The Legacy of a Cultural Elite: The British Olympic Association.

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At the 1996 Olympics Britain finished thirty-sixth, but changes in the State's attitudes towards intervention resulted in an upwards trajectory that culminated in a second position in the medal table in 2016. The Government's willingness to invest through the National Lottery after 1996 had signalled a major shift in its approach towards elite sport and marked a turning point for many long-held traditions. This paper examines a significant influence on these traditions, the British Olympic Association (BOA), and its relationship with amateurism, a sporting philosophy espoused by the cultural elites who formed the BOA in 1905. Confident in their social and political status, this sporting aristocracy used their cultural power throughout the twentieth century to impose their own hegemonic version of how sport should be managed and the values that participants should espouse. This paper draws on a range of archives to illustrate the impact of this upper-class cultural elite on the development of Olympic sports in Britain. It discusses the formation and development of the BOA by this social elite and highlights the ways in which their legacy of class interests still resonates.

Class

As Pierre Bourdieu has pointed out, social classes constantly seek to accumulate capital in different forms. Economic capital is most easily thought of in terms of wealth, cultural capital in terms of artistic tastes, and social capital in terms of social connections. All class factions work at accumulating forms of capital to enhance their social positions and use social practices like sport to maximize their capital and reflect and reinforce class distinctions. Upper-class status groups are characterized by inherited wealth, a reverence for tradition, an allegiance to family and a tendency to conservatism. They accept high status as a birthright, and they can socially distance themselves and preserve their dominant position by converting economic capital into social and cultural wealth. Maintaining dignity is paramount and their preferred leisure pursuits stress manners, deportment, disinterestedness, refinement, self-control, and social distance. Their sports encompass strict rules of etiquette and ethical imperatives, which reflect their aesthetic tastes, and involve ideal-typical forms of 'body impression management'. In order to reinforce their status, the upper classes prefer leisure activities that can be performed at times and in places beyond the reach of other classes.[1]

Relative to the upper classes, the middle class have limited economic, social, and cultural capital. Social capital is sparse, because social connections require economic capital and time, while cultural capital is scarce because it takes time, money, and social connections, to train, educate and cultivate elite lifestyles. As a result, the middle classes generally focus on the future, on rising economically and socially, and tend to discipline their lives with precise amounts of time being allotted to work, play, family, religion. They adopt pragmatic, sensible and utilitarian values, such as self-restraint, discipline, frugality, and piety combined with individual competitiveness. Patterns of socialisation were common across the nineteenth-century professional middle classes who shared attitudes to speech patterns and modes of dress, while control of the body was manifested in the cult of health, characterised by sobriety, a moderate diet, anxiety about appearance, and an adherence to the amateur doctrine of active participation.[2]

Amateurism

Despite their inferior position with respect to social and cultural capital, the educated middle classes reproduced upper-class attitudes with respect to the way that sports should be played, partly because they had attended the same schools and universities as their social superiors. The creed adopted by both classes was 'Amateurism', an ethical moral value system that formed part of a 'civilizing' process of self-restraint and represented an extension of the 'athleticism' of the public schools and universities into the public arena. For the amateur sportsman, participation was as important as the outcome and the motivation to participate came from intrinsic rewards rather than extrinsic rewards of money and fame. The assumption was that a love of sport for its own sake would stimulate a climate of sportspersonship. It is important that the ethos and spirit of amateur sport should not be confused with these basic principles. The commonly accepted ways of playing the game such as ideals of honourable, dignified and respectable behaviour, not boasting in victory or complaining in defeat, not being too partisan, maintaining self-control and dignity, performing stylishly and

[1] Booth, D. and Loy, J. (1999). Sport, Status, and Style. *Sport History Review*, 30: 1-26.
[2] Ibid.

with courage, and a focus on the manner of victory being more important than the margin, were all a matter of being a gentleman than of strict compliance with amateur principles. In many respects, amateur sport thoroughly mixed up aristocratic and bourgeois cultures. The spirit or ethos was essentially aristocratic while the principles and structures reflected middle-class attitudes.

