

■ NOTE DE LECTURE

■ PEUT-ON DONNER UNE DÉFINITION DU SPORT ?

Sébastien Darbon

Les fondements du système sportif : essai d'anthropologie historique

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As an anthropologist with a strong commitment to ethnography and to history, Sébastien Darbon has a special place in the study of sport. There is no-one else who does quite what he does. His work on French rugby, for which he is primarily known, has been justly praised. His work is marked by its empirical rigour and lucidity of thought. He also writes fluently and clearly. More recently, he has turned his attention to British sport. His overview of *Diffusion des sports et impérialisme anglo-saxon*¹ [2008] is an important work of synthesis, especially for a non-anglophone audience, which surprisingly has no equivalent in English. Finally, there is his special edition of *Ethnologie Française*² which explored sports diffusion from an interdisciplinary perspective and laid the foundations for the volume reviewed here.

In *Les fondements du système sportif : essai d'anthropologie historique*, Darbon considers how to define and explain the structure of “modern sport” but which he insists on simply calling “sport.” This is a big subject and an ambitious book, which seeks to establish the place of “sport” in the modern world by identifying key characteristics which differentiate it from what is generally termed “traditional sports” and which he calls “jeux athlétiques.” In many ways, this is a very French book. It is driven above all by a need for precise meanings based on general principles. He insists there must be a clear definition of something which has generally—and for good reasons—defied simple definition.

Whilst he admires British empiricism, especially its stress on firm historical evidence, Darbon cannot

accept its conceptual vagueness. When it comes to sport, British historians have tended to take the view that “if it looks like a duck, walks like a duck and quacks like a duck, it’s probably a duck.” In other words, you know sport when you see it and there is little to be gained by trying to pin down exactly what “it” is. The complex realities of different sports mean there will never be a definition which encompasses casual physical exercise and high performance entertainment, individual and team activities, participation and spectating, let alone the infinite kinetic and affective differences within and between activities. Hence most anglophone scholars have settled for an implicit definition, generally along the following lines: “sport” is a term used to describe pleasurable, usually competitive and organized activities, requiring varying combinations of skill, contact and effort, which may or may not have a professional and spectator dimension; or some such loose formulation. From this, it follows that serious students of sport, especially historians, should avoid conceptual speculation and concentrate on providing good work on specific sports from a broadly socio-cultural perspective.

Darbon admires this body of work but disagrees with its premise. He is determined to give us a clear and nuanced definition whether we want it or not. In doing so he focusses primarily and in the broadest sense on the *regulatory and organizational* aspects of sport. He explains how such a definition can be constructed and historically validated. In doing so, he is explicitly engaging with the pioneering work of Allen Guttman, whose *From Ritual to Record: the nature of modern sports*³ [1978] has been arguably the most influential academic book published on sport in English in the last generation.

Guttman relies strongly on Max Weber, who wrote nothing about sport but provided a framework for locating modernity in terms of the rise of scientific and bureaucratic rationality. Applying this big idea to sport, its standardization and organization form a small part of a far-reaching general transformation of western society. Both states and civil society were increasingly subject to ‘rational’ systems and structures as opposed to personal inclination or customary practice.

Accordingly, Guttman drew up a list of seven characteristics which differentiated “traditional” from “modern” forms of sport: secularism; equality of opportunity to compete; specialization of roles;

1. Sébastien Darbon, 2008, *Diffusion des sports et impérialisme anglo-saxon*, Paris, Éditions de la MSH.

2. *Ethnologie française*, 2011, XLI, 4.

3. Allen Guttman, 2004 [1978], *From Ritual to Record: The Nature of Modern Sports*, New York, Columbia University Press.

rationalization; bureaucratic organization; quantification; and the quest for records. He then commented in turn on the process of transition from ‘traditional’ to modern’ under these headings. His commentary on each of these criteria, however, varied substantially and surprisingly with, for example, a much fuller discussion of “the sacred and the secular” (ten pages) than “bureaucratization” (two and a half) despite the fact that organizational change was central to his thesis. Establishing a definition of modern sports was only one part of Guttmann’s purpose and the rest of the book is largely devoted to comparing American and European sport, leaving Darbon plenty of space to work on the crucial question of the transition from ancient to modern.

