

INTRODUCTION

*Sport and
Negative Theology*

IN ONGOING SCHOLARLY and popular debates over the relationship between sport and religion, one consistent theme is that sport is “religious” insofar as it provides an escape from politics. This can take a couple of basic forms, each at opposite ends of a broader spectrum. Academics or popular critics interested in radical social change often characterize sport as an opiate that obstructs emancipation. Conversely, scholars, theologians, or media commentators sympathetic to sport might celebrate its capacity to transcend the terror and boredom of quotidian existence (work, sleep, bills, interpersonal conflict, partisan strife, and so on). This book is an effort to move away from both of these positions in order to rethink sport-religion relationships in dialectical terms. For an initial sense of what I mean by this, consider some basic problems with each of the above versions of sport as religious escape.

The image of sport as an opiate borrows from Marx’s most famous metaphor for religion while ignoring the tensions that the metaphor summarizes.¹ The result is a condemnation of sport as an institution that pacifies citizens and inhibits their development of political consciousness. Marx, per common readings of his argument in “Toward a Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right,” stated that religion was “the opium of the people” and that “the abolition of religion as the illusory happiness of the people is the demand for their real happiness.”² Critiques of sport have taken a parallel form. For example, Terry Eagleton wrote in an opinion piece for *The Guardian*:

Excerpt • Temple University Press

If every rightwing thinktank came up with a scheme to distract the populace from political injustice and compensate them for lives of hard labour, the solution in each case would be the same: football. No finer way of resolving the problems of capitalism has been dreamed up, bar socialism. . . . Like some austere religious faith, the game determines what you wear, whom you associate with, what anthems you sing and what shrine of transcendent truth you worship at. Along with television, it is the supreme solution to that age-old dilemma of our political masters: what should we do with them when they're not working? . . . [F]ootball these days is the opium of the people, not to speak of their crack cocaine. . . . Nobody serious about political change can shirk the fact that the game has to be abolished.³

Eagleton's proposal is not at all unusual. There is even an apocryphal story that Marx concluded, after watching a game of cricket, that there would be no socialist revolution in England if the masses could be anaesthetized by such a bourgeois activity. The story is often repeated as fact, illustrating, as Ben Carrington notes, "the widely held perception concerning the inherent incompatibility of sport with politics."⁴ The main problem with such arguments is that they isolate sport from the broader structure of social relations within and through which it exerts unique but also interdependent ideological force, and then treat it, in a deterministic way, as the linchpin that by necessity must be removed if the larger structure is to come apart. This represents a common failure, as Carrington argues, to view sport "in complex relation to the wider historical conjuncture and the contingent set of social relations that produce it."⁵ As Stuart Hall defines it, a *conjuncture* is "a period in which the contradictions and problems and antagonisms, which are always present in different domains in a society, begin to . . . accumulate" around a point of rupture. Conjuncture includes the aftermath of that rupture, relevant processes of social change, and "challenges to the existing historical project or social order."⁶ Without some conception of conjuncture, there can be only a limited critical or cultural studies of sport. If sport is complicit with "ideological manipulation" and ultimately "devoid of any counter-cultural elements, let alone transformative potential," then the only point in critiquing it is to expose it as a site for false consciousness.⁷

To study sport's relationship to broader conjunctures is to go much further. Such a study requires what Lawrence Grossberg calls (in his exhortation to cultural studies critics) a "radical contextualism" wherein we assume that "the identity, significance, and effects of any practice or event . . . are defined only by the complex set of relations that surround, interpenetrate, and shape it." In this sense an institution or practice like sport cannot be "isolated from

Excerpt • Temple University Press

its relations”; it must be understood instead “as a condensation of multiple determinations and effects.”⁸ From there, scholars interested in sport culture can take an important additional step: to demonstrate that sport condenses these effects in ways that exert *unique force* across a broader structure of social relations. To cite some examples from my book: sport is a site that conditions hyperawareness about the transitory nature of bodily capacity, time, and labor production; reliance on specialized modes of audiovisual capture (e.g., instant replay) makes sport a proving ground for problems of human perception, institutional authority, and historical judgment; elite competition stages the most consistent, dramatic tests of progress in human potential, while also throwing light on the technological, medical, and governmental interventions behind such progress; and controversies over competitive eligibility bring into public view debates over the indeterminacy of gender, sexuality, and ability that were formerly raised almost exclusively by activists and academics.

These and other debates uncover long-standing contradictions and problems, which are often condensed in sport in the form of religious ideals like “witnessing” or “transcendence.” Thus my book proceeds from two basic premises: (1) at present, elite televised sport is in a moment of conjuncture in which conflicts inherent to several of its most foundational religious (or, as I define the term shortly, “theological”) images and tropes are becoming visible and crystallizing around points of rupture and (2) processes of historical change related to these ruptures illustrate how sport is a context that produces uniquely powerful religious antagonisms and transmits them across an inter-related set of cultural practices and institutions.

