

Sport and Identity in France

Practices, Locations, Representations

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CULTURAL IDENTITY STUDIES

CIS 14

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Introduction: Exploring French sporting identities

This book focuses attention on sport's social significance as a mode of individual and communal interaction, and also of cultural representation. Since the mid-nineteenth century, modern sports have exerted a powerful influence on both individual and communal self-images, and have thereby impacted significantly on local and national politics, and even on the international order itself. The extensively documented case of the Gaelic Athletic Association in Ireland stands as a paradigm of this multifaceted social role.¹ Sport has thus made a distinctive contribution to the imaginative life and the identity politics of modern nation-states. The present volume seeks to explore and ultimately to explain the processes of representation and mediation involved in the sporting construction and subsequent renegotiation of local, national and, increasingly, global identities. This ongoing process is examined by means of a detailed case study of France: from the mid-nineteenth century to the present, and at the level of individuals, communities, regions and the nation as a whole. While it is intended that this work will make a contribution to the fields of social history, cultural studies and sports studies, including most obviously the sociology of sport, its primary location is undoubtedly within French studies. This discipline has, since the mid-1990s, seen a considerable expansion in the research and teaching devoted to mass cultural phenomena. Among the most dynamic of these fields has been the study of sport, now firmly established as a standard component of broad surveys of French society and culture, underpinned by more specialized works by academics on both sides of the English Channel, and, indeed, on both sides of the Atlantic.

1 See among others, Mike Cronin, Mark Duncan and Paul Rouse, *The GAA: A People's History* (Cork: The Collins Press, 2009); Mike Cronin, William Murphy and Paul Rouse (eds), *The Gaelic Athletic Association, 1884–2009* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2009); John Scally, *The GAA: An Oral History* (Edinburgh: Mainstream, 2009).

Sport in France is increasingly the subject of monographs, edited volumes and special issues of scholarly journals. While specific aspects of the broader 'sportization' of French society and culture have been extensively analysed, both within and beyond the nation's borders, no general study has sought to focus attention explicitly on the role played by sport in the construction of identities. Important accounts, generally but not exclusively written in French, do exist of major events and, to a lesser extent, of memorable athletes, but the rare synthetic histories of the nation's sporting past have had relatively little to say about the role of sport in processes of identity construction. The recent publication of important overviews of the nation's sports history reflects the emergence of a new generation of French researchers, whose work will be explored in what follows. Such developments underline the need for a comparably substantial English-language survey. Moreover, valuable as these new French contributions to the debate undoubtedly are, they still do not engage in a sustained manner with the core thematic of identity that is privileged in the present volume. From this point of view, the outstanding work on the subject remains one of the earliest English-language studies, Richard Holt's *Sport and Society in Modern France* (1981).² Despite its widely acknowledged value, as reflected in regular citations by later researchers, this pioneering volume has long been out of print. In addition, notwithstanding its productive engagement with societal change, even here the emphasis is rarely on identities *per se*, while the study's central focus on the Third Republic (1870–1940) means that developments from 1940 onwards are generally not discussed. Finally, much that is qualitatively new has occurred since its publication three decades ago. Nevertheless, both in its scholarly aspirations and as a direct source of personal and professional inspiration, Holt's study remains an invaluable guide, and much that is presented in the following chapters may properly be regarded as footnotes to that classic work.

The present volume seeks, first, to reassess the process of modern sport's emergence and consolidation in France under the Second Empire and Third Republic, with particular reference to Holt's historical narrative and

2 Richard Holt, *Sport and Society in Modern France* (London: Macmillan, 1981).

with the specific aim of filling some of the gaps revealed by that ground-breaking study: such as equine and motor sport, Vichy and the colonies. The second main aim is to take up the story where *Sport and Society in Modern France* left off, by tracing developments from 1945 to the present day, and thus encouraging reflection on the current status and future role of sport in France. Where Holt foregrounded the roles of ideology, sociability and, to a lesser extent, festivity, this book integrates these and other explanatory paradigms within a broader analysis of the role of sport in the social construction of identities. To this end, attention is focused on the complex interaction of mass and elite physical practices with a wide variety of sporting locations – spatial and temporal, concrete and imaginative – and a rich field of representations. From the fine arts, through the rise of the popular press, to audio-visual and electronic culture, sport has long been a privileged object of representation. This has increasingly become the case with the development of the contemporary global media industry for which representations of sport are among its most popular subjects.

