

H-France Review Vol. 3 (May 2003), No. 60

Georges Vigarello, *Du jeu ancien au show sportif: La naissance d'un mythe*. Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2002. 236 pp. Notes. 21.00 € (pb). ISBN 2-02-053038-4.

Review by Christopher Thompson, Ball State University.

There is arguably no historian in France who has published on as wide an array of sports-related subjects as Georges Vigarello, and few if any who have done so with such insight into the role of physical exercise in both modern and early modern western societies. A professor at the *Université de Paris-V* and *Directeur d'études* at the *École des hautes études en sciences sociales*, Vigarello has distinguished himself over the past quarter century by the chronological and substantive sweep of his scholarship. If his central concern has always been the human body—specifically European attitudes and practices relating to the body since the Middle Ages—this has led him in many directions: hygiene, health, and medicine; theories about the body and physical training; rape; physical education; and various aspects of the history of sport.[1]

Vigarello's most recent work is a volume of essays on the changing roles and nature of sport in Europe since the sixteenth century. All but two of the thirteen essays were published elsewhere over the past two decades. There is the risk, in such an enterprise, that the collection will seem artificial—united by the identity of its author rather than by its thematic coherence. The scope of Vigarello's scholarship has been such, however, that he was able to select essays that do more than simply address a number of important aspects of the history of sport in Europe or, more generally, in the West. By providing a chronological perspective stretching back several centuries before the rise of modern sport in the late nineteenth century, he is able to highlight a number of significant trends, draw distinctions between various periods, and address both current and past challenges to what he describes as the "mythologizing" of sport.

The essays are presented in four chronological sections. The first is devoted to early modern sport and explores both the combat-inspired games of elites and the spontaneous games of the laboring masses, which were characterized by betting. The second section examines the emergence of modern sport in the decades before World War I in an essay on swimming and a more general piece on the ways in which mass sport during this period took on a widely accepted social and moral significance, in marked contrast to the frivolous betting games of the *ancien régime*. The third section addresses the development of mass spectator sport prior to World War II, with essays on the Olympic Games, the Tour de France, and the World Cup. The final section, comprised of six essays (almost half the total), examines postwar trends. Each section is prefaced by an introduction that provides a broader historical context and prepares the reader for the themes addressed in its essays.

This volume is not a comprehensive introduction to the history of European sport, nor was it intended to be. There are some important gaps in Vigarello's treatment of the sports phenomenon in these essays,

and he clearly favors more recent developments. This is not a criticism—such gaps and choices were inevitable given the nature of the volume—but simply a warning to readers who might be expecting a more systematic treatment of the subject. On the other hand, Vigarello's focus on certain themes—violence, the role of the media, the political uses of sport, and the mythologizing of sport—endows the volume with a coherence it might otherwise have lacked. His treatment of violence and of sport as "*un mythe*," on which I shall focus, illustrate the utility of such an approach.

Rather than providing a historical overview of the complex relationship between violence and sport, Vigarello focusses on the issue in two essays that treat periods several centuries apart. The first essay on sport in the ancien regime, which, as Vigarello himself acknowledges (p. 15), owes much to the work of Norbert Elias and Eric Dunning,[2] addresses the taming of violence in the royal and aristocratic sports of sixteenth-century France. During that period, the objective of such displays shifted from the dominance of one's opponent in violent confrontations to the demonstration of one's superiority in exercises that required a high degree of technical expertise and physical self-control and did not involve direct physical contact with a competitor. Thus, jousting and other barely disguised versions of real combat were gradually forbidden by royal fiat—often in the wake of the death or severe maiming of a prominent member of the court. They were replaced by new events that emphasized dexterity and technical skill over strength, such as *courses de bague* which required contestants on charging horses to thrust their lances through a ring (rather than their opponent's body). Vigarello explains this evolution as symptomatic of what one might call a shift in the cultural legitimation of royal authority: as the king of France increased his control over his realm and the nobles who might threaten his rule, the need to express his political dominance in explicit displays of his superior strength was replaced by the exaltation of a more subtle physical superiority founded on skill and control.