Of course sport does not only create conflict. It can and often does serve as an opiate in the most negative sense, but this does not preclude its oppositional potential. As Andrew McKinnon argues, the phrase “opium of the people” has been made “undialectical” due to a tendency to translate it, through contemporary sensibilities, as a reference to drug-induced passivity or escape. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, opium was “largely an unquestioned good”: a beneficial medicine affordable for the poor as well as a source of inspiration for artists and poets. Marx used it himself to treat various illnesses. By the end of the century, however, it had become “demonized” due to social concerns over “baby doping” (the use of opium to soothe children, a practice driven largely by women’s working conditions and pharmacists’ marketing efforts), illness, and addiction. Marx formulated his opium metaphor between these periods, thus capturing dialectical tensions between its implications as “blessed medicine” and “recreational curse”: “Religious suffering is at the same time an expression of real suffering and a protest against real suffering. Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the feeling of a heartless world,

Excerpt • Temple University Press

and the soul of soulless circumstances. It is the opium of the people.”⁹ This summarizes, according to McKinnon, Marx’s dialectical thinking: religious suffering *simultaneously* expresses and resists “real” suffering—that is, suffering grounded in the material, social conditions that produce religion, and to which religion is a response as well as a shaping force. Expression and resistance constitute an “unstable equilibrium,” an “indivisible whole” in which each part influences the other.

This, McKinnon argues, is what ordinary translations of the opium metaphor miss: a “dialectical movement, in which opium, as a condensed signifier, brings together both expression and protest in one moment.”¹⁰ Religion cannot be abstracted from the conditions of its social, political, and economic production. Neither, then, can it be seen to merely give voice to an illusory world outside those conditions. As “a sigh that bears witness to oppression,” religion reflects and deepens the inequitable structures that it constitutes (and that it is constituted by), while at the same time providing an image of an alternative future.¹¹ Max Horkheimer summarizes this perfectly in his essay “Thoughts on Religion”: “The concept of God was for a long time the place where the idea was kept alive that there are other norms besides those to which nature and society give expression in their operation. . . . Religion is the record of the wishes, desires, and accusations of countless generations.”¹² The capacity for religion to express a radical or “wholly other” alternative to the present state of affairs was “perverted,” Horkheimer argues, after Christianity “became the bedfellow of the state.” Even so, traces “of the drives and desires which religious belief preserved” could be “detached from [their] inhibiting religious form and become productive forces in social practice.”¹³

This process of detachment and reinvention summarizes my basic approach to religion throughout this book. In each of the chapters that follow, I attempt to map out the social, economic, and historical conditions under which certain religious drives central to sport have become sources of profound disruption for the very institutions—leagues, governing bodies, media companies—that have historically cultivated a profitable religious idealism. This disruption is not only the work of critical scholarship; it is also apparent in the efforts of journalists, fans, players, and other members of sport institutions who recognize that crises surrounding several of sport’s highest religious ideals provide unique opportunities for activism and change. I maintain that reconsidering sport-religion relationships in this way is commensurate with appreciating sport as a site for political unrest.

Operating from a different ideological standpoint, sport culture scholars and theologians have often celebrated sport’s capacity to ritualistically transport adherents out of the profane patterns of everyday life and into the sacred time of live events. In these cases the sacred is posed as superior to the quotid-

Excerpt • Temple University Press

ian, existing as a unique and separated source of hope and order. For example, Charles Prebish argues that sport turns “chaos into cosmos” and provides “a place of safety from the ghosts and demons that populate ordinary space”; Michael Novak maintains that both religion and sport lift us toward an experience “full of exhilaration, excitement, and peace . . . more real and more joyous than the activities of everyday life—as though it were *really living* to be in sacred time” as opposed to the “jading of work, progress, history”; Joseph Price views the U.S. sport calendar as a series of ritual transitions “from the chaos of secularity to the cosmos of sport, from cultural malaise to corporate hope”; and Eric Bain-Selbo writes that the sacred time of sport is “simply more meaningful and valuable than other time.”¹⁴ The mechanical tedium of quotidian life *desacralizes* the world, and sport offers a chance—perhaps one of the last remaining chances—to “*resacralize* our lives.”¹⁵ Harry Edwards goes so far as to claim that sport is the only “universal popular religion in America,” and the idea that sport might supplant denominational religions, or has already done so, is common among sport culture scholars and popular commentators alike.¹⁶

Scholars in sport culture are increasingly calling into question these moral and temporal distinctions between profane and sacred. In their recent book *Religion and Sports in American Culture*, Jeffrey Scholes and Raphael Sassower argue that there is “mounting evidence that the sacred and secular do not operate in two separate domains in twenty-first century culture” and that anyone looking to “cleanly separate the religious from the non-religious” in sport is likely exaggerating the distinction in order to pick a fight.¹⁷ Such a fight can certainly be principled. Robert Higgs and Michael Braswell worry, for example, that conflating religion and sport distorts the moral potential of faith, transforming it to the avarice of competition:

The danger of attempting to make sport a religion, even one qualified by the word “popular,” is the distinct possibility of an opposite effect, legitimizing religion as sports, trivializing the grand purposes of religions in spite of failures that all human institutions experience. Having the world’s largest congregation or Sunday school, becoming top dog in the manner of national championships, and providing services for membership can easily become more important than providing services “for the least of these” in a community.¹⁸

Higgs and Braswell propose rethinking the sport-religion relationship as akin to that of “oil and water, which seems analogous to Jesus’s metaphor of the things of Caesar and the things of God.”¹⁹ The problem with this proposal is that, much like Eagleton’s proposal, it is mostly a thought experiment. Re-

Excerpt • Temple University Press

ligious, state, and corporate institutions have been working together for too long to make separation realistic. In fact, the presumed boundary between sacred and profane has been breached by the very people who would seem most opposed to profaning faith via commerce, such as religious leaders and proselytizing athletes.

