The Imagined Sporting Nation

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In the previous topics within this module we have focused on smaller scale sporting collectivities (subcultures and communities).

This topic takes the analysis to the larger scale community of the nation, through an analysis of the relationship between sport, the nation, national identity, and nationalism.

Neil Smith’s (1992) Typology of Geographical Scales

The World of Nations

The Nation: A key source of modern spatial organization and collective/communal identification.

Benedict Anderson famously conceptualised the nation as an imagined community:

"imagined because members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion."


National Identity: PERCEIVED Common Traditions, Practices, Values, Beliefs

National Communities: FEELING of Collective Identification, Unity, and Belonging

Theme 1:

Sport, the Nation, National Identity, and Nationalism
The nation is a multidimensional concept incorporating a:
- named human population
- a historic territory
- common myths and memories
- a mass, public culture
- a common economy and polity
- common legal rights and duties

The industrializing and urbanizing tumult of the nineteenth century, when national governing elites became instrumental in advancing the nation as the:

“political and cultural organizing principle of mass industrial modernity”

The invention of Modern Nations

Europe c. 1850

Europe c. 1920

National Traditions were “invented” during the period 1870-1914, as a means of creating a UNIFYING sense of national identity, with which the NATIONAL POPULACE could IDENTIFY, and through which they could PERFORM their MEMBERSHIP of the NATION.

“Invention of National Tradition”

symbols/flags

anthems

costumes

sporting pastimes

rituals/ceremonies

institutions


Late 19th/Early 20th Century National Sporting Traditions

France: Cycling
England: Soccer
Ireland: Gaelic Football
New Zealand: Rugby Union

Sport (either spectating or participating) is one of the most important “badges of membership” of the nation.

The sporting nation represents a compelling and seductive agent of cohesive commonality...

...it is one of the most important sources of the (symbolic) collective glue which creates the imagined community of the nation.

According to Hobsbawm, sport is a:
“uniquely effective a medium for inculcating national feelings”

Indeed, the modern nation has become to be EMBODIED IN, and EXPRESSED THROUGH, popular sporting practices, events, spectacles, and individuals, with perhaps only the MILITARY rivaling its nationalistic significance.

Athletes, like the military, are the EMBODIED REPRESENTATIVES of the nation, who compete for/fight for their nation in contests/wars for national supremacy.

The “Sport-War Nexus”


Question: WHY SHOULD SPORT BECOME SUCH AN EFFECTIVE AND EMOTIVE EXPRESSION OF NATION?

Answer: BECAUSE IT BASED AND FOCUSED UPON AND THROUGH THE:

BODY (it is CORPOREAL)

“The individual, even the one who only cheers, becomes a symbol of his nation himself”


Nationalism?

- [n] love of country and willingness to sacrifice for it
- [n] the doctrine that your national culture and interests are superior to any other
- [n] the doctrine that nations should act independently (rather than collectively) to attain their goals
- [n] the aspiration for national independence felt by people under foreign domination

Nationalism as National Pride and Solidarity

Nationalism is the sense of identification/belonging expressed toward the nation and other members of the national community.

While sporting nationalism is highly emotive, it can POTENTIALLY lead to some negative consequences, particularly in relation to:

1. The positioning of nations and national populations against each other.
2. The creation of ethnic hierarchies and divisions within national populations

Sport is one of the most emotive cultural forms through which we experience and express our NATIONALISM: SENSE OF NATION and NATIONAL BELONGING.

Performing/Experiencing the Nation  See Video Clip 1
The PROBLEM with any form of NATIONALISM is that it is rarely BENIGN.

Even unintentionally, and even when humorously, it often positions the HOME NATION as being SUPERIOR to others.

As novelist George Orwell (author of 1984 etc.), noted:

“At the international level sport is frankly mimic warfare…it is war minus the shooting”


Many sporting nationalisms are also based on an ETHNIC HIERARCHY that positions a specific ethnic grouping at the NORMATIVE CENTER of the national culture/nation.

In other words, a single ethnic grouping is oftentimes identified as the most AUTHENTIC and LEGITIMATE members of the NATION.

NATIONALISMS are often based on a form of ETHNIC ABSOLUTISM which often MARGINALISES large sections of the NATIONAL POPULACE.

