

# Sport and Cultural Memory

Stephen G. Wieting  
Department of Sociology  
University of Iowa  
Iowa City, Iowa 52242  
stephen-wieting@uiowa.edu

## Abstract

*Chapter 23 of the Iliad recounts Achilles' effort to honor his fallen friend, Patroclus, with eight sporting events. Societies have since regularly employed sport to celebrate and remember cherished cultural values. Sport is not the only vehicle societies use for collective memory, but this activity has proved serviceable by virtue of its common appeal, expansiveness in the stimulation of our senses, and capacity for a decisive resolution. This project examines ways in which sport serves as a special preserve of a society's memories. In the form of stylized bodily performance, special stories, and distinct rituals valorized conduct is emphasized. Sport can conceal as well as display, so attention is also given how sport can belie social cleavages such as race and gender differences.*

## *The Project in Brief*

Memory is essential for individual and national integrity and productivity. Ian Hacking argues convincingly that memory replaced the theological concept of the soul as the essence of the human mind in the rise of modern psychology in France between 1874 and 1886 (1995). Antonio Damasio starts his book, *Descartes' Error: Emotion, Reason, and the Human Brain* (1994), with the haunting image of Phineas Gage whose brain was severed by a rod accidentally rocketed during the tamping of an explosive charge (1994). The body persevered, but the core of the mind, memory, was lost, the indispensable path to Gage's own past. The collective horror of Orwell's *1984* is associated with the systematic destruction of a country's history (1984 [1949]). Émile Durkheim stressed in *Elementary Forms* (1969 [1913]) the centrality of ritual that would assure collective memory, a theme powerfully emphasized by his student, Maurice Halbwachs (1925; 1950), and currently stressed by historians such as Peter Novick (*The Holocaust in American Life*,

1999). Ivo Andric's *The Bridge Over the Drina* (1977 [1945]) serves as the central emblem of loss and retention of collective memory as armies contest the Central Balkans.

Andric provides the valuable message that collective memory must use physical objects and common social performances to aid in the memory process. Added to the magnificent architectural expression as a medium of memory for his artistic recounting, societies use music, dance, painting, and varieties of literature as repositories of important memories. This project examines the role of sport in the service of collective memory in several countries, including Canada (Wieting and Lamoureux, 2001), France (Wieting, 2000), Iceland, Kenya, Romania, and the United States (Polumbaum and Wieting, 1999; Wieting, 2001). The disposition is not that sport necessarily is superior to these other vehicles; but the trajectory of research orienting the particular project considers sport a worthy analytic contender as an entry-point into cultural memory. First, for good or ill, sport substance is a broadly distributed form of discourse; secondly, the capability of sport to evoke strong and broad responses from a variety of senses seems to lend it salience to people; thirdly, the formal boundaries of sport allow unambiguous resolution in ways that life in general terms often cannot.

#### *What is Studied?*

Scholarship integrating ethnography and social history concludes that collective memory is inscribed and enacted in three main areas: public texts, normative prescriptions for actors' bodies, and public celebrations (e.g., Kleinman and Kleinman, 1994; Connerton, 1989). An oft-repeated maxim is that "A culture is its stories." Alice Munro's characterizations of Canada carry messages of verisimilitude for natives of Canada as do those of Joyce Carol Oates for U.S. citizens and of Ngugi for Kenyans. Sports pages of modern newspapers, beyond recounting the facts of contests, memorialize sports events in compelling narratives that contain actors, accomplishments, and a moral load that readers can understand. Several dimensions of attention to body shape and performance in sport provide salient markers of cultural uses of the body in

sport, through intensification of technological aids, the rhetoric of discipline inherent in training, emblems that represent valued morals, and as commodities. Sporting productions in collegiate, professional, and certainly international arenas have been imbued with ultimate meanings for spectators and participants (and in turn for the constituencies represented, for example, the campus, the community, the nation) that approach religious intensity.

