

Alienation

The word 'alienation' has a general usage and it usually refers to a state of detachment – of 'feeling out of things'. In sociology, and in the history of social thought, it has a more specific meaning. This derives from the work of Karl Marx on life under capitalism and, in particular, from his *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844* (Marx, 1959). Marx interprets the term in four related ways and these are set out in the *Dictionary of Sociology* as follows: (a) workers become estranged from the products of their own labour, which are owned and disposed of by someone else; (b) work itself becomes an alien activity with no intrinsic satisfaction. People work in order to live, rather than to express themselves, and their labour becomes a commodity; (c) the worker is thus deprived of the opportunity to become fully human and; (d) human beings are alienated from each other. They are individuals in competition, their relationships having been shaped by the market (Abercrombie et al., 2000: 11–12).

'Alienation' as a concept had a wide currency in European philosophy in the nineteenth century, but, following the Russian Revolution of 1917 the opportunity arose to address human alienation through political practice. In the early 1920s groups of intellectuals in Russia campaigned to transform Russian culture and to place it in the service of the proletariat (the working class) and of Soviet communism. Prominent among these was the Proletarian Cultural and Enlightenment Organizations or *Proletkult* who, along with the Hygienists, who were campaigners for physical and mental health, called for an end to competitive sport. As historian Robert Edelman notes: 'They preferred instead what they called 'production gymnastics, excursions, and pageants'. At times they invented specifically proletarian games, two of which were 'Rescue from the Imperialists' and 'Smuggling Revolutionary Literature across the Frontier' (Edelman, 1993: 34). These groups and their ideas had some influence in early Soviet Russia, but, by the late 1920s with the communist party now under the authoritarian leadership of Josef Stalin, the Soviet Union drifted back towards 'bourgeois practices'. In 1952, a year before Stalin's death, they competed in their first Olympic Games (see Parks, 2007: 27–44).

Nevertheless, during the 1930s, the Soviet Union helped to sponsor a workers' sport movement in Europe whose explicit aim was to preserve sport for the healthy recreation of the masses and to keep it safe from the incursions of competitiveness, commercialism and nationalism. Indeed, alternative 'Workers' Olympics', dedicated to internationalism, worker solidarity and peace, were staged in Frankfurt in 1925, Vienna in 1931 and Antwerp in 1937. One tournament, scheduled for Barcelona in 1936, was prevented from taking place by the Spanish Civil War and another, planned for Helsinki in 1943 was cancelled because of World War Two (Riordan, 1984: 98–112). Some communist countries, however, still sought to prevent sport becoming marketised or unduly competitive. In the mid 1970s, for example, China under Mao Zedong still sought to maintain a policy of 'Friendship first, competition second' (see Hoberman, 1984: 222).

Two things are clear, though, when we consider the concept of alienation in relation to contemporary sport. One is that, historically, this is an issue in both philosophy and politics on which sections of the left and the right could make common cause: it is after all, a fundament both of Victorian gentlemanly amateurism and of internationalist worker sport that sport must not be practised with intensity and should instead promote the refreshment and 're-creation' of the individual. The other is that much sport in the early twenty-first century has assumed a form that approximates closely to the condition of alienation, as set out by Marx in the 1840s. This, for some leading writers in the area, evokes a singular irony because it was the Soviet Union, a proclaimed Marxist state, which in the 1930s led the way in applying scientific, achievement-oriented rationality to sport. Most countries today have, or aspire to have, academies for their most gifted athletes and train them toward elite performance. These academies, while still disparaged in the West, were pioneered in the USSR. The wedding of sport, science and commercialism has accelerated since World War Two (Beamish and Ritchie, 2006). As John Hoberman remarks acidly in the mid-1980s, sport has become 'the one international culture which is developing in accordance with a Communist model' (1986: 11).