Ethnic Nationalism

An understanding based on the “natural” origins of the nation being based upon definite characteristics:

- Ethnic/racial
- Language
- Cultural

An ethnically/racially EXCLUSIVE form of nationalism and national belonging.

I am Canadian [Not American]
“the intrusion of ethnic elements and sentiments of collective belonging into the life of the nation inevitably breeds exclusiveness and intolerance, and that ethnic closure is the chief bases of many of the current national conflicts that afflict the world.”


**Theme 2:**

The American Sporting Landscape

**From Colony to Independent Nation**

Colonial America, 1775

United States of America, 2013

The Invention/Creation of the American Nation/National Identity

MASS IMMIGRATION, INDUSTRIALIZATION, URBANIZATION, all threatened the social, economic, and political stability of the rapidly developing American nation.

Hence, American national identity was constructed as a collectively bonding:

“cultural formulation, a feeling of belonging, and a shared heritage”


**COMMUNITAS: Collective [NATIONAL] Identification and Belonging**

“communitas–a special experience during which individuals are able to rise above those structures that materially and normatively regulate their daily lives and that unite people across the boundaries of structure, rank, and socioeconomic status.”

(Ingham & McDonald, 2003, p. 26)


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**American EXCEPTIONALISM**

Historically speaking, American NATIONAL IDENTITY has been based on understandings of the nation’s UNIQUENESS and DIFFERENCE from others, particularly those in EUROPE.

This philosophy was partly based on a “frontier mentality”, which believed that the untamed American frontier generated a young, rugged, creative, and dynamic society that was qualitatively DIFFERENT from established European societies, weighed down by monarchies, aristocracies, powerful churches, and professional armies.

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**The Importance of Frontier ideology to the American Psyche**

The understanding of America as an EXPECTIONAL nation: A young, rugged, creative, and dynamic society.

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**The Closing of the American Frontier, Frontier Anxiety, and Sport**

With the closing of the American frontier in the 1890s, many Americans (most notably Theodore Roosevelt) became anxious that America would lose the source of its EXCEPTIONALISM, and hence looked for new frontiers to conquer.

According to Frederic Paxson in 1917, sport/athletic contests were:

“a fitting substitute for the old frontier and promised ‘honest sport’ would produce ‘a new Americanism for a new century’”


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**American sporting exceptionalism developed as a means of NATIONAL differentiation (from European sport models) around:**

“the home-grown national trinity of American football, baseball and basketball”

(Dyreson, 2005, p. 941)

SPORT: “uniquely effective a medium for inculcating national feelings”


“Baseball, Hot Dogs, Apple Pie, and Chevrolet”

See Video Clip 4

Sport as METONYM for American Society

Metonym: Something that stands in place for/ comes to represent something else.

“How Football Explains America”

The Frontier Thesis Lives On...

See Video Clip 5

Part of the reason for “soccer’s” failure to can be explained by its evident foreign/international identity, which distinguished it from the AMERICAN SPORTING EXCEPTIONALISM of baseball, football, and basketball.


“The imagined community of millions seems more real as a team of eleven named people”

Performing American Sporting Exceptionalism I: Playing

“The individual, even the one who only cheers, becomes a symbol of his nation himself”

Performing American Sporting Exceptionalism II: Spectacting

American SPORTING INSULARITY

The structure of American sport leads to a form of SPORTING INSULARITY, in as much as the globally elite forms of the sporting “holy trinity” are all based in the U.S.

Hence, there has been a tendency to focus on these “American” sports to the exclusion of others.


This sporting INSULARITY has meant that, despite being a regular participant within international sporting competition...

...only infrequently have American sporting teams captured the imagination of the American sporting public, and become sites for the expression of a:

FERVENT SPORTING NATIONALISM

“The imagined community of millions seems more real as a team of eleven named people”


“The individual, even the one who only cheers, becomes a symbol of his nation himself”

Performing the American (Sporting) Nation

The Women’s US Soccer Team

Specific sports are vehicles for expressing AMERICAN NATIONAL IDENTITY, and thereby helping constitute the very sense of communal belonging (COMMUNITAS) of the NATION.

In other words, in different ways and to different intensities, they EMBODY what it is to “be” American.

Nevertheless, sport plays ANOTHER important role in the CONSTITUTION of the NATION and NATIONAL IDENTITY.