#### *What is the Point? Vantage on Local/Global Processes*

The project which uses the strategic site of sport as cultural memory focuses particularly on the highly dynamic (and controversial) process of globalization. Contemporary theorists of globalization tend toward poles of description and evaluation of balance in the current flow of capital, labor, and images across geographic and political boundaries. Thomas Friedman's characterization (1999), for example, heralds the common benefit of local entities and transnational economic players in the wealthy West, both of whom can take advantage of the inexorable pace and density of these global connections. Analysts such as John Gray (*False Dawn*, 1998) and Michel Chossudovsky (*The Globalization of Poverty*, 1997) see the process as one more moment in a dreary pattern of larger, Western cultures subsuming less powerful nations' uniquenesses: i.e., the most recent version of abject colonization, excessive in its insidiousness for its rapidity and expansiveness. Sport scholarship in the last ten years has added a sector of complexity to these polar views by showing ways in which local, national sport has proved very resilient in retaining its unique national character, and how global spread of sport is often powerfully modulated and framed by these durable local forces.

Societies and individuals rely on some stability in visions of the past construed for the purposes of present tasks, and sport serves as an important technical and metaphorical container for such cultural ballast. Memorializing entails strategic selection, meaning not simply the evocation of past events but also the restriction of recall in opportunistic ways as part of the adaptation to changing current circumstances. In sport as in other fields, global imbalances of

power and resources coming to bear differentially on local cultures accentuate relationships of dominance and subordination, and sporting activities, like phenomena in other realms, become marked by compromise and hybridity, and in some cases engulfment and surrender. However, even extreme adaptation arising from local confrontation with global duress will never entirely dispense with valued representations of the past which culturally distinguish the present: indeed, under some circumstances exaggerated retrieval from the past may become an especially potent adaptive device. Examining configurations of local/global interactions through sport yields four prototypical patterns of exchange between the local and the global: *limited dependency*, *strategic accommodation*, *opportunistic variability*, and *selective concealment*.

The variable history of franchise success in Canada as basketball and baseball has expanded north illustrates *limited dependency*. Athletically and financially, the Toronto Blue Jays have been considerably more successful than Montreal's baseball franchise. Toronto's team plays in a huge entertainment center, the Skydome, with a retractable dome. Toronto was on its way to these achievements with or without the Blue Jays, even as the extensions of U.S. sports industries nurtured there have been mutually reinforcing. The Skydome is the most popular venue for sporting events and other forms of entertainment in North America, and indirectly a draw for other businesses, including the Raptors with their nearby stadium.

The balance between local integrity and global expansion becomes an especially important strategic question surrounding small, marginal or vulnerable sports. Curling in Canada, and with it Canada's stake in the world development of elite curling, presents such a case. Curling has substantial market draw in Canada, but with the country's population being only one-tenth that of the U.S. curling promoters in Canada consider growth is dependent on expanding U.S. markets. There are only 15,000 curlers in the U.S. (compared to 1.3 million in Canada). But U.S. curling promoters successfully marketed international curling to U.S. networks in the Salt Lake Olympics and seem to have, as a result, assured Olympic curling beyond 2006. A related pattern of *strategic accommodation* occurs visibly with U.S. sports neutralization of charges of

drug use, such as the New York Yankees endeavors to manage Darryl Strawberry's cocaine habit through regular testing, and Major League Baseball's disregard for home-run slugger Mark McGwire's use of androstenedione.

The history of the NCAA and its selective support of women's athletics in the U.S. illustrate a third dynamic, *opportunistic variability*. Although the NCAA has formally embraced Title IX, the record reveals a general attitude of resistance. Support has been slow, begrudging, and partial – driven more from opportunism than principle. Title IX and its evolution extend two traditions of legal reasoning in the U.S. One, the historical presumption, grounds the interpretation of cases in the interest of assuring consistency with the established values and traditions of the Republic (represented by *Bowers v. Hardwick*, 1986). The other, in line with legal principle, hinges on concepts of inclusion within express guarantees in the Constitution, foremost among them being the due process and equal opportunity provisions of the 14<sup>th</sup> Amendment. The weight of Constitutional guarantees rather than the inertia of historical interpretation prevailed in the early 1970s, when both Roe and Title IX were argued and passed. Yet the two currents remain in constant tension, and the weight of historical argument has proved to be a drag on the realization of Title IX much as at times it has threatened to roll back the declaration of Roe. The facts that the 1964 Civil Rights Act had to be repeatedly “repaired,” including also the amendment of Title IX, and that resistance to sexual parity in sports persisted after Title IX, are entirely consistent with the historical presumption. Although on balance Constitutional protections have weighted more powerfully from the mid-1970s on, relentless forces of traditionalism persist in the NCAA as in U.S. society broadly.