In short, *From Ritual to Record* is good on the Greeks and on the twentieth century, especially the United States, but says much less about what happened in between, especially the crucial period in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries when the structural reforms he identifies came into being. This is the challenge Darbon takes up, re-working and reducing Guttmann’s seven criteria of modernity to five, which distinguish “sport” from its previous incarnation as “jeux athlétiques” and which *taken together* constitute what he calls “le système sportif.” These criteria are as follows: (i) the setting down of precise *rules* to be universally applied; (ii) the creation of *institutions* to apply those rules; (iii) the principle of equality of competition; (iv) the creation of specific sporting “space,” which Darbon calls “l’innovation la plus spectaculaire qui a permis de transformer les jeux athlétiques en sports” and which “curieusement n’a pas été directement abordée par Guttmann” [17]; (v) the role of “time” and the establishing of specific durations for different sports. It is central to Darbon’s argument that these five criteria are *inter-dependent* and that it is this mutual reinforcement over time which creates the “system.”

Thus, while sports may vary in numerous physical and social respects, in the key organizational and regulatory respects they are more or less the same. He argues—rightly in my view—that this extraordinary global standardization of cultural practice has not been given the central importance it deserves. We have been more interested in the narcissism of small differences than the striking similarities of sporting rules and structures. Variations between national cultures are seen as more important than the shared structures that bind them together. For example, Darbon urges us to look afresh at association football—“the world

game”—played under the same rules, in the same defined spaces and for the same duration across all continents. He thinks we take this astonishing global standardization too much for granted. After all, such uniformity does not apply to other forms of culture such as music, dance or art despite the best efforts of global capitalist media and mass consumer culture.

Darbon does much more than simply revise Guttmann’s list of criteria and stress their necessary inter-connections. This is a complex “definition” which allows for the varying combination of its constituent parts according to the activity and the period concerned. Most importantly, he provides a detailed historical account of how his five criteria for the definition of “sport” came into being in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in Great Britain (with limited reference to the United States and deliberately excluding any discussion of continental Europe). This is a book about British, and mainly English, sports history. Darbon shows the “system” emerged not as a complete set of principles imposed from above but by what he terms “a myriad of local micro-decisions”—his book, he insists, is about the gradual “*elaboration*” of a template for sport in Britain and not about its subsequent global diffusion [212].

This is extremely important. He is fully aware that the men—and they were all men—who created “sport” in its modern form did not *know* they were creating a “sports system” while they were doing so. They were simply responding *ad hoc* to the opportunities thrown up by time and circumstances: i.e. the emergence of a newly affluent elite culture based on the remarkable growth of the agrarian, commercial and industrial wealth of eighteenth century Britain. New sporting possibilities, especially opportunities for gambling, required common rules to be formulated and special organizations (“sports clubs”) such as the Jockey Club (1750), The Royal and Ancient Golf Club of St Andrews (1754) or the Marylebone Cricket Club (1787) to be set up. These clubs gradually took control, often in an accidental and incremental way, of their respective sports; they slowly established—and then periodically revised—the rules and general conditions of play (notably the prescription of space and time which Darbon stresses as especially important). Whilst contingency was important, the underlying pattern was clear.