Popular SPORT SPECTACLES provide the high profile sites for the RITUALISTIC DISPLAY/PERFORMANCE of the current forms of AMERICAN NATIONALISM.

SPORT SPECTACLES are thus important agents of NATIONAL PEDAGOGY: they are sites at which the population are PRESENTED with, and LEARN, what it is to “BE” American.

The National Politics of SPORT SPECTACLES

Unavoidably, the manner in which SPORT SPECTACLES are structured/delivered is related to the contemporary CONTEXT.

Sport spectacles are both RITUALISTIC products, and producers, of POPULAR ways of thinking about America at any given moment.

They are both POLITICAL and COMMERCIAL entities in actively looking to address/resonate with MAINSTREAM VIEWS and VALUES.

THE MONUMENTAL SPORT SPECTACLE

(a high profile, mass interest, commercially oriented sporting event)

The Consistency of Sporting Nationalism?

**Hot Nationalism**: the intensified, extreme, or overt forms of nationalism which often occur during times of real/perceived national crisis/threat/attack.

**Banal Nationalism**: The routine, everyday, and often unacknowledged expressions and performances of nationalism which punctuate all aspects of our lives.

**Cool Nationalism**: the expressions of indifference and/or hostility toward the nation, and a reluctance to acknowledge it as a source of identity.


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### Early 1970s Anti-War Politics/Movement

U.S. National Community Divided by Involvement in Military Conflict

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### Sport in the Immediate Post-Kent State Shootings Moment

Following the shootings, the NCAA met with ABC and implored the broadcaster not to show any acts or expressions of student activism at sporting events.

The NCAA did not want their events to be used as a vehicle for political opposition.

The suppression of the oppositional political spectacle?


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### Sport and Cool American Nationalism

**Cool Nationalism**: the expressions of indifference and/or hostility toward the nation, and a reluctance to acknowledge it as a source of identity.
The Contextuality of Sporting Nationalisms/Nationalist Politics

October 31, 1970
University of Buffalo Football:
“Thunder of the East Marching Band”

A half-time show titled “Give Peace a Chance” was planned by the marching band to highlight the issues and concerns of the era:

1. Opposition to the Vietnam War
2. Support for the peace movement in general
3. U.S. race relations and the death of Martin Luther King
4. Concerns for the environment

The broadcaster ABC decided to turn its cameras to traffic, trees, and clouds in order to avoid any controversy.


Sport and Hot American Nationalism

Hot Nationalism: the intensified, extreme, or overt forms of nationalism which often occur during times of immediate national crisis/threat/attack.

Sites of Hot Sporting Nationalisms

1980 Olympic “Miracle on Ice”: USA v USSR
1996 Olympic Bombing: Atlanta Centennial Park

Theme 4:

Sport, Nationalism, and the 9/11 Moment

SPONTANEOUS COMMUNITAS:
Spontaneous and short-lived experiences of collective unity, oftentimes prompted by unexpected events (i.e. 9/11).

MANUFACTURED COMMUNITAS:
The attempt to perpetuate the feelings and relations of spontaneous communitas, usually motivated by political/ideological aims.

9/11 and Transformations in American Society

“The decade after the 9/11 attacks reshaped many facets of life in America. Some changes were temporary -- an immediate response out of concern for our safety -- while some proved to be more lasting transformations in American life.”


In the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, three sporting spectacles played an important role in capturing and communicating the national sentiment:

1. The resumption of NFL regular season games (September 23, 2001)
2. The Ceremonial First Pitch of the 2001 World Series Game 3 (October 30, 2001)
3. The 2002 Super Bowl (February 3, 2002)
4. The opening ceremony of the 2002 Salt Lake City Winter Olympics (February 8, 2002)

9/11 and the NFL Spectacle

SPONTANEOUS NATIONAL COMMUNITAS:
National mourning, remembrance, and recovery

MANUFACTURED COMMUNITAS: Game 3, 2001 World Series, Yankee Stadium October 30

"To see the commander in chief say, 'I'm not vulnerable. I'll stand right here on the mound at Yankee Stadium and nobody can bring harm to our country.' That's what that appearance represented. It had tremendous impact." (Ari Fleischer, White House press secretary)

Source: Bodley, H. (2011, September 6). President's first pitch provided healing image. MLB.com

The Presidential Pitch

See Video Clip 7

See Video Clip 8
Super Bowl 2002: 9/11 Nationalism
February 3, 2002, New Orleans

Salt Lake City 2002: 9/11 Nationalism

The Nationalized Olympic Spectacle

Such expressions of American Nationalism undoubtedly assisted in the process of NATIONAL EMOTIONAL/PSYCHIC RECOVERY, as people sought COLLECTIVE strength in coming to terms with America’s newly perceived VULNERABILITY.