The political and intellectual response to this development has been diverse. In the mid-1970s the French Marxist writer Jean-Marie Brohm (1978) published *Sport: A Prison of Measured Time* – arguably the plainest and least nuanced exposition of sport as an alienated activity in modern, industrialised societies in the second half of the twentieth century. Brohm argued:

The competitive sportsman is a *new type of worker* who sells his labour power – that is to say his ability to produce a spectacle that draws the crowds – to an employer. The exchange value of his labour power, governed by the law of supply and demand on the market, is determined by the labour time socially necessary for its production. Amateurism ceased to exist a long time ago. All top level sportsmen are professional performers in the muscle show. They are also very often advertising ‘sandwich board’ men. (1978: 176).

Brohm made no distinction between capitalist and communist societies in this regard. Of the German Democratic Republic he wrote:

A look at the sports system brings to mind a sports factory or a sports barracks: sport has become an essential productive force. Such a penetration of competitive sport into all spheres of society has turned E. Germany into a vast sports laboratory or sports enterprise – some would go as far as to say a sports prison’ (1978: 79–80).

But the leading writer on the matter of sport and alienation, while perceptibly angry at what he sees as the perversions of modern elite sport, has nevertheless written consistently out of the belief that something in the way of fair play and honest sporting endeavour could be salvaged from the wreckage. John Hoberman is an American academic, trained originally in Scandinavian languages. His work has combined prodigious scholarship on the history both of sport and science with an often emotive vocabulary, withering in its condemnation of cheating sportspeople and vacillating bureaucrats. The title of Hoberman’s principal work in this area – *Mortal Engines: The Science of Performance and the Dehumanization of Sport* (1992) is largely self-explanatory and ties the author, if not to the Marxian notion of alienation, at least to the nineteenth-century humanist philosophy from which it was developed. The book is a detailed historical account of the ways in which scientific intervention has disfigured sport across a range of countries and social systems. Early on in *Mortal Engines* Hoberman acknowledges the difficulty in countering the ‘relativizing strategy’ which styles ‘doping’ as simply one performance enhancement among many. ‘Why, then’, he asks, ‘should one technique be banned while others are allowed? A rebuttal must show why some techniques violate the essence of sport while others do not’ (1992: 26–7). Hoberman, of course, has his own rebuttals – he argues, for example, that steroids are different because ‘they affect the human endocrinological system, which is

the physiological basis of gender and sexual functioning' (1992: 27), but the very existence of this philosophical grey area is, for him, evidence of 'scientific ambition out of control' and a 'bioethical crisis of high-performance sport today' (1992: 28).

Six years later, with this perceived crisis apparently deepening, Hoberman reflected angrily on the Tour de France cycle race of 1998, from which the Festina team had been expelled for illegal drug use. In an article ironically appearing on *Meso-Rx*, a website for bodybuilders and other steroid users, Hoberman denounced the event as 'a pharmacy on wheels'. 'The Tour debacle', he wrote, 'has finally made it acceptable to say in public and without provocation what many have known for a long time, namely, that long-distance cycling has been the most consistently drug-soaked sport of the twentieth century' (Møller and Nauright, 2002). This recognition, though, and the riders' general response – peeved rather than contrite – only increased Hoberman's anger with the sponsors and administrators who had tacitly accepted the situation. The expulsions, he gloomily reflected, had come as the result of an

unprecedented crackdown presided over by a Communist (female) health minister in the cabinet of the socialist prime minister Lionel Jospin... They were dumbfounded precisely because everyone involved, including the press, had been playing the game for so long in the interest of doing business as usual. And why does it matter that the health minister [Marie-Georges Buffet, leader of the French Communist Party] is a Communist? Because the only politicians in Europe who want to deploy the long arm of the law against doping, whether in France, Italy or Germany, are leftists or Greens who do not share the sportive nationalism of their conservative countrymen – the patriots who have always been willing to look the other way in the interest of keeping up with foreigners who just might be using drugs. (Møller and Nauright, 2002).

National sporting elites and the financial backers on whom they depended could, it was implied, no longer be relied upon to preserve even a vestige of post-Victorian fair play: quoting a *New York Times* article on the affair from October of 1998, Hoberman reflected ruefully 'Festina actually reported "that the scandal had a positive effect on sales of its watches and that it would pay the team's \$5 million expenses again next year"' (1998).