Four centuries later, the restraint—both real and symbolic—of violence in athletic competitions continues to be a critical feature of sport, even if contemporary sporting events bear no resemblance to the sixteenth-century contests of the European nobility. As Vigarello notes, modern sport is characterized by an unprecedented level of organization, centralization, uniformization of rules, and control[3]: athletes belong to sports clubs, which belong to regional and national federations; the latter are members of international federations. In earlier periods, games like *soule* (the violent ancestor of soccer and rugby) were chaotic local events contested by neighboring villages throughout the countryside with few, if any, limits on competitive conduct. In contrast, modern sports typically take place in a space and time specifically designated for their competitions, according to rules recognized globally and enforced by referees hired and trained by sports federations, and with the explicit permission and, often, the logistical and financial support of the state. Furthermore the separation between players and spectators, which was often fluid in pre-modern contests, is rigid: athletes are on the field of play, spectators in the stands, and any deviation from this arrangement is generally a sign of the breakdown of order (for example, when spectators disrupt play by invading the field, or athletes go into the stands to confront obstreperous fans). The violence of modern athletes is generally very much under control as a result of a regime of escalating penalties: fouls, ejections, suspensions, fines, and, in the most serious cases, banishment from the sport. Even in "contact sports" like rugby the form that physical contact may legitimately take is carefully circumscribed and excessive brutality is punished. In a sense, then, the "civilizing process" of controlling public displays of violence begun in sixteenth-century European court society remains an important feature of sport to this day.

Curiously, as Vigarello points out, where this process has broken down in recent decades is not on the field but in the stands, where the transgressive violence of sports hooligans—a minority, but a particularly visible minority—challenges notions of sport as both "civilized" and "civilizing." His explanation of the phenomenon goes beyond the usual arguments about crowd psychology and the extreme identification of fans with their team, against an "other" personified by the opposing side and its fans. While quite rightly not discounting such factors, Vigarello suggests that hooliganism is best understood as the reaction of a marginalized minority who use sport to express publicly their rage at

being excluded from a society that has given unprecedented priority to the individual's pleasure, comfort, and personal fulfillment. Market economies, social mobility (both real and illusory), the welfare state and lengthy vacations, the triumph of consumerism, of permissiveness, and of an ethos of self-actualization, and the erosion of traditional solidarities—all of which Vigarello argues are defining characteristics of contemporary European civilization—have contributed to the celebration of the atomized individual and his needs. As a result, those whose needs are not met by a society that has made the satisfaction of individual needs its highest aim use widely televised sporting events—particularly soccer matches—to manifest their rejection of a society that has rejected them. By asserting themselves as violent actors in a mass spectacle, one of whose features is the symbolic neutralization of violence, hooligans undermine the legitimacy of the society against which they are rebelling.

The most important theme addressed in these essays, particularly those dealing with the past century, is the mythologization of sport, which goes to the question of why and how sport has emerged as such an important cultural phenomenon in modern societies. Vigarello argues that, from the late nineteenth century, sport has been actively presented by the media, economic actors, and politicians, and understood by the mass public, as an idealized social space. Sport is a *contre-société*^[4] in which the core values of modern democratic societies reign unopposed: equality of opportunity and meritocracy (based on objectively measured performance), justice (the impartiality of referees) and moral purity (the absence of corruption), progress and efficiency (improved equipment and training methods). Sport is thus the one domain where such societies are true to their ideals. The power of this mythologized vision of sport, particularly in secular western societies where other forms of transcendence are largely lacking, explains why champion athletes are seen as heroes: to have triumphed in such a pure environment—as opposed to the corrupt, discredited world of business or politics—is a sign not only of physical skill, but of the highest moral character. Of course, in addition to the athletes themselves, such an image serves other interests: the media that cover competitions; companies that sponsor events, teams, and athletes and hire the latter as corporate spokesmen; and politicians who seek to associate themselves with popular athletes in order to exploit the latter's prestige with their constituents.