MLB’s Symbolic Resiliency

These 9/11 Sport Spectacles IMAGINED the NATION as a HARMONIOUS and UNITED WHOLE:

“These 9/11 Sport Spectacles IMAGINED the NATION as a HARMONIOUS and UNITED WHOLE:

“The spectacle appears at once as society itself, as a part of society and as a means of unification.” (Debord, 1994, p. 12)


Through these MANUFACTURED (and MILITARIZED) SPORT SPECTACLES, the nation is (re)imagined as the stricken home and (global) defender of freedom.

This framing justified the U.S.’s heightened security and military policies at home and abroad.

1. Military Incursions in Afghanistan and Iraq
2. USA Patriot Act (2001) extended intelligence gathering, and strengthened immigrant detention and deportation

However, let us not forget that we live in a capitalist consumer culture, and oftentimes national symbols are used within advertising and promotional campaigns as a form of:

COMMERCIAL NATIONALISM

“Many would probably conclude that using the flag to sell diapers is over the top, but all kinds of products are being sold with 9/11 visual symbolism tie-ins—most with an American flag motif.”


“Pizza Box” Nationalism (c. 2002)

“Gummi” Patriotism (2013)
Theme 5:
Hot and Banal Sporting Nationalism in Post-9/11 America

“Sport, as a civic [NATIONAL] ritual, is embedded in political-economic relations” (Ingham et al., 1987, p. 460)


Hot Nationalism: the intensified, extreme, or overt forms of nationalism which often occur during times of real/p national crisis/threat/attack.

Banal Nationalism: The routine, everyday, and often unacknowledged expressions and performances of nationalism which punctuate all aspects of our lives.

Cool Nationalism: the expressions of indifference and/or hostility toward the nation, and an reluctance to acknowledge it as a source of identity.


The Perceived and Real THREATS to American Society: Post-9/11

Among certain sections of American society this experience of perpetual threat created an enduring climate of HOT NATIONALISM, with heightened and intensified feelings of NATIONAL BELONGING and IDENTIFICATION.

The Nationalism of SPORT SPECTACLES within the Context of a Perpetual State of War, Terror, Fear, and Insecurity


The Post-9/11 Context

In the aftermath of 9/11, American society has been described as being in a:

Perpetual State of War, Terror, Fear, and Insecurity

Periods of HOT NATIONALISM can, over time, raise the levels of THE BANAL NATIONALISM. In effect, these raised levels of nationalism become experienced as the NEW NORMAL, and become ROUTINE AND UNACKNOWLEDGED ASPECTS OF EVERYDAY LIFE.

Super Bowl 2004: The American Heroes - Tragedy and the Colonization of Space

The MILITARIZATION of SPORT
Both soldiers and athletes are EMOTIVE and EMBODIED representatives of NATION. Hence the MILITARIZATION of popular sport spectacles in the post-9/11 context was a natural development.

Mythologizing Pat Tillman: Embodying Post-9/11 America

Although the fabrication of Pat Tillman’s demise for political gain was highly problematic, the POPULIST rationale behind it was perhaps understandable.

Within the context of an increasingly unpopular conflict/Bush administration, Tillman’s unique persona as both military and sporting hero was sought to be mobilized for political gain (to secure popular support for the Afghanistan/Iraq military involvements), and homeland security initiatives.

San Diego Padres Military Uniforms

“We are honored to join the America Supports You team,” said Padres’ Chief Executive Officer Sandy Alderson. “Located in the city with the largest concentration of military in the country, we understand and have great respect for what our dedicated men and women in uniform do for our country – day in and day out.”