As William Baker explains, sport and religion have developed together through a history of mutually beneficial accommodations: Puritan requirements for quiet reflection on Sundays were lifted, and Sunday is now one of the most important sporting days in the U.S. week; believers shifted their attitudes toward celebrations of the flesh in sport, especially as pleasurable spectacles afforded religious leaders an opportunity to proselytize; sport reformed from a background of wanton violence to adopt moralistic rules and structures, sanitizing both games and bodies (e.g., testing for performance-enhancing drugs); and, understanding its influence over visibility and alumni support, denominational colleges and universities enthusiastically integrated sport with religion.²⁰ These accommodations are apparent today in the popular branding of Evangelical Christianity in, for example, major- and minor-league baseball “Faith Nights,” where athletes testify to their faith and church leaders give away bobble-head dolls of Biblical characters like Noah, Moses, and Samson.²¹ Since the mid- to late nineteenth century, the idea of “muscular Christianity”—a characteristically Christian commitment to health and masculinity—has been aligned with athletics on the premise that sport was an arena for Christian outreach.²² In 1858 prize fighter Orville “Awful” Gardner (thus nicknamed because he had bitten off an opponent’s ear in a barroom fight) testified to his Christian conversion in a New York City church and used his celebrity to convert others, becoming one of the United States’ first muscular-Christian athletic evangelicals.²³ Today his heirs hold group prayers on the field after games, and offer up their talent as a public testament to God’s grace.

Not all people of faith are on board with these partnerships. Thoughtful debates among theologians about the ethics of public prayer in sport, for example, point to a more general unease about such interdependencies.²⁴ These are important and meaningful philosophical problems, but the focus of my book is on the practical economic and historical conditions under which sport reconciles religion and the market.

The boundary between sacred and profane is porous in sport, even if we attempt to draw it at a formally theological or denominational level. We run into similar problems when characterizing sport as a form of “civil religion,” a construct that captures some of the importance of sport’s religious imagery but often simplifies its politics.²⁵ As Sean McCloud argues, studies on sport as popular religion are often characterized by functionalist understandings of

Excerpt • Temple University Press

religion.²⁶ To borrow from James Carey, sport culture studies are “functionalist” when they treat ideology “as a device for releasing tension” and satisfying needs, rather than as something connected with larger “structural forces.”²⁷ The frequent focus in sport culture studies on profane-to-sacred transport summarizes this functionalist tendency most clearly. By no means do I view such studies as ingenuous or illegitimate. They capture a very real experience central to sport participation, one that I have had myself at ballparks and stadiums, with family and friends. My concern is with the ontological assumption upon which profane-to-sacred transport is founded—that the sacred is separated from and morally or experientially superior to the profane—and the related idea that the *essential* function of religion in sport is ideological escape.

Given the realities of contemporary sport media production, the more sustainable position is that sacredness is both a product of “profane” cultural forces (e.g., economics, politics, media representation) *and* an expression of hopefulness and desire for separation from those forces. This is part of a more generally dialectical view of sport and religion. The idea is not to resolve a metaphysical fight in the direction of either religion or materialism but to recognize that in terms of practical, cultural production, these forms of experience and commitment are interrelated; they create irresolvable tensions that mobilize a variety of social practices, ranging from proselytizing to forming labor unions.

In response to both of these predominant visions of religious escape I propose approaching sport-religion relationships through the lens of negative theology. Not to be confused with Apophatic theology (a project of characterizing God through negations), the negative theology I refer to comes out of the so-called theological turn in critical and cultural theory, philosophy, and literary theory and traces back to thinkers in the Frankfurt School.²⁸ Negative theology is a critique of history and a practice of interpretation ideally suited to understanding the problems and possibilities of conjuncture in elite televised sport. It advances two premises that I find especially important. First, it opposes interpretations of social experience as *either* metaphysical *or* materialist. It allows, instead, a back-and-forth migration between religious images, terms, and ideals and their secular, economic, and politicized analogues.²⁹ Second, it recognizes a process whereby theological images become detached from their institutional appropriations and mobilized against the very notions of historical progress they have traditionally upheld.³⁰ Negative theology interrogates several assumptions underlying the antagonisms and ruptures within, and projecting out from, present-day elite sport. An overview of those assumptions provides an initial sense of how and why negative theology might be both practically and theoretically important as a critique

Excerpt • Temple University Press

of history and as an approach to interpretation, especially in light of current states of unrest in elite televised sport. This discussion serves as a preview of my approach in the coming chapters.