This combination of cultural approaches was replicated by the Olympic movement and when, in June 1894, 79 delegates from 13 countries and over 50 sports societies revived the Olympic Games they looked to Britain's Public Schools for relevant structures and a modern interpretation of ancient Greek ideals. Delegates entrusted the organization to an International Olympic Committee (IOC), which became the final arbiter in all matters concerning the Olympic movement. There was no pretence of democracy and the 15 committee members were selected by Coubertin who wanted these 'trustees' of the Olympic idea to be selected for their knowledge of sport and their social status. This was a self-perpetuating body, composed of financially independent men, who valued internationalism above nationalism. In many respects, Coubertin's IOC appeared to conform to Weber's ideal type of a formal, rationally organized bureaucracy with clearly defined goals and patterns of activity accompanied by acceptable regulations and controls functionally related to attainment of goals. However, Michel's 'iron law of oligarchy' is probably more pertinent given that oligarchy, rule by the few, arises even in the most idealistic of organizations, the ideals over time serving as mere rationalisations to preserve power in the hands of the few.[3]

British Olympic Association

The BOA was formed and structured along the same lines as the IOC and it adhered to the same principles. Two of the IOC members appointed by Coubertin were British. Charles Herbert, Honorary Secretary of the Amateur Athletic Association (AAA) was highly thought of by Coubertin, who described him as part of the 'immovable trinity' at the head of the IOC. Lord Ampthill, the son of the British Ambassador to Germany, was selected by Coubertin presumably because he felt he needed someone with more impressive social credentials than Herbert to represent Britain. Ampthill was an outstanding oarsman at Eton, where he first met Coubertin in 1888, and he rowed for Oxford University alongside another future IOC member, Theodore Cook. Ampthill was appointed Governor-General of Madras in 1900 and, like many influential persons in British sport, he was a prominent freemason.

The IOC held its fourth session in London in June 1904, an event organized by the then British representatives on the IOC, Sir Howard Vincent, the Rev Robert Stuart de Courcy Laffan, and Charles Herbert. The visit stimulated the formation of the British Olympic Association (BOA) in the House of Commons on 24 May 1905. Its remits were to spread knowledge of the Olympic movement in Britain, to guarantee that the views of British sporting associations were represented in the organization of the Olympic Games, and to ensure the participation in the Olympic Games and Congresses of accredited representatives of British sport. The committee was dominated by representatives of the privileged classes, particularly those key personnel who were also IOC members. Member of Parliament (MP) William Henry Grenfell, Lord Desborough of Taplow, was an IOC Member from 1906 to 1909 and BOA Chairman from 1905 to 1913. He was educated at Harrow and Oxford and an outstanding all-round sportsman who became chief organizer of the 1908 Olympics and President of five national governing bodies. The Rev. Robert Stuart de Courcy Laffan, an IOC member between 1899 and 1927, was Honorary Secretary of the BOA from 1905 to 1920 and acting Chairman between 1920 and 1922. He went to Winchester public school and Oxford, became a Church of England vicar and a public-school headmaster. Sir Theodore Andrea Cook, an IOC member from 1909 to 1915, was an oarsman and fencer who was best known as editor of the sporting periodical, *The Field.* Colonel Sir Howard Vincent went to Westminster school and Royal Military College, Sandhurst, before pursuing a career as a soldier and becoming an MP.[4]

Several other BOA members were MPs. Sir Lees Knowles was a politician and barrister who was educated at Rugby School and Cambridge where he was President of the Athletics Club. William Hayes Fisher, President of the National Skating Association, was a barrister and MP who was elected Chairman of the BOA in September 1919. Reginald Gridley, barrister and MP, who was rowing's representative on the BOA, went to Eton and rowed for Cambridge. Other members

[3] Tolbert, P. S. (2010). Robert Michels and the iron law of oligarchy [Electronic version]. Retrieved from Cornell University, ILR School site: http://digitalcommons.ilr.cornell.edu/articles/397/

[4] Barker, Philip (2005) 'The British Olympic Association 1905-2005 - A Chronology', *Journal of Olympic History* 13(2): 64-72.

had social capital through their connections to Oxford University. Lord Montagu of Beaulieu had rowed at Oxford, while Colonel Sir Henry Walrond, honorary secretary of the Royal Toxophilite Society, and Captain Alfred Hutton, president of the Amateur Fencing Association, had attended Oxford before pursuing their military careers.[5]