Ceremonial first pitch, July 4, 2007

Elsewhere, the line between sport, the nation, and militarism has been blurred:

Recreating Iwo Jima

San Diego Padres Petco Park
The Militarization of NASCAR


Fusing Sport, the Military, and Nationalism

“Quicken Loans Carrier Classic” USS Carl Vinson: Veterans Day 2011

- Warship from which Osama bin Laden’s body buried at sea
- Ship personnel involved in effort to “bring bin Laden to justice”
- First to launch airstrikes in support of US war in Afghanistan in 2001
- Both teams wore camouflaged uniforms, with USA on the backs
- Pre-game speech: Obama used it as an opportunity to underscore the need to thank and support servicemen...

The President’s Basketball Pulpit

President Barack Obama and First Lady Michelle Obama aboard the USS Carl Vinson on Nov. 11, 2001 — for the “Quicken Loans Carrier Classic” between North Carolina and Michigan State.

“The Militarization of NASCAR”

Within this context, the MILITARY are celebrated as the SAVIORS and DEFENDERS of American nation/American life.

“Sport, as a civic [NATIONAL] ritual, is embedded in political-economic relations” (Ingham et al, 1987, p. 460)

Within this context, the MILITARIZATION of sport is viewed uncritically as the natural way of being American/supporting America.

There is an implied unity and cohesion (communitas) felt within the national. These sport spectacles display and “construct the illusion of consensus” (Ingham et al, 1987, p. 458)

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Any dissent/opposition is thus viewed as being un-American.

Theme 6:

The New Normal Within Sporting Nationalism?

American Sporting Nationalism: The NEW Normal?
Recent Metonymic Personifications of Insecure (Sporting) Nationalism

Tim Tebow and Tebowing?


NASCAR as American Christian Ministry

One NASCAR Nation Under God?
(militarism meets Christianity through corporate capitalism)

Invocation at the Nashville 300 NASCAR race at the Nashville Superspeedway, July 23, 2011


NASCAR: Contemporary “Dixie”?
Projecting an image of America(ns) that is largely:

- WHITE
- MALE
- HETEROSEXUAL
- CHRISTIAN
- “SOUTHERN”


Sporting Nations and Ethnic Absolutism?

NASCAR’s Conflicted National Politics?

Michelle Obama and Jill Biden acting as two of the official starters of the NASCAR season finale at the Homestead-Miami Speedway race in 2011.
Uniting or Dividing the Nation? Soccer and Ethnically Exclusionary American Nationalism


Sport as a Site for National Mourning and Rememberance

Sandy Hook Elementary Shooting: December 14, 2012

The Super Bowl and the NATIONAL POLITICS of Gun Control?

The Sandy Hook Elementary School Chorus and Jennifer Hudson singing at the 2013 Super Bowl in New Orleans
Community and National Recovery: Boston as Metonym for Nation

Metonym: Something that stands in place for/ comes to represent something else.

Boston Communitas

A Moment of Communal/National Healing and Recovery?

Neil Diamond Singing “Sweet Caroline” at Fenway Park, April 20, 2013

The NEW Normal of the Sport Spectacle?

A SPORTING NATION UNDER THREAT?:
Overt and covert security presence at sport events

9/11 and the Reaffirmation of American Exceptionalism

“The attacks of September 11th were intended to break our spirit. Instead we have emerged stronger and more unified. We feel renewed devotion to the principles of political, economic and religious freedom, the rule of law and respect for human life. We are more determined than ever to live our lives in freedom.”

(New York City Mayor, Rudolph W. Giuliani, December 31, 2001)

The Critique of Post-9/11 America

“In the post-9/11 era there has emerged a new form of social control [NATIONALISM], one centered around fear, terror, the military, and an attack on democracy and civil liberties.”

(Silk, 2012, p. 10)

Is the post-9/11 NATIONALISMS based on a form of ETHNIC ABSOLUTISM which MARGINALISES sections of the NATIONAL POPULACE? Is it a form of:

**Ethnic Nationalism**

An understanding based on the “natural” origins of the nation being based upon definite characteristics:

- Ethnic/racial
- Language
- Cultural

An ethnically/racially EXCLUSIVE form of nationalism and national belonging.

Basicallly, is post-9/11 SPORT and SPORTING NATIONALISM a UNIFYING or DIVIDING agent? Is it an EXPRESSION of American FREEDOM or American CONFORMITY?

For more discussion of the U.S.’s global sporting relations try:

**KNES 485 Sport and Globalization**

Online course taught every Summer and Winter session

See course website for related lectures slides, podcast, thematic review questions, video clips, required readings, key concepts, discussion tasks, and essay question.