Sport and Negative Theology

The term “theology” is ordinarily associated with the systematic study of the nature of God or with justifications of religious belief and doctrine. Theology in this sense is fideistic, apologetic, confessional, and denominational. It is a discipline predominantly identified with churches and seminaries, and less (as debates among scholars in religious studies suggest) with secular academic institutions.³¹ In contrast, critical and cultural theorists invoke the term as a framework for locating a radical or “wholly other” alternative to our current moment, in which market logics have penetrated every aspect of public and personal experience.³² Theology in this sense is largely materialist, secular, and atheistic.³³ These two conceptions of theology represent divergent projects (save for their intersections in leftist movements in twentieth-century Judaism and Christianity, or in contemporary liberation theology).³⁴ Yet they share a common lexicon for imagining history in fundamental contrast to the present day. What critical and cultural theorists are attempting to capture in theology, then, is the insistence that the present state of affairs is not inevitable, that other possibilities for social and political order exist and can be realized in our own time.³⁵ The most immediate context for this second sense of the concept is the theological turn in contemporary philosophy, critical and cultural studies, and literary theory, a moment that incorporates the projects of diverse thinkers like Giorgio Agamben, Slavoj Žižek, Jacques Derrida, Alain Badiou, Terry Eagleton, and others. As Roland Boer notes, this moment has been curiously disconnected from the theological thought of earlier Western Marxists such as Ernst Bloch, Walter Benjamin, Theodor Adorno, and Max Horkheimer.³⁶ Among the rare exceptions have been reengagements with Benjamin, particularly in the writings of Agamben, Žižek, and Derrida.³⁷ I do not examine the reasons behind this disconnect, nor do I investigate any one of these thinkers’ larger theological projects beyond their relevance to my own book.³⁸ My interest, more broadly and more practically, is in how critical theorists have looked to theology to recover capacities for historical critique that seemed foreclosed in their particular philosophical and political moments.

I am not looking to advance negative theology as a grand theory of sport and religion. My approach throughout the book is more characteristically strategic: I rely upon theorists and concepts from the Frankfurt School and from the more recent theological turn based on their relevance to the particular

Excerpt • Temple University Press

contexts and problems that interest me.³⁹ My thinking is especially influenced by Benjamin because he connected theology, history, and media technologies in a way that is relevant to problems of religion in elite televised sport. But I do not view an association between sport and negative theology as necessarily Benjaminian (especially since Benjamin never wrote about sport, and guessing at his thoughts on the topic seems beside the point). Negative theology is, for me, a theoretical “wager about what will work” to address some very specific problems.⁴⁰ What justifications can we locate, from within current sport culture contexts, for moving away from the position that religion serves essentially as an outlet for ideological escape? What related insights can we gain about the processes of change, and the foreclosures of those possibilities, currently underway in elite sport? And on what terms can we project alternative futures?

Sport, Conjuncture, and Theology

For thinkers of the contemporary theological turn, theology offers a potentially radical alternative to the current social order at a moment when theorists debate whether any approach to criticism or activism can be invented that does not simply reinvest in the political and discursive structures it opposes.⁴¹ This capacity to imagine a “wholly other” alternative to the present state of affairs traces back to the thinkers of the Frankfurt School, even if that connection is not always acknowledged.⁴² Max Horkheimer wrote that a theological perspective allowed critics to conceive of “something other than the world, something over which the fixed rules of nature, the perennial source of doom, have no dominion.”⁴³ As Eduardo Mendieta summarizes, critical theologies have been characterized by a “refusal to grant immanence the last word.”⁴⁴

Sport might seem the last place one should look for hope for an alternative future. Many fans, players, and commentators perceive sport as ideally “apolitical” (and thus attempt to prohibit political discussion), while many academics perceive it as “actively *anti*-political” (and thus dismiss it as a context for social change).⁴⁵ In practical terms, neither position is sustainable. Political struggles break through all the time, and the impossibility of their containment means that sport projects an idealized image of society (a level playing field, a separated time and space that transcend difference and inequity) and at the same time stages constant profanations of that image. Thus, as critical and cultural scholars have long insisted, sport is not merely a site for repression. It can also, as Ben Carrington argues, “under specific circumstances, offer a space through which oppositional politics could be fought and won.”⁴⁶

Excerpt • Temple University Press

Another way of putting this is that sport can and should be studied in relationship to broader historical conjunctures, especially as an institution that exerts unique influence across a complex structure of social relations. As Stuart Hall defines it:

A conjuncture is a period in which the contradictions and problems and antagonisms, which are always present in different domains in a society, begin to come together. They begin to accumulate, they begin to fuse, to overlap with one another. The ideological becomes part of the economic problem and vice versa. . . . The aftermath of the fusion, how that fusion develops, its challenges to the existing historical project or social order . . . *all* of that arc constitutes conjuncture.⁴⁷

Of interest are the processes by which these tensions and contradictions begin to “accumulate” or “fuse” at a specific historical moment, becoming conspicuous or legible in such a way that they precipitate protective responses from powerful officials, or activist mobilizations, or legal challenges, or predictions of alternative futures. Conjunctures do not guarantee radical change. They do, however, open spaces for potentially new conceptions of historical reality.⁴⁸

Hall emphasizes that “in a conjuncture, different kinds of contradictions can play the leading part, but they never define it entirely.”⁴⁹ While I am making the case that religious antagonisms are central to broader crises in elite sport, then, I also recognize that it is a series of *interrelationships* between religious idealism and various practices of production (political, economic, technological, medical) that are beginning to fuse together in this arena.

