

## BASEBALL AND AMERICAN CULTURE: HISTORY, LITERATURE, CINEMA

**"It's our game, that's the chief fact in connection with it: America's game." It "has the snap, go, fling of the American atmosphere - belongs as much to our institutions, fits into them as significantly, as our constitutions, laws: is just as important in the sum total of our historic life."**

**- Walt Whitman**

Commentators have long argued that baseball is a key to understanding American culture and the American character. Over the past two decades historians of the sport have unearthed an enormous amount of material that not only verifies this insight but allows us to be more precise about the connection between baseball and the development of American society. This workshop explores the social history of the game using a variety of historical, literary, and cinematic sources. (A "social" history is one that places the game in its social context, that assumes that social values, assumptions, and conflicts shape -though they do not "determine" - every aspect of a culture from its style of war-making to its games. The "new social history" of the past twenty-five years has been particularly interested in sports as a means of writing history "from the bottom up" and understanding the lives of ordinary people in the everyday lives.) This course examines the two-way interaction between sport and society.

I attempt to lay out a skeletal version of this social history in the essay "upping the ante" and the quotations at the end of this syllabus. But here, briefly, are its main components. First, I argue that organized sports have been from their inception and continue to be crucial elements in the public realm and public life and that therefore they have a closer relationship to politics than we might assume. Second, I argue that baseball emerged as a crucial myth in industrializing America, dramatizing a harmonious mixing of two key elements of the culture (technology and the pastoral ideal), offering a stable model of a competitive, entrepreneurial and free labor economy, and preserving key values of craftsmanship, individualism, and egalitarianism. Third, as "public thing" (the Latin "res public" or republic), as myth, and as "national pastime," baseball has been the occasion and the site for a discussion of a variety of social and political issues, from monopoly and competition to labor relations and, most famously, racial segregation. Finally I argue that in light of the important role the game has played in our political ideals and our sense of social well-being, the current state of the game and its much discussed troubles is a matter of great import. Asserting a vital connection between a team and its city, sport and civic pride, I will explore the possibilities of a "revolution" (with a nod to Bill James' great essay of that title) in the way we have dealt with the game.

A chronological history of the game from the 1840's to the present day fleshes out this social history. Thus most of the rest of the week will be devoted to this chronological history. In contrast to the Cooperstown-Doubleday myth of baseball's immaculate conception, this history stresses the evolution of both the game and its role in American culture and society. It will high-

light the game's engagement with a variety of public issues from the problem of monopoly and the rights of labor, the value of competition, cooperation, and craftsmanship, to ethnic, religious, and racial conflicts. It should also serve to help us evaluate the central arguments presented on the first night.

Monday: **FROM FRATERNITY TO NATIONAL LEAGUE:** The Public and the Civic in Early Baseball

Tuesday: **THE RISE OF ORGANIZED BASEBALL:** Competition versus Collusion and the Myth of Industrializing America

Wednesday: **CREATING THE NATIONAL PASTIME:** A Crisis of Civic and Market

Thursday: **BASEBALL'S TWO REVOLUTIONS:** Babe Ruth, Jackie Robinson, and the Modern Game

Friday: **THE TROUBLE WITH BASEBALL:** From Golden Age to Modern Game

\*\*\*\*\*

**Upping the Ante:** The ambitious historian of baseball is faced with a daunting task. We simply know more about the history of baseball than virtually any other subject one can name. The paleontologist (and baseball historian) Steven Jay Gould, whose academic discipline recaptures lost forms of life, evolutionary processes, and a prehistoric era measured in millions of years all based upon the study of the most fragmentary records left by fossils, marvels at the exhaustive statistical records baseball has generated. Supplemented by photographs, movie footage, oral histories and recollections, and the traditional documents of mainstream history, baseball statistics form part of an usually complete (if still incomplete) record of one corner of human activity over the past 150 years. No single historian, no single fan, can possibly master all of this material. The choices of inclusion and exclusion can be heartbreaking, conclusions are at best tentative pending further study, and the audience generally well-informed, partisan, and contentious. Worst of all, what one can one possibly add to a discourse about baseball that generates dozens of new books published every year?