Vigarello argues that as a result of the powerful interests served by this image of sport (and the uncritical attitude of most fans), this myth has proved remarkably resilient, even in the face of significant challenges. For example, the hypocrisy of "shamateurism" endured until quite recently in certain sports (notably track and field) as officially amateur athletes were paid under the table in order to maintain the fiction that their sport was a pure activity uncorrupted by crass economic considerations. Most recently, the issue of performance-enhancing doping, to which Vigarello devotes perhaps his best essay, has challenged the image of sport as a *contre-société* devoid of the human flaws and failures so apparent in other activities. As he shows, influential interest groups in the sports world—athletes, sponsors, federation officials, and the media—have typically contested, downplayed, and otherwise neutralized the threat posed by doping to the idealized image of sport, even when faced with mounting anecdotal and other evidence of the ubiquity of the practice among top-flight athletes. Vigarello argues convincingly that in such an environment only the state can effect change by intervening to uphold laws designed to address threats to public health, such as the illegal transport, sale, and consumption of dangerous drugs. The 1998 Tour de France doping scandal, which broke as a result of the actions of French customs officials, supports his view, as do numerous other instances in which sports organizations, like other institutions, have demonstrated an inability to police themselves.

Vigarello's argument about the elaboration and enduring appeal of this sports myth is compelling, but incomplete, in part because he presents the myth as the product of powerful converging interests, all of which are served by the idealized image of society sport provides. In fact, the history of sport suggests that there have been numerous competing myths about sport created to advance varied, often mutually exclusive visions of society. A consideration of gender, class, or race suggests the extent to which contradictions inherent in the myth of sport as the ideal, just, egalitarian, and meritocratic mirror image of an imperfect "real world" have been resoundingly exposed, and it becomes apparent that the interests

of diverse actors presumably served by the myth of a sportive *contre-société* frequently diverge. For example, sports in France and elsewhere have been essential vehicles for the construction and promotion of a binary gender order that celebrates a particularly virile form of masculinity from which women are explicitly excluded. But even in the early days of modern sport, women cyclists, for example, challenged such notions and were supported in their efforts by cycle manufacturers who realized that if female cycling became socially acceptable, they stood to double their potential customer base.[5] Curiously, Vigarello does not address women's sports in these essays and thus misses opportunities to nuance his treatment of the mythologization of sport.

Such considerations notwithstanding, *Du jeu ancien au show sportif* is an engagingly written, thought-provoking, and insightful meditation on the emergence of a phenomenon with important and wide-ranging implications. Readers interested in the ever-increasing place of leisure, sport, and the "heroic" athlete in contemporary mass consumer society will find the themes Vigarello addresses and the arguments he makes in this collection a most useful contribution.

NOTES

[1] For a non-exhaustive bibliography that reflects the diversity of Vigarello's research interests, see, for example, *Posture, espace et pédagogie* (Paris: Ed. Garnier frères, 1977); *Le corps redressé: histoire d'un pouvoir pédagogique* (Paris: J.P. Delarge, 1978); *L'Eau: un imaginaire pédagogique dans la médecine des enfants aux XVIe-XVIIe et XVIIIe siècles* (Firenze: Leo S. Olschki ed., 1982); *Le propre et le sale: l'hygiène du corps depuis le Moyen Age* (Paris: Seuil, 1985); *Une histoire culturelle du sport: techniques d'hier...et d'aujourd'hui* (Paris: Revue E.P.S.: Robert Laffont, 1988); *Le sain et le malsain: santé et mieux-être depuis le Moyen Age* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1993); and *Histoire du viol: XVIe-XXe siècle* (Paris: Seuil, 1998).

[2] Norbert Elias and Eric Dunning, *Quest for Excitement: Sport and Leisure in the Civilising Process* (Oxford and Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1986).

[3] Allen Guttman has argued that modern sport is distinguished from pre-modern games by seven characteristics: secularism; equality; specialization; rationalization; bureaucracy; quantification; and records. See Allen Guttman, *From Ritual to Record: The Nature of Modern Sports* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1978):15-55.

[4] As Vigarello notes, the term "*contre-société*" is borrowed from Bernard Jeu, "La contre-société sportive et ses contradictions" in *Esprit*, October 1973.

[5] I develop this argument in "Un troisième sexe? Les bourgeoises et la bicyclette dans la France fin de siècle" in *Le mouvement social*, no. 192 (July-September 2000): 9-39.

Christopher Thompson
Ball State University
cthomps@bsu.edu

Copyright © 2003 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical

Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for redistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of *H-France Review* nor re-publication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of *H-France*. The views posted on *H-France Review* are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies. ISSN 1553-9172