Although he does not use the same vocabulary of conjuncture, Benjamin implies something similar in his conception of the “now of recognizability.” What Benjamin adds (and I cover shortly) is a way of thinking about how theology relates to the accumulation and fusion of contradictions at particular historical moments. In *The Arcades Project*, he argues that the claims and burdens of the past can “attain legibility” or “accede to legibility” as images, but “only at a particular time”; “each ‘now’ is the now of a particular recognizability.”⁵⁰ On this “now” Benjamin writes:

It’s not that what is past casts its light on what is present, or what is present its light on what is past; rather, image is that wherein what has been comes together in a flash with the now to form a constellation. In other words, image is dialectics at a standstill. For while the relation of the present to the past is a purely temporal, continuous one, the relation of what-has-been to the now is dialectical: is not progression but image, suddenly emergent.—Only dialectical images

Excerpt • Temple University Press

are genuine images (that is, not archaic); and the place where one encounters them is language.⁵¹

Images in this “now” are dialectical because they force a confrontation between an idealized version of the past and the present reality.⁵² In such moments, ideal and actual history do not split apart or diverge but rather *come into constellation*, and their imagistic juxtapositions constitute a disruptive legibility. The result, Benjamin hoped, would be a political awakening wherein the “secret affinity” between “what was” and “the now” would finally “disclose itself.”⁵³ These constellations represent “dialectics at a standstill” because even as the images that constitute them emerge from a historical continuum, the resulting tensions are not resolved teleologically (that is, they are not synthesized or rendered as a new image of progress). Rather, the now of recognizability represents a “contracted” moment during which, as Samuel McCormick explains, we are able to step outside the flow of sequential history and experience the contradictions of a time when “the actuality of the present and the potentiality of the future begin to intermingle.”⁵⁴

This sounds abstract, but it actually describes a condition of practical possibilities. Benjamin insisted that a historical object had to be “blasted out of the continuum of historical succession” to force a “confrontation” between that object’s past idealization and present reality.⁵⁵ Under such conditions our “now” could be “charged to the bursting point” with dialectical tensions, and past images could gain “retroactive force” and work against the continuity of progress through the present.⁵⁶ This is, as I argue throughout this book, what is starting to happen around religious images central to elite televised sport.

My consistent point of reference for this process is the athletic body. As historical (and, as I cover below, theological) objects, athletic bodies represent a presumably natural continuum of ever-advancing human potential. Sustaining that image requires, as I maintain in Chapter 2, a continuous flow of historical successions: of record-breaking performances, of newly emergent stars, of increasingly superendowed bodies. A temporal disruption or cut in that continuity represents at least two important possibilities: (1) that some practice of sport cultural production (e.g., audiovisual capture, biotechnological enhancement, labor struggle) has constituted a unique moment of legibility around long-standing but typically concealed antagonisms and (2) that this is a moment of risk, when progressive social change and reinstatements of idealized history are both possibilities.

Hall emphasizes that a conjuncture is a “narrow period of crisis” that occurs between the “relative stability” of a dominant social formation and the appearance of “cracks” in that formation. Central questions for any con-

Excerpt • Temple University Press

juncture, then, are how long it will last and in what directions its constitutive struggles and attempts at resolution point.⁵⁷

Similar considerations of time and opportunity were important for Benjamin. As he warned in “Theses on the Philosophy of History”:

The true picture of the past flits by. The past can be seized only as an image which flashes up at the instant when it can be recognized and is never seen again. . . . For every image of the past that is not recognized by the present as one of its own concerns threatens to disappear irretrievably.⁵⁸

The now of recognizability is, as McCormick puts it, “*a time in which time is running out.*” In order to “make a difference in the present,” the image must compel immediate action; we must understand that “recognition is not enough.”⁵⁹ The changes that may emerge from our own moment of recognition are part of an uncertain future. But this does not mean that the critic’s or the activist’s obligation to respond can be deferred. There is urgency to act in the present, since the moment opened by the image is already passing by.⁶⁰ In addition, dialectical images and objects are visible not only to activists or critical scholars. They are also available for appropriation by the very institutions they threaten to undermine.⁶¹ This means that critical and cultural work on sport, just as with any dominant popular institution, operates under a “logic of ‘no guarantees.’”⁶² The relations that shape history and social experience are not essential or inevitable, and this means that political struggles can and will change them. But the results are always uncertain. This is not to romanticize contingency or indeterminateness: any new structure of relations will be *real* in the sense that it will exert material force over peoples’ lives.⁶³ The idea is to recognize that our “now” is not inevitable and then, in Grossberg’s words, to gain a “better understanding of where we are so that we can get somewhere else (some place, we hope, that is better—based on more just principles of equality and the distribution of wealth and power).”⁶⁴

As Hall argues, ideological struggle does not involve the wholesale displacement of one unified system of thought by another. Rather, movement toward a new historical stage occurs within a terrain defined “by the existing balance of social forces,” the unique shape of a “concrete conjuncture” within which political action is limited. The balance of forces can be changed, but there are no “final guarantees” regarding the direction or results of that change due to the “openness’ of historical development to practice and struggle.” Hall is not elevating change as intrinsically good. Rather, he is acknowledging the limits of what we can claim or predict about new configurations that may or may not emerge from the crises of a particular conjuncture. Ideological

Excerpt • Temple University Press

struggle matters not because it guarantees results in advance but because it exerts *real, material force* within, through, and perhaps against existing relations of power.⁶⁵

Borrowing from Grossberg, my hope is that theology might serve as a resource for constructing “possibilities, both immediate and imaginary” out of the concrete historical circumstances we confront in contemporary sport cultures. Theology should not be viewed as a totalizing theoretical framework for understanding sport. More modestly (and also more practically and materially), it summarizes antagonisms basic to sport cultures that are currently *in the process of* crystallizing around points of rupture. I view it as a framework especially suited to the moment this book captures.