Before answering that question, a cautionary note: "The silliest and most tendentious of baseball writing tries to wrest profundity from the spectacle of grown men hitting a ball with a stick by suggesting linkages between the sport and deep issues of morality, parenthood, history, lost innocence, gentleness, and so on, seemingly ad infinitum. (The effort reeks of silliness because baseball is profound all by itself and needs no excuses....)...Nonetheless, baseball is a major item of our culture, and it does have a long and interesting history." - Stephen Jay Gould

On the other hand consider the following:

"What do they know of cricket who only cricket know?" - C. L. R. James

In answer to the question I intend to up the ante, to take the phenomenon of sports seriously and to claim far more for the history of baseball than the mere status of a mirror of cultural attitudes and values. For many young men and an admittedly smaller number of young women baseball affords an initial and influential "window on the world" (as James - C.L.R. not Bill! - puts it in his magnificent study of cricket, Beyond a Boundary), an introduction to the social realms of power, purpose and possibility. As a boy and as a young man I found my bearings in regards to such crucial (and political) questions as the relations between labor and capital, race and ethnicity, loyalty and manipulation, competition and cooperation, skill and chance, through the game of baseball. As a suburbanite, I (like so many others) first encountered the sights and sounds and smells, the variety, the fascination and the horror (my brother at Connie Mack) of city life through excursions to various baseball parks. My sense of "the public," (that is, other people; how we meet, what we can accomplish together, and what we mean to each other) what the public is and what its possibilities were, came through the game as well; it remains (for me, in minor league parks and youth leagues, if not in Riverfront or Wrigley) the most attractive and satisfying of public experiences.

Thus an important underlying theme of much of what I will have to say this week is that sports and especially baseball preserve something of the spirit and the possibilities of "the public realm" that was central to the ancient Greek polis (the realm of freedom and of politics, where ambition and honor were more important than mundane economic interests). The occasional references to baseball as an important civic institution, indeed as America's civic religion, that dot its history, as well as the commercial game's exploitation of and dependence on civic pride and civic rivalry, suggest as much. But I think the link is more organic than that. The idea of a public realm of virtuous men transcending mere material concerns came down to our founding fathers via the republican tradition of Renaissance Italy and early modern England (see J.G.A. Pocock's influential The Machiavellian Moment or, more accessible, Gordon Wood's The Radicalism of the American Revolution). But fairly early on in the history of the American republic the opportunities and the distractions of the marketplace and the rise of a profession of interest-oriented politics raised doubts about the existence of an unitary public good independent of the material interests of groups and individuals. The public good seemed less a product of the disinterested actions of virtuous citizens than the product of the competition among interests. Rather than a matter of virtue, imagination, ambition, politics became a process of compromise, the art of the possible as delimited by interests.

It is in this context, in the 1840's and 1850's, that baseball and other organized sports began to emerge (see Norbert Elias on the link between state-building and sports). The development of organized forms of play coincided with what the Dutch historian Johan Huizinga has described as the gradual eradication of the play element from most other cultural forms, from religion to work, and, as I try to suggest above, from politics. The rationalization of such activities, histori-

an Christopher Lasch argues, left "little room for the spirit of arbitrary invention or the disposition to leave things to chance. Risk, daring, uncertainty - important components of play - have no place in industry or in activities infiltrated by industrial standards, which seek precisely to predict and control the future and to eliminate risk." Sports, of course, celebrated exactly these threatened attributes, risk, daring, uncertainty (and baseball, in particular, attracted clerks and artisans who felt most acutely the impact of industrialization). The appeal of sports, notwithstanding their increasingly commercialized nature, owed a great deal to their transcendence of purely rational, instrumental, and pecuniary matters. Glory, honor, inventiveness and imagination remained central virtues in the world of sports.

Thus sports inherited something of the qualities of the classical public. Perhaps the best indication of this is that a variety of political problems in American society have been more frankly and more playfully approached through baseball than through the formal institutions of democracy. Racial segregation is, of course, the most famous and most important example. In the late 1940's and early 1950's, Jules Tygiel writes, "developments on southern playing fields spearheaded the attack on segregation. The acceptance of blacks in interracial competition dented Jim Crow's armor, and in many instances, caused people, particularly business leaders, to re-evaluate the efficacy and wisdom of southern racial policies. Even as resistance to integration escalated, the baseball diamond remained an oasis of relative enlightenment amidst and increasingly hostile environment." Moreover the essence of the more modern public (that thing which we call public opinion) is the capacity for debate, deliberation, and decision (for talk), as such scholars as Jurgen Habermas and Benjamin Barber argue. Here again baseball touches on the political. There are few things about which we talk more and more freely and in those discussions we address issues of profound importance. Again listen to Tygiel and note the emphasis on the telling of tales: "The saga of Robinson's first season has become a part of American mythology - sacrosanct in its memory, magnificent in its retelling. It remains a drama which thrills and fascinates, combining the central themes of the illusive Great American Novel: the undertones of Horatio Alger, the interracial comradeship of nineteenth-century fiction, the sage advisor and his youthful apprentice, and the rugged and righteous individual confronting the angry mob. It is a tale of courage, heroics, and triumph. Epic in its proportions, the Robinson legend has persevered - and will continue to do so - because the myth, which rarely deviates from reality, fits our national perceptions of fair play and social progress."