The following year at a conference on doping in North Carolina, Hoberman expressed his indignation that, following the Festina scandal,

leading administrators had called for milder penalties for dopers and for sportspeople to be treated as workers, with their own labour laws. He lent his full support to proposals for an international anti-doping body, which materialised later that year in the form of the World Anti-Doping Agency (WADA) (1999). In 2005, Hoberman published *Testosterone Dreams*, a book in which he gives perhaps greater acknowledgement than hitherto to the medicalisation of everyday life and the ways in which 'People can feel obligated to dope themselves for military, professional or sexual purposes' (2005: 4). Thus sport takes its place alongside the pursuit of greater industrial productivity, military efficiency, extended youth and physical attractiveness as matters which have become the province of medical doctors, scrupulous and otherwise.

John Hoberman's work can be read as expressing a passionate belief that modern sport could, in some way and to some degree, be re-humanised and thus saved from its corrupt and over-scientised self. All that is needed, it is implied, are better safeguards to root out the cheats and indulgent officials. Hoberman seems frequently to draw a line in the sand, only to have it washed away by the next tide of pharmacological transgressions. In their *Fastest, Highest, Strongest*, Rob Beamish and Ian Ritchie, other leading writers in the field, take a more dispassionate view of elite sport. They note how at the headquarters of the sports firm Nike, in Portland, Oregon, in the early twenty-first century there took place 'the latest development in the total integration of commercial marketing interests, vast private sector resources, patriotism, cutting-edge science and technology and world-class, high-performance sport' (Beamish and Ritchie, 2006: 105): Nike assembled some promising runners and maintained them in an hermetically sealed environment, every physical aspect of which had been scientifically controlled to procure optimal performance (Beamish and Ritchie, 2006: 105). Were they alive today, nineteenth-century thinkers such as Marx might have thought that, in advanced capitalist sport, alienation was complete. However, Beamish and Ritchie cannot accept concepts such as 'the essence of sport' or 'true sport' – concepts which, as we saw, power the work of writers such as Hoberman. Their dismissal of these notions comes out of two, linked convictions: first, that myths surround such purportedly carefree, amateur sporting achievements of the late nineteenth and early to mid-twentieth centuries, such as the founding of the modern Olympics or the running of the first sub-four minute mile in 1954 and, second, that sport can, ultimately, only be what human beings say that it is – it has no 'essence' or 'authenticity' beyond that (Beamish and Ritchie, 2006: 112–15; see also Bale, 2004).

Some philosophers and sociologists are prepared to go further and embrace the technological innovations and to dismiss the notion that there might be a 'natural body' or a state of mind that was intrinsically human. The humanist philosophy of the nineteenth century is thus rejected in favour of 'posthumanism' and 'transhumanism'. As a result, in academic commentary on sport, terms such as 'cyborg athlete' and 'genetically modified athlete' are gaining currency. Andy Miah, for example, writes:

sport is already posthuman. Athletes have already metamorphosed into super-humans, blurred suitably by the softening presentation of modern television. Athletes are ambassadors of transhumanism, placed at the cutting edge of human boundaries of capability. The athlete's body is in a state of flux, continually transcending itself, and thus, perpetuating transhuman ideas about the biophysics of humanity. For this reason, elite sport is a useful case from which one can justify the acceptance of transhumanism. (2003)

The culture of advanced capitalist societies affords little space for the idea of alienation; these societies are governed increasingly by the politics of identity, in which, it is asserted, people can become what they wish to become. Many people are therefore likely to warm to the idea of a mutating sporting body, seeking, and seeking to exceed, its known limits. For others of a Marxian persuasion, outside of skimming a Frisbee round the park on a Sunday afternoon or playing beach cricket with their families, un-alienated sport will be increasingly difficult to find.

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Amateurism

The word 'amateur' is French in origin and derives from the Latin word for 'love' – the same root that gave us the English word 'amorous'. It was therefore used originally to describe someone who pursued an activity solely for the love of it. Amateurism is generally seen as an English phenomenon (Allison, 2001: 10).