As an example for thinking through sport in terms of conjuncture, consider Jean-Marie Brohm’s seminal collection of essays *Sport—a Prison of Measured Time*. Brohm’s essays were written in response to conditions between 1968 and 1972, a period of heightened debate over “bourgeois institutions and values” brought about by events like the 1968 workers’ strikes in France, the Vietnam War, and controversies over the 1968 and 1972 Olympic Games.⁶⁶ Brohm saw these debates penetrating sport and thus creating a condition where consensus over its political purity had broken down: “Sport can no longer be naïvely treated as a value unaffected by the political and ideological class struggle. Sport is now a *central political issue* in the social conflicts of our time. Things can no longer go along in the same way.”⁶⁷ Scholars of the contemporary theological turn have identified similarly a moment of crisis wherein discussions over what constitutes progress in a capitalist society can no longer proceed in the same way. The book *Paul’s New Moment*, for example, opens with such a scene: in the aftermath of the 2008 global financial crisis, “the capitalist world is coming apart at the seams” and “the perils of greed built into the very heart of the structures of capitalistic commodification” are exposed; yet serious critiques from the Left have been marginalized. For critics invested in the theological turn, theology seems one of the few disciplines through which one can seize on this moment and “mount an uncompromising stance against capitalism and its supplement, neoliberalism.”⁶⁸ If, as critics of the contemporary theological turn insist, theology is an appropriate response to conflicts in contemporary capitalism, I think that that response should include sport, especially because sport so effectively sublimates the competitive avarice of the market—physical labor, individualism, violence, productivity—into religious imagery.

Brohm recognized that the crises surrounding sport in his own moment would develop beyond the scope of his writings, but he indicated that it was “already possible to discern some general tendencies which can only be aggravated in the future.”⁶⁹ I write from a similar position, not knowing how the

Excerpt • Temple University Press

crises that interest me will turn out but confident that there are underlying, emergent patterns that point toward opportunities for productive conflict and change.

Negative Theology and Sport Culture Criticism

The conception of theology that critical theorists advance is “negative” in at least two senses that I view as important to sport-religion relationships: a negative theology (1) counters interpretations of social experience or economic production that take place through binary understandings of profane vs. sacred or immanent vs. transcendent and instead recognizes how these categories of experience are dialectical and (2) outlines a process for detaching religious images, tropes, and objects from their institutional appropriations and mobilizing them against the very notions of historical progress they have upheld. Both are built on a principle of negation basic to critical theory. The critic identifies a historical object (say, an athletic body) that is made up simultaneously of proclaimed unities (e.g., “natural” advances in human-athletic potential) and internal contradictions (e.g., biotechnological enhancements). My use of “human-athletic” here (and throughout the book) summarizes a common articulation between dreams of human progress and measurements of athletic achievement, an articulation that constitutes idealized tropes like transcendence while at the same time mobilizing a host of profane political and economic interventions. Creating awareness around the conflict between idealization and actuality represented by (and operating within) the object reveals how that object “fails by its own standards.” The hoped-for result of negation is a *positive* alternative to the present state of affairs, an alternative currently foreclosed by the seeming unity of the object and the broader structure of social relations that it holds together.⁷⁰ To be clear, these are not the only elements that might fall under negative theology, whether the reference is to the Frankfurt School or the more recent theological turn. They are elements that I find especially relevant for sport culture criticism, and it is in this specific sense that I review negative theology here.

Interpretation: Hovering between Materialism and Religion

Critics interested in a negative theological approach often look for convergences between religious and materialist ideas when they read texts.⁷¹ Adorno describes both his and Benjamin’s view as an “inverse” theology that is “directed against natural and supernatural interpretation alike.”⁷² And Benjamin writes that when theologically examining works of art, those works must be interpreted with attention to “their political aspects as much as their fashionable

Excerpt • Temple University Press

ones, their economic determinations as much as their metaphysical ones.”⁷³ The general idea of critical theologies is, as Rudolph J. Siebert summarizes, to allow “religious and theological contents to migrate . . . into the secular discourse” of various academic disciplines and “into communicative and even political praxis.”⁷⁴ These migrations enable the critic to hover, as David Kaufmann puts it, “between the twin perils of uncritical piety and materialist reduction.”⁷⁵

This hovering is especially important for sport because arguments about religion and ideological escape—whether articulated as opium or as profane-to-sacred transport—are premised on a separation between the immanent world of politics and the mythic time of games. As Richard Gruneau warns, setting apart sporting experiences as superior or more hopeful in contrast to the depressing, commercialized, or instrumental nature of profane existence causes critics to treat religious imagery as “*outside* . . . the process of active history,” so that “the meanings encoded in play, games, and sports become depoliticized and recreated in mythic forms that have powerful ideological overtones.”⁷⁶ This problem is especially represented through the influence of Mircea Eliade in scholarship on sport and religion.⁷⁷ Eliade assumes an experiential and moral separation between sacred and profane that is characteristic of the functionalist assumptions I critiqued above: “Religious man [*sic*] lives in two kinds of time, of which the more important, sacred time, appears under the paradoxical aspect of a circular time, reversible and recoverable, a sort of eternal mythic present that is periodically reintegrated by means of rites.”⁷⁸ Here “circular” and “sacred” time run parallel but separately through the human condition, and “reintegration” involves ritualistically tapping into the sacred as an ontological structure universal to all cultures. This ontological separation suggests that experiences are “religious” in the sense that they transcend the influence of ordinary cultural forces.⁷⁹