In an important collective study of the sports film as a distinctive cinematic *genre*, editors Richard King and David Leonard have argued that the representational economies of sport serve ‘to simultaneously fashion magical spaces and to unfold metaphors for the social.’³ Such an approach usefully highlights the location of sporting representations at the interface of the individual and the social, thus offering privileged scholarly access to the creation and circulation of identities, as well as insights into their articulation with collective memory. The study of sporting sites may consequently be informed by the work of scholars in such burgeoning, but rarely connected, fields as memory studies and body studies, as well as the analysis of material, textual and visual cultures. A spirit of intellectual inclusivity will consequently be apparent in what follows. Interdisciplinary in both scope and methodology, this book seeks to engage with a wide range of theoretical models and empirically based analytical traditions in an effort to shed new light upon the apparently familiar. By focusing on

3 C. Richard King and David J. Leonard (eds), *Visual Economies of/in Motion: Sport and Film* (New York: Peter Lang, 2006), p. 3.

representations – from Degas's Impressionist paintings of French horse racing to the media frenzy surrounding Zinedine Zidane's sending-off during the 2006 World Cup final – the study also seeks to bridge the conventional divide between 'high' and 'popular' culture, and thus to facilitate the spreading of knowledge to a broader readership than is generally the case for academic studies. This potential for the non-traditional dissemination of research findings is central to the appeal of sport to academic commentators. Indeed, it is envisaged as an important aspect of the appeal of this book both to specialist and more general audiences.

The period under investigation corresponds to that of the emergence, development, and ultimately mass diffusion and consumption of recognizably modern sports in France. This began with the codification and popularization of horse racing under the July Monarchy (1830–1848) and Second Empire (1852–1870). It continued with the introduction of athletic sports on the British model, followed by the development of 'indigenous' sports such as cycle road racing under the Third Republic (1870–1940). Profound transformations then occurred with the Popular Front (1936–1938), the collaborationist Vichy regime (1940–1944) and, in the post-war period, the presidency of General Charles de Gaulle (1958–1969). Major developments that took place in the latter part of the twentieth century are also analysed, including the historic victory by the ethnically diverse home team in the France 98 football World Cup. This and related developments lead us to consider contemporary sport's contribution to the emergence of transnational, and even supra-national, forms of identification. Particular attention is given to the current role of sporting practices and representations in the development of increasingly multicultural, hybrid and globalized forms of French identity in the putatively post-modern world. The analysis employs a qualitative methodology, with the primary emphasis placed on the close reading of both textual and visual images. Media representations are an essential component of the study, which draws on material from both the general and specialist press, through cinema, radio and television, to digital media. The substantial, although rarely investigated, impact of sport on French 'high' art – literary, graphic and plastic – also forms an important part of the survey. Such depictions are used to draw attention to broader trends in French society and culture, and thus to offer some

general conclusions regarding sports-inflected processes of communication and affiliation.

By investigating a selection of significant practices, locations and representations, the work seeks to assess the contribution of modern sports (both participatory activities and sporting spectacles) to the construction of identities. It explores both 'traditional' identities (conceived as unitary and fixed) and the emergence of eclectic and unstable forms of identification. The discussion thus draws on familiar sociological paradigms – including gender, ethnicity, class and generational factors – but also seeks to highlight processes of negotiation and reinvention in the sporting and broader public spheres. This focus raises closely related issues of citizenship, empowerment and social inclusion, particularly on the part of disenfranchised urban youth of ethnic minority origin. While sporting practices, locations and representations are to the fore throughout, individual chapters focus on the moral and material investment made by French citizens, and often the French state, in targeted events, institutions and figures. The three substantive sections similarly foreground one aspect of the thematic analysis, and simultaneously contribute to the broader analytical thrust of the project. Given the vast scope of the field, the aim clearly cannot be a comprehensive treatment of French sport. The study presents, rather, a representative sample of activities and images, aiming at precision and penetration in its treatment of the selected fields. The chapters are conceived as interlinked but self-sufficient thematic essays rather than narrowly sequential sections, although a broadly chronological narrative is maintained to reinforce the work's overall conceptual architecture. While the primary focus is on identity, related concepts of sporting celebrity, stardom and heroism also inform the discussion, with attention given throughout to issues of memory and forgetting. The resulting overview presents new findings as well as engaging critically with existing analyses offered by leading scholars working in both English and French. This project has also allowed the author to revisit topics engaged with at earlier stages in his research, as part of a broader synthesis than was possible in those typically single-sport studies.

Thus far, we have presented our project's central organizational principle – the concept of identity – as if it were unproblematic. However, the fact that this term features so regularly in studies of sport around the world