

Populism and the Leisure Spectacle

BSA Leisure & Recreation Workshop 1st June 2018, University of Bath

This BSA workshop combined contemporary history with event management, cultural studies and theory with studies of national cases, the binding theme being the whys and wherefores of the populist profile of particular sport and leisure practices and cultural formations. Whereas the concept and theory of spectacle, and the notion of carnival, have been applied to sport mega-events, music festivals and rock concerts, the populist dimension that may have characterised and sustained such cultural phenomena has not received comparable attention. This day was the first of a couple of workshops and conference sessions designed to explore this relatively neglected aspect of the leisure spectacle.

Alex Gillett opened the day with a consideration of the 1966 football World Cup finals tournament, hosted and won by England. Drawing upon his work with co-author Kevin Tennant he presented data on the almost serendipitous way in which the British government lent financial support to the event, the disappointment of those English regions beyond London for whom the anticipated tourist bonanza was a washout if not disaster, and the small scale of commercialisation of the product that nevertheless hinted at the later, media-generated and sponsor-based global commodity that the World Cup has become. The broader context was informed by Flyvbjerg's four sublimes of the mega-project, to which Alex and Kevin's research has brought an ethnographic and qualitative dimension as applied to the study of event history and business history. These themes and approaches stimulated lively discussion on just how we understand contemporary history and the lived meanings of iconic cultural moments in our past. He also looked at how the 1994 World Cup in the United States sought, through targeted marketing strategies aimed at both established and potential audiences, to popularize the game in the crowded US market dominated by the Big 4 (American Football, basketball, baseball and ice hockey).

David Goldblatt began his examination of the case of Hungary and the use of football by the populist president of the country, Viktor Orbán, with the observation that for the political use of football in a populist project there was no better example than Silvio Berlusconi in Italy. Berlusconi did not need to enrich himself through football, though, and this was one aspect in which he differed from the Hungarian president. In Hungary, in the vacuum of the country's decline from footballing prominence, Orbán has brought his personal football obsession to the fore. With an opportunistic adaptation of a provenly effective populist slogan - "to make Hungarian football great again" - Orbán and his political henchmen have appropriated the game at the top level, siphoning public funds on personal vanity projects such as the Pancho Stadium in the small town for which he himself once played. David was granted a two-hour audience/tour of this stadium by Orbán. Combining cultural studies with his (investigative) journalistic accreditation, he reported on the inside world of a corrupt, ruthless populist president whose obsession with and passion for football is combined with a far-right dictatorial erosion of civil rights in the country; all this alongside the embezzlement of public funds and the enrichment of cronies whom he has

brought into the most powerful positions in the state, also gifting to his select favourites lucrative construction projects on a massive scale.

Michael Williams moved the focus of discussion to the sphere of music, the big rock spectacle. His case study of U2's 100-plus concerts over three years focused upon the experience of fans and the socio-political messages that Bono himself conveyed from his platform of the most lucrative rock tour in history: the series of shows was attended by 8 million and consumed by a further 10 million via YouTube. On such a stage, for many fans, the Bono persona and presence embodies the spectacle, and his hold on massive crowds of fans appears almost magical, giving him the profile of what Michael called a "secular shaman". Such an effect is achieved through appeals to fans constituted as closed and inclusive communities. In terms of the U2 message itself, Bono appeals to the ideals of peace, freedom, and civil rights, alongside calls to campaign against poverty and human rights abuses. He operates, in Gramscian terms, as an organic intellectual giving voice to his enraptured public: "Activate yourself – the time is now". He does not have a perfectly compliant public though, some fans leaving the arena when the speechifying begins, there for the music not the message, the entertainment not the elucidation.

Bryan Clift presented a focused case study of the rise to power of left-wing populist Lula da Silva in Brazil in the first decade of the century, and of the significance of the gaining of the two most sought-after sport mega-events for the country, the 2014 World Cup and the 2016 Summer Olympics and Paralympics. Lula's working-class background gave him a genuine connectivity with the population through the vehicle of the restored socialist party, the Workers' Party (PT). Mobilising an effective charismatic presence, president from 2003-2011, Lula instituted a radical series of distributive reforms and also convinced a left-wing and working-class following of the benefits to the country of hosting large-scale mega-events. Such a strategy was less successful for his successor, Dilma Rousseff, who was impeached and removed from office at the end of August 2016, a little over a week after the end of the Rio de Janeiro Summer Olympics. Rousseff lacked the organic links to a national public that had sustained Lula, and the populist benefits, and potential for a positive cultural legacy, of those events look to have been eroded by a right-wing backlash and deepening economic and political crisis. The Rio Olympics motto "A new world" has a ring of irony to it in such a context.

In the final session of the day Alan Tomlinson discussed selected socio-historical examples of how leisure spectacles have been understood in different cultural and political settings. Juvenal's "bread and races/circuses", for instance, can surely be read as a comment on sport's capacity to bring the populace together in a form of right-wing populism, in this particular case combined with the lauded presence of the charismatic leader/dictator. Accounts of leisure noting the shared interests of the "common people" and the elite might be more usefully framed as analyses of populist phenomena which bolster the status of the elite as well as keep the people in their place. Take Hippolyte Taine's account of Derby Day (28 May 1861) in England: as "drunken people along the whole road" back to London are supported by laughing comrades, "the spectators' faces do not

betokened disgust. Today everything is allowable, it is an outlet for a year of repression". The case could certainly be made for populism as a core concept for understanding leisure, alongside the concepts of spectacle, carnival, liminality, and performativity. In the populism literature dominated by political science, there is a consensus that populism refers to both a sense of an homogeneous people/public (identified or projected), and to the values embodied in the charismatic leader. These elements are without doubt core features of many leisure spectacles. Overall then a socio-cultural, and as appropriate historically informed, understanding of the populist dimensions of sport and leisure cultures/spectacles could focus upon a) populist leaders/performers, political and cultural, and the sport spectacle; b) populist events, and the modes of consumption that underpin such events; and c) populist discourse, from cultural policies to the mission statements of SINGOs such as FIFA and the IOC.

The host convenor for the workshop was Bryan Clift, and we are grateful to the University of Bath's Department of Health for supporting the day and providing refreshments and lunch.

This workshop will be complemented by sessions held in October/November 2018 at the annual conference of the North American Society for the Sociology of Sport (NASSS) in Vancouver. The workshops are planned as contributions to an edited volume that will be published in late 2019.

Alan Tomlinson
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