As religious studies scholars insist, in contemporary commercial media production the borders between profane and sacred or immanent and transcendent have become so “clearly porous” that distinguishing between these categories is now an “unhelpful” and “unsustainable” basis for criticism.⁸⁰ Accordingly, conceptions of sacredness or transcendence must attend to the specific conditions of power, culture, and mediated production within which they are constituted.⁸¹

Specific to sport, Scholes and Sassower argue that “the sacred and secular do not operate in two separate domains” in twenty-first-century sport culture. “If,” they suggest, “one is unable to cleanly locate and separate the religious from the non-religious, as was once thought possible,” then one is justified in turning one’s attention toward how religious values and experiences of time “are expressed in culture,” where the secular and religious continuously co-opt

Excerpt • Temple University Press

one another.⁸² This is not to say that denominational institutions and sport leagues are the same thing, or that attending games and observing sacraments carry the same implications for belief and spiritual commitment. Relationships between sport and religion can be figurative, but they are not arbitrary. They must be understood within specific contexts: for example, where the proselytizing and commercial interests of Evangelicals and sport leagues converge, or where an advertising campaign appropriates religious images to promote a mega-event. Each sport culture context presents a unique challenge for delineating religious and secular imagery and identifying the particular ideological interests served by their figurative and denominational constructions, their intersections, and their attempted separations.

Within these contexts, particular theological images, tropes, or objects can come to represent or condense the complex social relations that constitute a conjuncture. They become theological, in this sense, when they represent the act of making experiences *sensible* by interpreting back and forth between immanence and transcendence, the material and the metaphysical. As Kenneth Burke argues in *The Rhetoric of Religion*, “Theological principles can be shown to have usable secular analogies that throw light upon the nature of language.”⁸³ Drawing on a foundational analogy between “words” and “The Word,” Burke writes: “What we say about *words*, in the empirical realm, will bear a notable likeness to what is said about *God*, in theology.”⁸⁴ When we talk about the “supernatural” or the “ineffable,” then, our words are “necessarily borrowed from . . . the sorts of things we can talk about literally . . . (the world of everyday experience).”⁸⁵ Extending Burke’s focus on the supernatural, Joshua Gunn argues that this analogical movement between immanence and transcendence is essential to the way language works, even when describing the most mundane experiences.⁸⁶

Sport discourses are often structured around the same analogical movement. It is not hard to find journalists or fans celebrating the supernatural (a record-breaking performance that defies physics or stretches the horizons of human possibility) in terms of the material world (muscular physique, technologized training, measured time). Or, moving in the opposite direction, economics and politics constantly encroach on what fans and journalists view as protected territory: the sacred, the transcendent. Also, as sport culture scholars have long emphasized, content-level parallels between sport and religious institutions are readily apparent. In his seminal book *Sociology of Sport*, for example, Edwards details correspondences between “traditional religions” and sport: both have saints (iconic departed figures), ruling patriarchs (owners, coaches), gods (star athletes), high councils (governing bodies), scribes (journalists, broadcasters), “seekers of the kingdom” (fans), and shrines and houses of worship (arenas, stadiums, halls of fame).⁸⁷ To read these parallels

Excerpt • Temple University Press

descriptively—simply classifying religious and secular overlaps—would be to miss how they signify deeper structures of thought and experience and, moreover, how they represent the constant potential for contradiction and rupture.⁸⁸

Benjamin saw in theology a form of experience that enabled the transformation of “elements of archaic myth” into “keys for deciphering” material, political potential.⁸⁹ As Susan Buck-Morss emphasizes, this approach aimed at drawing on the constitutive relationships between worldly and religious phenomena while avoiding the oversights of a worldview that compartmentalized materialism and theology. In Benjamin’s view, theology keeps Marxism from falling “into positivism,” while Marxism keeps theology from falling “into magic.”⁹⁰ Benjamin maintains tensions between the theological and materialist poles of his thought to avoid either of these excesses.⁹¹ His refusal to resolve their inconsistencies has made for uneasy reception of his work. As James Martell puts it, Benjamin has been “too mystical for the Marxists and too Marxist for the mystics.”⁹² This sounds like a perfect middle ground for critics of sport and religion.

