Book Review

SEPTEMBER 11 AND AMERICA'S SPORTING NATION

Mia Fischer

The Cultural Politics of Post-9/11 American Sport: Power, Pedagogy and the Popular

MICHAEL SILK

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With The Cultural Politics of Post-9/11 American Sport, Michael Silk engages in a compelling discussion of the public and educative potentialities of sporting discourse. By contextualizing sport’s evolution as inextricably tied to an expansion of the media-industrial complex, Silk pays homage to Guy Debord’s ‘society of the spectacle’. More specifically, he suggests that sporting spectacles are phenomena of media culture that inculcate individuals into a particular way of life, embody society’s basic values and expand militarism. Silk successfully lays out how the events of 11 September 2001 set the stage for an affinity between the George W. Bush administration, the Pentagon, Hollywood and broadcast media. Sporting spectacles, he argues, became an effective means for defining the nation and harnessing its citizenry in the post-9/11 period.

The book’s theoretical and methodological approach is situated at the intersection of the sociology of sport, cultural studies and critical pedagogy. Silk employs a strategy of critical textual analysis guided by Grossberg’s understanding of culture’s role in the construction of the ‘lived milieu of power’ (p. 13). In seven chapters, Silk illuminates how the ‘sporting popular’ became a crucial site for expansionist empire building, an attack on civil liberties, and support for violent regime change. It did so, he suggests, through the constant invocation of rhetorics of fear, terror, moral authority and religiosity.

Silk begins by observing baseball as a ritualistic space for memorializing and mourning (chapter 2), before providing a detailed analysis of the Super...
Bowl (the annual championship game of American football) and the opening ceremony of the Salt Lake City Winter Olympics in 2002 (chapter 6). Disney’s film *Miracle* (2003) is used to demonstrate the rendering of a ‘sanitized’ history of the US Olympic hockey team’s victory over the Soviet Union in 1980 (chapter 5). Analysing these numerous media texts, Silk effectively demonstrates how narratives of ‘hope, heroes, and homeland’ act out a ‘commodified pastiche of the past’ (p. 35). The ‘sanctioned’ sporting discourse relies on a complex rhetoric addressed to an idealized ‘we’, whose purpose is to capitalize on ‘the affective orientation of popular-commodity signs’ (p. 114). The emphasis on ‘capital accumulation’ in turn produced an ideology by means of which US citizens could view themselves as culturally, morally and politically superior to those of other nation-states.

Particularly insightful is Silk’s chronicling of the militarization of sporting life and culture (chapter 3) alongside the emergence of an intensified patriarchal post-9/11 body politic. He provides a detailed discussion of the media spectacle surrounding Pat Tillman, who left professional (American) football to enlist in the US Army and was killed in Afghanistan by ‘friendly fire’ in 2004. Silk argues that his ‘sacrifice’ ‘operates as a symbol of wounded (white) America’ (p. 54), working to reinforce subtle modes of contemporary racism. Tillman’s positioning as an idealized white, masculine American citizen is connected to and depends on the demonization of African-American athletes, e.g. basketball star Kevin Garnett, who, in the aftermath of 9/11, faced intense media scrutiny for allegedly being ungrateful, over-privileged and unpatriotic. Furthermore, Silk introduces a notion of the ‘post-9/11 phallus’ with NASCAR representing the embodiment of neoconservativism. Through constructions of hyperwhite and hypermasculine identities, stock car racing harvested political and cultural capital for the Bush administration. While Silk successfully builds here on previous scholarship, notably absent are more critical engagements with the portrayals of hegemonic masculinities that glorify heroism, bravery and aggression while rendering women virtually invisible and powerless, as Vavrus (2007) demonstrates.

From there Silk goes on to showcase how certain ‘minority groups’ in sporting spectacles were incorporated into and redefined as integral to a neo-ethnic version of national identity, while others were conceptualized as ‘disposable populations’. Middle Easterners and Muslims, in particular, were strategically portrayed as dysfunctional and abject. As such, Silk argues, they mirrored the face of terrorism (e.g. through World Wrestling Entertainment’s villain character, Muhammad Hassan) while deflecting attention away from major social and economic problems at home, such as institutionalized racism, crude xenophobia and the links between domestic terror and foreign policy.
Chapter 4, an exploration of (bio)-pedagogies of the self, presents the author’s most thought-provoking intervention. Silk contrasts the valorized neoliberal corpus and the ‘post-9/11 pariah’ of reality TV’s The Biggest Loser, arguing that these bio-pedagogies of obesity ‘do little but pathologize anything other than the white, heterosexual, militarized, gendered, slender, normalized, middle-class consumer-citizen in the post 9/11 moment’ (p. 71). Engaging with Foucault’s concept of ‘governmentality’, he shows how TBL explicitly maintains the boundary between the healthy bodies proper that fulfil the ‘obligations’ of participatory democratic citizenship (through fitness consumption) and those socially, morally and economically demonized outsiders—obese ‘public pollutants’ (p. 86) who are purportedly unfit, unhealthy and present a national threat demanding a domestic war on terror.

In the final part of the book, Silk successfully draws together his previous analyses to place sporting spectacles more thoroughly within a global post-9/11 context. As welfare states are dismantled, public services privatized and income disparities intensified, Silk argues that sporting spectacles are simultaneously preserving neoconservative values around family, church, manliness, patriotism and military might by providing society with a moral-religious compass. Unfortunately, his use of Hardt and Negri’s conceptualization of ‘empire,’ particularly the role of the nation state and its entanglements with emergent geopolitical military trajectories as well as transnational corporations, falls short in its theoretical application to elucidate how the sporting popular can be located at the convergence of two ‘raging torrents’ (p. 10) — neoconservatism and neoliberalism. Additionally, a conceptual weakness throughout the book is Silk’s lack of clarification as to who or what comprises the ‘sporting popular’, a place where social forces, discourses and institutions converge and are contested.

Still, Silk’s book is an excellent read for scholars and students interested in understanding the complex entanglements of sport ‘deployed as soft-core weaponry in a hard-core militarized industrial complex’ (p. 3). Sporting spectacles saturated with ‘popcorn patriotism’ (p. 145) are as evident today as they were ten years ago, despite a change in government and the assassination of Osama Bin Laden. Indeed, since mediated sporting events as ‘popular’ texts continue to function as a ‘civil religion’ in the US society and elsewhere, especially in times of divisive politics, economic uncertainties and ongoing wars, Silk urgently advocates for a critical pedagogy and scholarship that lays bare, resists and opposes these discourses.

Notes on contributor

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research explores issues of ‘militainment’ – the complex entanglements between sports, media and the military – during the NFL’s 10th anniversary commemorations of 9/11.

Reference


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