This was the “first” sporting revolution to be followed by a “second” and arguably more important transformation in the later nineteenth century when

the private club as an organizational model was replaced by representative national “unions” or “associations.” These were formally constituted bodies with elected officers comprising a number of fee-paying member clubs; for example, the Football Association (1863), the Rugby Football Union (1871) and the Amateur Athletic Association (1880). These organizations—and the many like them founded at the same time—correspond more closely to a Weberian form of rational administration than earlier form, which nonetheless survived and flourished. It was the “associational” form which was widely copied around the world. Given its central importance in his argument, Darbon could say more about the crucial shift to “voluntary association” in the default principle of organisation. To do this he needs wider reference to the general reorganization of Victorian society through the creation of a host of voluntary associations to regulate the liberal professions or lobby for social reform. Everyone was getting “organized” in new ways, including political parties themselves, and sport was no exception. This was the “age of association” par excellence—and the book needs more contextualization at this point.

Darbon explicitly rejects the idea of an “evolution” of sporting forms, which he detects in Guttmann’s truncated account of the transition from traditional to modern. He stresses the difference between what he terms “filiation” (direct connection) and “resemblance” (similarities between old and new forms). Traditional or “folk” football, for example, was a contest between rival groups moving a ball over a contested territory whilst the new sport of association football in its professional form was also based on the power of local identity. But for Darbon that is where the similarities cease. He stresses that such “resemblances” do *not* mean there is a direct connection—a key point to which we shall return. On the contrary, he insists that there was a clean break with the past in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and that this ‘rupture’ involved not only the writing down of rules but also the re-defining of ludic space and time. Here he echoes the comments of a host of social historians of sport in emphasising modern sport’s striking departure from the old world of locality and orality; of customary rules, sites and times for “jeux athlétiques.”

How do these ideas measure up to subsequent research? Work which was in progress as Darbon was writing his book has in several cases provided broad confirmation of his ideas. If we take the example of association football whilst there is plenty of evidence

of “football” before the formation of the Football Association (Darbon’s “resemblances”), there is little or no evidence of a direct connection (“filiation”) between the old and the new. So in general terms the latest work backs up Darbon’s analysis by making it clear that both association football and rugby were the product of elite public school-based innovation without significant input from pre-existing forms of popular sporting culture.

The leading authority on the history of rugby, Tony Collins, for example, implicitly backs Darbon’s thesis in a detailed critique of evolutionary claims for continuity between earlier forms of football and the modern codes of association and rugby football. It turns out these really were “invented” in the public schools after all. There *was* a “rupture” with the past. Collins exhaustive research also provides numerous examples of Darbon’s notion of gradual ‘elaboration’ in which contingency and historical circumstance play their part in the emergence of the “sports system”.⁴

Similarly, Gavin Kitching, who has examined almost 400 early match reports, finds virtually no evidence of continuity between traditional and modern forms. However, like Collins, he endorses Darbon’s nuanced view that this dramatic change did not happen overnight and that the new sports of association football and rugby football were very closely related in the 1860s and 1870s with frequent cases of teams mixing the two codes in one match.⁵ Standardisation took time. The governing bodies adjusted the rules to suit the needs of players and spectators—Darbon insists on the importance of spectators from the start. However, within twenty years or so the ‘system’ was in place for each sport and has remained relatively unchanged in its essentials.

I have three general reservations about what is in many respects a pioneering and impressive book. The first is, as I have indicated, from the purely historical point of view, Darbon needs wider and richer reference to nineteenth century British economic, social, cultural and political history; the same could also be said of the eighteenth century, explaining the necessary conditions for the emergence of the privileged group of patrons and players, who unknowingly were

4. Tony Collins, 2015, “Early football and the Emergence of Modern Soccer, c. 1840–1880”, *International Journal of the History of Sport*, online 29 May 2015: 1–16.

5. Gavin Kitching, 2015, “The origins of football: Ideology and the Making of ‘the People’s Game’” *History Workshop Journal*, 79, February: 127–153.

developing what became a “sports system.” Although he makes a persuasive case from a selective reading, there are gaps; not simply in the large body of new work on general history (which perhaps even the most assiduous anthropologist could not expect to master) but also in some specialised sports research. Dennis Brailsford,⁶ who almost single-handedly transformed the history of eighteenth century sport, comes especially to mind amongst several others. He is too reliant on reference works such as Arlott’s *Oxford Companion to Sports and Games*,⁷ which, though generally reliable, is forty years old.

