief overview of what may be said about sport in the ancient Greek world and the concomitant rise of democratic societies.

In the next section, Christesen tracks the historical course of athletics from something that was solely the purview of the elite to an activity that was increasingly practiced and viewed by a broader and more diverse audience. Christesen is masterful here and this is the strongest part of the book. However, Christesen’s discussion of the way that the connections between sport, politics, and social integration changed during the Hellenistic Period is less strong. Although the Greek city-states lost their political sovereignty following the Macedonian and then Roman conquests, mass participation in sports rose to unprecedented levels both in terms of active participants (from all socioeconomic levels) and of spectators at an ever increasing number of athletic festivals. While there is discussion of athletics during this period (178–183), a more substantial and nuanced exploration of mass sport and the challenges raised by it in a time of political oppression would have strengthened the book.

In the chapters that follow, Christesen compares both the changes in the political systems and the rise of mass sport and athletics (both of the horizontal and vertical type) in Britain, Germany, and the United States during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. While the depth of Christesen’s research is impressive and the case for the importance of sport in the development of democratization is compelling, the real hero appears more the development of public education both in the ancient and modern worlds. To be sure, in all cases sport was an important part of that education, but the spread of mass literacy seems more important for understanding the democratization of all the societies examined by Christesen.

In sum, *Sport and Democracy* is an important and challenging work that will be read with profit by sport historians and sociologists of sport alike. Christesen makes a compelling case for the power of horizontal sport, in particular, to inculcate the values of cooperation and participation and to increase the levels of democratization in society. One should hope that policymakers heed his call for more public expenditure to support greater levels of participation in this type of activity as a means to bolster our own beleaguered democracy.

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