

FOLLOW THE MONEY, NOT THE METAPHOR?

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As I have noted before in this column, in discussing preparations for the Atlanta Olympics, Andrew Young offered the following: "We hope we have taken commercialism out of sport by taking commercialism for granted" (quoted in McKay & Kirk, 1992, p. 10).

After the hyper-commercial grotesqueries of that Olympics, and the graft we now know was offered by officials and business leaches to secure Salt Lake City and Sydney as Olympic sites, Young's remark looks even more ludicrous than it did at the time. But at least he openly referenced the dance of morality and society that characterizes the discourse of sport.

I want here to connect three disparate sites to reinforce the point. In each case, there is a complex cross-validation of sport and the social—a kind of double-declutching. On one hand, the supposedly pure world of sport, free of politics, metaphorises problematic aspects of the social order to suggest a false unity, denying the fissures of everyday life. On the other hand, the claim that sport is frivolously ephemeral is countered by its demetaphorised role in the putatively harmonious functioning of society.

Consider our friends over at the World Bank (the words that follow in quotation marks are theirs, not mine). Concerned that its name conjured up images of "overpaid and underworked bureaucrats" in a "beehive of corruption," who "value economic theories" over "human beings," the bank's staff association recently decided to promulgate personal anecdotes recounting small acts of kindness perpetrated by its functionaries in the course of their office duties. As a more public part of improving staff morale, Jim Wolfensohn, who runs the bank, went further. He encouraged employees to wear pins in the shape of a soccer ball. What a neat way of instantaneously humanizing World Bank executives! I guess it'll be easier now for the rest of us to correctly identify them as organic intellectuals of the working class ("Kick and Tell," 1999).

Such attempts to paper over the exercise of power through sport are all too common. I recall the ecstasy (certainly felt by me) when a multiracial French team won the 1998 World Cup, a pleasure all the greater for the grip of racism that has long characterized that country. Here, some of us thought, might be a moment when Zinedine Zidane and his colleagues symbolically trumped the banality and brutality of White racism. But a few months later, the comedian Guy Bedos compared the North African Zidane's goals in the final to the trivia of a Benneton commercial—purely because of

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that event, France was claiming a newfound multiculturalism? (Vinocur, 1999). Just as Benneton has a paper-thin, truly cosmetic commitment to multiculturalism and the environment, so the suggestion that myths of nationhood can be transformed by a new racial makeup to a football team is wish fulfillment in the extreme. Here, liberal and radical thought was caught in a mirror image of right-wing mythification.

The third site is closer to U.S. concerns. Stanley Kubrick and Joe DiMaggio died on the same weekend in March 1999. I was literally staggered to compare the coverage of their careers in the bourgeois media. It was as if Kubrick had been a hack director, rather than someone recognized as one of the world's greatest filmmakers, and DiMaggio had been world-renowned, rather than a star in a minority-interest sport. But I came to understand this better as the discourse about DiMaggio mounted and that on Kubrick—well, I guess it *dismounted*. Paul Simon (1999) told a story of bumping into DiMaggio in an Italian restaurant a few years after his famous lyric from "Mrs. Robinson" had created overseas fame for the retired baseballer. DiMaggio wondered where he was supposed to have "gone," given the prominent commercial for Mr. Coffee and his work for the Bowery Savings Bank (Simon, 1999). Simon's point, of course, was about loss, about his grief for a retired/departed hero, and his yearning that heroism remain unsullied, youthful, and (perhaps) something more than a façade for hawk-ing loans and beans.

In the first days after DiMaggio's death, most of what we read and heard owed more to the lives of the saints than to competent journalism or cultural history. There was little, if any, mention of the "Yankee Clipper's" (a) domestic violence, (b) virtual invention of the fee-for-autographs trade, (c) massively unpopular holdout for increased pay during World War II, and (d) hissing campaigns against Mickey Mantle (Barra, 1999). Instead, we were told of his quiet dignity, that his play surpassed the capacity of words to describe it, and—here I think was the key—how ably he stood for the right kind of immigrant assimilation. DiMaggio was an implicit price deflator of "uppity" pro sports stars of today from, shall we say, less assimilated groups. Supposed selflessness and glory overdetermined the historical record and contemporary social divisions, with DiMaggio's dignity implicitly opposed to others' wildness. Again, a misleading deployment of sport-validated politics elsewhere.

Oh, back to the World Bank. When its soccer-pin campaign was formally inaugurated in December 1998, a net and posts were erected at the bank's headquarters. Executives lined up to demonstrate their prowess. But the bank's principal neoclassical economics maven missed his shot on-goal ("Kick and Tell," 1999). Perhaps there is some truth, after all, in sport as metaphor.

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