The Robinson saga was certainly not the first time baseball took on the character of myth. As a way of trying to land you in the middle of some of the other themes and arguments in the course consider the following quotations:

### **The Machine in the Garden: Baseball as the Great Myth of Industrializing America**

"ball tossing had a deep symbolic meaning when played in the spring of the year...the early church adopted this symbol...to typify the Resurrection."

- A. G. Spalding

"folk customs and religious ceremonies, undertaken not as idle pastimes, but as grim supplications to various deities, are the roots from which our modern sports have sprung."

- Robert W. Henderson

"games learned in youth exert their own demands and inspire loyalty to the game itself, rather than to the programs ideologues seek to impose upon them."

- Christopher Lasch

"If you build it he will come."

- from Field of Dreams

Baseball is played upon "a geometrically perfect landscape."

- from the documentary film Baseball Forever

Baseball's "efficient movement...systematic, refined technique...evoked analogies to the industrial discipline in the sport."

- Gunther Barth

The "pleasure of watching baseball is like that derived from observing the interplay of vast and complex machinery, but...incalculably more admirable because carried out by cooperating men."

- sportswriter Charles Fleischer (1908)

### **The Trouble With Baseball: The Degradation of Sport**

If baseball is just a business does that mean that hot dogs are just a business (or are they also food, just as baseball is also, and more fundamentally, a sport)?

- Bill James paraphrased

"The degradation of sport...consists not in its being taken too seriously but in its trivialization. Games derived their power from the investment of seemingly trivial activity with serious intent. By submitting without reservation to the rules and conventions of the game, the players (and the spectators too) cooperate in creating an illusion of reality. In this way the game becomes a representation of life, and play takes on the character of play-acting as well. In our time, games -

sports in particular - are rapidly losing the quality of illusion."

- Christopher Lasch

"As Howard Cosell has candidly acknowledged, sports can no longer be sold to the public as 'just sports or as religion...Sports aren't life and death. They're entertainment.' Even as the television audience demands the presentation of sports as a form of spectacle, however, the widespread resentment of star athletes among followers of sports - a resentment directed against the inflated salaries negotiated by their agents and against their willingness to become hucksters, promoters, and celebrities - indicates the persistence of a need to believe that sport represents something more than entertainment, something that, though neither life nor death in itself, retains some lingering capacity to dramatize and clarify those experiences."

-Christopher Lasch

"Play has always, by its very nature, set itself off from workaday life; yet it retains an organic connection with the life of the community, by virtue of its capacity to dramatize reality and to offer a convincing representation of the community's values. The ancient connections between games, ritual, and public festivity suggest that although games take place within arbitrary boundaries, they are nevertheless rooted in shared traditions to which they give objective expression. Games and athletic contests offer a dramatic commentary on reality rather than an escape from it - a heightened reenactment of communal traditions, not a repudiation of them. It is only when games and sports come to be valued purely as a form of escape that they lose the capacity to provide this escape."

- Christopher Lasch

### **Taking Sports Seriously: Revolution**

"Why cannot the chief municipalities interested take over baseball and manage it themselves? We have municipal ownership of art galleries, of public parks, in some cities of choral societies. Surely none of these appeal more to either civic pride or pleasure than baseball?"

- from a 1923 interview with Colonel Huston, co-owner of the New York Yankees

"We baseball fans don't have much of a record to be proud of. We put up with almost anything the owners shove down our throats. Sure, we complain a lot; we even boo the owner at Yankee Stadium. And rarely, very rarely, we simply leave a team, declare a divorce, and look elsewhere...." But now "fans and the government may finally be getting ready to push MLB out of its plush luxury box high above the real business world. MLB's self-destructive shenanigans may result in its collapse....Eliminating the [anti-trust] exemption would free minor league teams from their current servitude...and a whole range of large and medium-sized cities would be free

to see if they could support a big-league team. Because it takes a lot of money to operate a sports franchise, municipal or public ownership and local partnerships would be the most popular new forms of owning a team, and - who knows - maybe ball clubs would become real clubs again, something they used to be, way back before the Civil War."

- baseball historian Warren Goldstein