A second problem with the book concerns difference and similarity. Although ‘soccer’ and ‘rugby’ began as similar sports with relatively little difference in tactics or physical contact, they evolved quite differently with one generally focussed on physical contact and the other inclined to restrict it. In time they became strikingly different sports, though still sharing team-based inter-passing skills and the opportunities for individual brilliance; some things are shared, some are not and Darbon’s definition does not require such binary oppositions. But rugby requires precisely the hard and constant direct physical contact that football, though aerobic and often robust, completely forbids.

Such differences are even more obvious when comparing two successful sports in the United States: it would be hard to think of two activities more different than American football and golf, although they share similar forms of organization. But their governance is not what is interesting about them. Similarly sports which involve direct physical combat—martial arts, wrestling, boxing—as opposed to non-combat sports such as tennis or athletics, suggest it is not their rules, organization or their use of time and space which is most important, but their strikingly divergent attitudes to the body. So when we say that different activities are all forms of “sport” we are not really saying very much. Definitions can only take us so far. The main intellectual interest of sports lies precisely in those aspects of their practice and values, which are unique or form

part of a wider pattern culture—and as such necessarily fall outside of a general definition. This brings us back to the kinds of things historians of sport have always tended to study. Darbon’s own research on rugby is a good example, showing a powerful grasp of the role of sport in male socialization together with careful attention not only to gender but to a wide range of class and ethnicity issues.

My third reservation is about what is necessarily excluded. If “sport” is only to include those parts of it which are “institutionalized”, i.e. part of a formal network of organized clubs whether private or school based which in turn are part of national and international associations, what place is there for recreational sport? What about the informal game of park football, “hitting” with a friend on the tennis court, a few solitary holes of golf on a summer evening, a run around the streets or along the beach, a bike ride in the country? Logically, these and other similar activities fall outside Darbon’s definition of “sport” as they are clearly outside the intricate organizational web of the sports system. And yet for the many of who enjoy “sport”—myself included—this kind of physical activity is at one end of a spectrum which has professional sport at the other. It feels as if it’s all part of the same thing. To deny this is to put the need for formal definition and conceptual rigour above our living experience of the thing itself. One can’t help thinking of that old anglo-saxon jibe about French intellectuals, “never mind if it works in practice, does it work in theory?”

To conclude, despite these reservations, Darbon has done an extremely important job of clearing the ground. We can see more clearly now whether we agree with him or not. It is to his credit that he has attempted what few, since Guttmann, have dared to do. The five criteria which make up his “definition” are sensible and flexible in their historical application. This is what he means by an “essai d’anthropologie historique,” fusing the anthropologist’s focus on the common properties of different activities and the historian’s concern to find clear empirical evidence of how different sports developed differently. In achieving a synthesis of these two apparently conflicting approaches, he puts flesh on the bones of Guttmann’s binary opposition between “traditional” and “modern.” This is a major achievement. It is the product of years of careful reflection and research on a central question for our culture. As such it deserves a wide readership and support for an English translation from a British or American academic publisher.

6. Amongst Brailsford’s numerous publications, the most significant for Darbon’s work are: Dennis Brailsford, 1991, *Sport, Time and Society: the British at Play*, Cambridge, The Lutterworth Press; and Dennis Brailsford, 1999, *A Taste for Diversions: Sport in Georgian England*, Cambridge, the Lutterworth Press.

7. John Arlott (ed.), 1975, *The Oxford Companion to Sports and Games*, Oxford, Oxford University Press; Darbon would have found a valuable supplement to Arlott in the reference work by J.A. Cuddon, 1980, *The Macmillan Dictionary of Sports and Games*, London, Macmillan Press.