Collective memory displays, but also excludes and distorts. The apparent success of African Americans in U.S. sport is an image many administrators of sport endeavor to nurture. For several decades the rosters of the three biggest U.S. professional sports leagues have exhibited moderate to extreme over-representation of African-Americans compared with their proportion in the general population. A recent accounting showed 77% of players in the NBA,

65% of NFL players, and 15% in Major League Baseball were black. Yet such figures do not reflect fundamental racial discrepancies persisting in the society at large. Black/white disparities in the general population are particularly glaring in matters of health and basic life chances, and also in crime statistics. Despite laws and affirmative action programs implemented since the civil rights activism of the 1960s, the lower life expectancy of male blacks relative to white males has not changed in a generation (.89 in 1975 and .88, as a proportion of white figures in 1995). The risks of neonatal death and infant mortality for black children, both male and female, have actually increased relative to whites. Blacks are seven times more likely than whites to contract tuberculosis, more than six times more likely to be murder victims, more than three times as likely to suffer from HIV, meningitis, or anemia. Blacks are for more likely to remain below the official U.S. poverty level than whites, and although the overall differential has decreased slightly over three decades, the percentage of black children below the poverty line is still more than double that of whites – 36.8 versus 15.4. The extraordinary presence within a few days of Tiger Woods on the covers of both *Time* and *The New Yorker* (August 2000) suggests a self-satisfaction regarding U.S. sport that such an epic performer illustrates an open society for minorities. The hypocrisy is glaring when these journalistic treatments avoid the point that Woods is the only African American on the PGA Tour.

### *References*

- Andric, Ivo. 1977 [1945]. *The Bridge Over the Drina*. Trans. I. F. Edwards. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Chossudovsky, Michael. 1997. *The Globalization of Poverty. Penang, Malaysia: Third World Network*.
- Connerton, Paul. 1989. *How Societies Remember*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Damasio, Antonio R. 1994. *Descartes' Error: Emotion, Reason, and the Human Brain*. New York: Putnam.

- Durkheim, Émile. 1969 [1913]. *Les élémentaires de la vie religieuse*. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France.
- Friedman, Thomas L.. 1999. *The Lexus and the Olive Tree*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
- Gray, John. 1998. *False Dawn*. New York: New Press.
- Hacking, Ian. 1995. *Rewriting the Soul: Multiple Personality and the Sciences of Memory*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Halbwachs, Maurice. 1950 [1925]. *Les cadres sociaux de la mémoire*. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *La Mémoire collective*. 1950. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France.
- Kleinman, Arthur and Joan Kleinman. 1994. "How Bodies Remember: Social Memory and Bodily Experience of Criticism, Resistance, and Delegitimation Following China's Cultural Revolution," *New Literary History* 25: 707-723.
- Luria, A.R. 1972. *The Man with a Shattered World: the History of a Brain Wound*. Trans. Lynn Solotaroff. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Novick, Peter. *The Holocaust in American Life*. 1999. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
- Orwell, George. 1984 [1949]. *1984*. New York: New American Library.
- Polumbaum, Judy and Stephen G. Wieting. 1999. *Stories of Sport and the Moral Order: Unraveling the Cultural Construction of Tiger Woods*. *Journalism and Communication Monographs* 1:69-118.
- Wieting, Stephen G. 2000. "Twilight of the Hero in the Tour de France." *International Review for the Sociology of Sport* 35: 369-384.
- \_\_\_\_\_. ed. 2001. *Sport and Memory in North America*. London: Frank Cass Publishers.
- Wieting, Stephen G. and Danny Lamoureux. 2001. "Curling in Canada." Pp. 140-153 in Wieting, Stephen G., ed. *Sport and Memory in North America*. London: Frank Cass Publishers.