At the time of the London Games in 1908 little seems to have changed. Lord Desborough was Chairman and de Courcy Laffan was still Honorary Secretary while several other founding members were still on the Committee which had now been extended, partly to facilitate the organization of the Games. While this expansion created the potential for a degree of democratisation in the BOA that never occurred because the cultural elite retained control of key committee positions with the first six presidents and ten of its first thirteen chairpersons holding aristocratic titles.[6] This elitism was reflected by the large proportion of university men in the track and field team at Stockholm in 1912, leading one critic to observe that, 'Caste rules the world of athletes and all is snobbery...At present the whole tendency seems to be that only public school and university men shall have all the chances. Those who control the British contribution to the Olympic Games would like to see Britain represented by nice young men with nice pedigrees and splendid educations.'[7]

Inter-War Period

Harold Perkin described inter-war society as being in a 'transitional stage, a sort of halfway house in which remnants of Victorianism…co-existed with harbingers of the future'[8] and this applied to aspects of social, cultural, political and economic life, including sport, where class dynamics continued to exert a powerful influence. When the BOA met in Russell Square in September 1919, the aristocrat Lord Downham was installed as Chairman, and when the BOA investigated the state of track and field athletics in 1923 its Commission, headed by aristocrat Lord Decies, was sprinkled with University and military men, reflecting the composition of the BOA itself. In 1926, a later BOA chairman and IOC member Lord Rochdale took advantage of the new medium of radio to give a talk on the Olympics and by the time of the Berlin Olympics Lord Burghley, already an IOC member, had become BOA chairman. As the aristocracy had always done in all aspects of their lives, the BOA leaders used acceptable middle-class individuals as servants to administer their Olympic project. These amateur administrators had often attended the same schools and universities and they shared the same sporting philosophy. Examples abound. John Wadmore was manager of the 1928 Olympic Team in Amsterdam, where Denis Lyons acted as a referee, and Arthur Turk, the 'Grand Old Man' of British athletics and a life vice-president of the AAA, oversaw the 1932 and 1936 Olympic teams.[9] For both the aristocracy and the bourgeoisie, amateurism continued to be the underlying philosophical imperative. In May 1923, the Official Bulletin of the IOC included a simple questionnaire from de Courcy-Laffan designed to help readers understand what it meant to be a sportsman.[10] Appropriate amateur behaviour remained the benchmark in the 1930s. Following poor performances at the 1936 Games, apologists for the team argued that British athletes had competed as a 'gentleman' should.[11]

Government Intervention

Despite significant changes in English society, amateurism continued to exercise a powerful grip over the practice and administration of British sport after 1945,[12] and the cultural elite continued to control Britain's Olympic movement. On 7 May 1951, Lord Luke of Pavenham was appointed as an IOC member to replace Sir Noel Curtis-Bennett. After schooling at Eton, he went up to Cambridge University where he was a notable athlete and oarsman. He was director of several commercial companies, a trustee of various leading charities and, like two of his predecessors on the IOC, General R. J. Kentish and Sir Noel Curtis-Bennett, he was Chairman of the National Playing Fields Association. He retired from the IOC at the age of 83 to make way for Princess Anne, who competed at the 1976 Montreal Games when another aristocrat, Lord Rupert Nevill led the delegation as Team Commandant. This BOA cultural elite consistently resisted both

[5] Ibid.
[6] K. S. Duncan, 'Great Britain and Olympism,' *Olympic Review* 99-100 (January-February 1976), 54-91.
[7] 'Ill Training and Snobbery in British Athletics,' *The Literary Digest* 45 (August 31, 1912), 30.
[8] Perkin, Harold (1989). *The Rise of Professional Society: England since 1880*. (Oxon: Routledge), 1989.218
[9] *Star Green 'un*, 10 August 1957, 8.
[10] R.S. de Courcy-Laffan, 'Are You A Sportsman?' May 31, 1923. Official Bulletin of the IOC
[11] See *Daily Express*, August 14, 1936, 3; *Daily Mirror*, August 14, 1936, 3; *Observer*, August 16, 1936, 12.
[12] Baker, Neil. 'Whose Hegemony? The Origins of the Amateur Ethos in Nineteenth Century English Society.' *Sport in History* 24(1), (2004): 14.

commercialisation and professionalism,[13] even during the 1950s and 1960s, which witnessed a growing interest in the pursuit of excellence, partly due to Britain's steady 'decline' in international competition.[14] Any developments, however, remained contingent on persuading those whose sporting lives had been dictated by their allegiance to amateurism, such as Roger Bannister, who argued in 1955 that 'To regard sport as a hobby is surely more of a virtue than a vice',[15] that they needed to compromise and this was always going to be difficult. In the end, the effective challenge to the legacy left by this high-status group came from an even more powerful influence, the government.