History: Theological Critiques of Progress

A negative theology rejects idealizations of history as teleologically or divinely guided progress. Rather, history is a catastrophe that violates the very religious ideals it is so often structured around. In response, the critic is to use theological images *against* the progress-oriented histories they support in a recovery or reappropriation of those images’ suppressed political potential.⁹³ In sport this reappropriation would mean rejecting the continuity of human-athletic advance, insofar as it is supported through theological tropes like eternity, transcendence, and revelation. In recovering the suppressed political potential of these tropes and reading them against the grain of progress, a negative theology actually aims at a *positive* alternative to the present: a refiguring of social relations invented out of possibilities not totally defined by the prevailing economic, political, or symbolic structures of our own time.⁹⁴

In “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” Benjamin famously depicts the problem of progress through Paul Klee’s painting *Angelus Novus*. The angel is turned toward the past; while most people perceive history as a cumulative succession of events, he sees it as a “catastrophe,” a continuous piling up of unaddressed wreckage. The angel “would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed,” but the storm of “progress” propels him violently toward the future.⁹⁵ As Michael Bowman argues, the “crucial question” for Benjamin was “how to shake off the burden” of this catastrophe, how to rescue the truth content of the past from the “ash heaps of history.” This

Excerpt • Temple University Press

boiled down “to a question of how to ‘read’ [history’s] ruins,” both as a form of criticism and as a “model of social praxis.”⁹⁶

For Benjamin, the work of addressing the true disaster of history falls to historical materialists, whom he distinguishes from “historicists.” Historicists empathize with the victors and in doing so affirm a view of history as linear and cumulative progress, which hides the lasting imprint of past injustices in the present.⁹⁷ Historical materialists, by contrast, “seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger” and use it “to explode the continuum of history.”⁹⁸ In order to “win” against the march of progress, the historical materialist must, Benjamin insists, enlist “the services of theology.”⁹⁹ This is, again, characteristic of a more generally negative theological approach: a call to recover and reappropriate the suppressed political potential of theological images. As Gunn writes, Benjamin’s aim is to deploy these images instrumentally, as “rhetorical effect[s]” designed to “keep the past alive in the present” and motivate change.¹⁰⁰ For Benjamin, theology aids the historical materialist in recognizing that the past is always unfinished, that every generation inherits responsibility for its unsettled debts.¹⁰¹ In failing that responsibility we allow the dead (the literally deceased, as well as the anonymous and voiceless) to die again.¹⁰² Here negative theology’s *interpretive* refusal to resolve tensions between religion and materialism becomes a framework for attitudes toward historical change.

These problems of progress pervade sport, especially (as I argue from Chapter 2 forward) surrounding images of human-athletic advance and their attending theological tropes. The seemingly immutable (ahistorical, transcendent) nature of that advance serves as a constant justification for forward historical motion in sport. Very few cultural institutions make the past so seemingly naturally obsolete because very few institutions build their histories so thoroughly around moving, competing, measured, and evolving bodies. Under certain conditions, however, the “stigmata of past experience” inscribed on athletic bodies can become legible *through* those theological ideals that ordinarily obscure the catastrophes of historical progress.¹⁰³

Athletic Bodies as Theological Objects

Elite athletes represent especially powerful embodiments of theological conflict. Buck-Morss notes that for Benjamin, a historical object has no inherent theological meaning. Rather, theological meaning emerges only out of an object’s construction in a specific context. When an object’s representation of some utopian hope (e.g., human freedom) “is brought together with its historically present form, the double focus illuminates both . . . [the] utopian

Excerpt • Temple University Press

potential and, simultaneously, the betrayal of that potential.”¹⁰⁴ The simultaneous representation of promise *and* betrayal is important, as it relates to the object’s capacity to force a dialectical confrontation: to act, in Benjamin’s words, as a “force field in which the confrontation” between an idealized past and present-day truth “is played out.”¹⁰⁵ Thus, our “now” can be “charged to the bursting point” with dialectical tensions between ideal and actual history.¹⁰⁶ For Benjamin this confrontation “makes up the interior (and, as it were, the bowels) of the historical object.”¹⁰⁷ Under certain conditions the conflict between ideal and actual history churning *within* a historical object foments energies sufficient to create a “breaking point,” a wakening disruption that “bursts forth” from the historical continuum.¹⁰⁸ In conceptualizing athletic bodies as theological images, then, I am suggesting that they encapsulate these conflicts and energies, which are variously suppressed or made visible across multiple representations and historical contexts.

The theological construction of athletic bodies is especially apparent where sport condenses the broader tensions of capitalist production. Even the most damning assessments of sport have allowed that athletic bodies might constitute (more than merely reflect) crises that move political and economic struggle forward.¹⁰⁹ Brohm, for example, critiques sport as repressive at every level, its ideals “naively peddled” as cover for its actual dramatizations of capitalist violence.¹¹⁰ Yet he also recognizes that sport is central in bringing that violence to light, as athletics index the body’s greater relationship to capitalism:

Apart from the act of labour, the dominant and fundamental way man [*sic*] relates to his body in state capitalist society is through sport—inasmuch as it is through the model of sport that the body is understood in practice, collectively hallucinated, fantasised, imagined and individually experienced as an object, an instrument, a technical means to an end, a reified factor of output and productivity, in short, as a machine with the job of producing the maximum work and energy. And it is precisely this competitive sport and the conception of the body which it exemplifies which have now entered a *period of continuous crisis*.¹¹¹

This is a good summary of the basic interrelationship between athletic bodies and conjuncture. As Brohm argues, athletic bodies both “refract” and “aggravate” the political, economic, and social conflicts of which they are a part.¹¹² Elite athletes, then, do not simply mirror crises in capitalist production. By representing a “double focus” on idealization and instantiation, they embody tensions sufficient to disrupt historical continuity.