In 1959, the Foreign Office acknowledged that the Olympics had 'immense prestige and offer a unique stage for the demonstration of national prowess',[16] while the 1960 Wolfenden Report recognised that international sporting contacts had the potential to 'yield rich dividends in international understanding'.[17] Eventually, the British government was persuaded to intervene more directly in elite sport, moving it away from the control of the upper-class elite, although it was not until the 1990s that government reports and strategic documents started to make an impact, a process accelerated by the IOC awarding the Games to London in 2005. UK Sport, the government organization responsible for developing elite-level sport, was established in 1997 and authorised to distribute lottery funding. In 2017 to 2018, UK Sport's total expenditure was £157.7 million, nearly 94% of this in grants and related payments to NGBs, athletes and major events.[18] Despite criticisms, the focused investment of the last twenty years has resulted in a marked change in British Olympic fortunes and the elite sporting agenda shows no signs of deviating from the established template.[19]

Reflections

The powerful influence of the British class system was constantly reflected in the way in which amateur principles were applied by a cultural elite during the twentieth century and it is no surprise that, despite a shift in emphasis to government-sponsored bureaucratic rationalisation, the legacy of that cultural elite maintains a powerful presence. A study of over 1,400 elite athletes at the beginning of the twenty-first century identified that 20% had been educated in private schools and that the proportion of elite athletes emerging from higher social class families was much higher than from any other groups. In the 2012 Games, 35% of British medallists had attended an independent school and in 2016 this figure was 31%. Over half (52%) of medal winning rowers attended fee-paying schools in 2016, along with 50% of the winning women's hockey team. Team GB have been frequently lauded for their success at 'sitting down sports', including rowing, cycling, sailing and equestrianism, which are sports historically associated with higher social classes and involve specialised and frequently expensive equipment and facilities. The role of independent schools in many such sports is reflected in the fact that an Old Etonian has won a medal in these sports at every Olympic Games since 1992. Funding has been increasingly targeted at such sports, on the basis that they offer the best chance of medals, and this approach has achieved substantial international success, although questions have been raised about whether this has come at the expense of funding more widely played and accessible sports. Even at participation levels of sport, socio-economic background and education levels have been shown to be significantly associated with regular sporting activity.[20] None of this should really be a surprise given that narrow class interests still dominate the wider social and political landscape. Britain remains a class-ridden society. Of the 26 Prime Ministers since 1885, 9 have come from Eton, 15 went to Oxford University (including 11 out of the last 15) and 3 to Cambridge. The current British Cabinet is the most privately educated for over a generation with 64 per cent having attended private school and 45 per cent having attended Oxbridge (Cambridge and Oxford Universities).

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[13] Ibid.
[14] Anthony Don (1980). *A Strategy for British Sport* London: C Hurst & Co.
[15] Bannister, Roger (1955). *First Four Minutes*. Putnam, 161.
[16] PRO: TNA: FO371/145547/W1801, Foreign Office to H.M. representatives overseas, 16 July 1959; Krüger, Arndt (1993), 'On the Origins of the Notion that Sport Serves as a Means of National Representation.' *History of European Ideas*, 16: 863–7; Beck, Peter (2005). 'Britain and the Cold War's 'Cultural Olympics': Responding to the Political Drive of Soviet Sport, 1945–58', *Contemporary British History* 19(2): 169–185.
[17] Wolfenden Report (1960). *Sport and the Community*. London: Eyre & Spottiswood, 73-76.
[18] UK Sport 'The National Lottery'. https://www.uksport.gov.uk/about-us/partners/the-national-lottery. Accessed 28.09.2019.
[19] UK Sport. 'Investing in Sport', http://www.uksport.gov.uk/our-work/investing-in-sport. Accessed 01.09.2018.
[20] The Sutton Trust (2019). *Elitist Britain The Educational Backgrounds of Britain's Leading People*, 81.