The Sydney Cricket Ground: Sport and the Australian Identity

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This paper explores the interrelationship between sport and culture in Australia and seeks to determine the extent to which sport contributes to the overall Australian identity. It uses the Syndey Cricket Ground (SCG) as a case study to demonstrate the ways in which traditional and postmodern discourses influence one's conception of Australian identity and the role of sport in fostering identity. Stoddart (1988) for instance emphasises the utility of sports such as cricket as a vehicle through which traditional British values were inculcated into Australian society. The popularity of cricket in Australia constitutes perhaps what Markovits and Hellerman (2001) coin a "hegemonic sports culture," and thus represents an influential component of Australian culture. However, the postmodern discourse undermines the extent to which Australian identity is based on British heritage. Gelber (2010) purports that contemporary Australian society is far less influenced by British traditions as it was prior to WWII. The influence of immigration in Australia, and the global ascendency of Asia in recent years have led to a shift in national identity, which is reflected in sport. Edwards (2009) and McNeill (2008) provide evidence that traditional constructions of Australian sport minimise the cultural significance of indigenous athletes and customs in shaping national identity. Ultimately this paper argues that the role of sport in defining Australia's identity is relative to the discourse employed in constructing it.

Introduction

The influence of sport in contemporary Australian life and culture seems to eclipse mere popularity. Sporting personalities are omnipresent in the media, participation in sporting activities is imbued in the lifestyle of Australians from an early age, and the immense financial involvement of both the government and the corporate sector has made sport a keystone economic industry. Indeed, Australian sports 'stars' and 'icons' maintain a revered place in society, frequently attaining some of Australia's highest public honours.

While the pervasiveness of sport in Australian culture is clear, the extent to which sport contributes to Australia's national identity is a more complex issue and has subsequently been the topic of considerable scholarly debate. Crabb purports that "The pursuit of national identity requires an emphasis on the features of an Australian "narrative" which identify a heritage, as well as institutions, held in common." (Crabb 1985, p.19). However, Australian society is comprised of a diverse range of experiences, nationalities and cultures thus complicating the notion of such a grand narrative. The discursive emphasis placed on Australia's indigenous origin, colonial past, and multicultural present, may thus yield contrasting views of the nation's identity and the place of sport therein.

Using the Sydney Cricket Ground (SCG) as a case study, this paper will attempt to demonstrate the ways in which traditional and postmodern discourses influence our

understanding of the role and significance of sport in Australian culture and identity. In particular, the popularisation of sports such as cricket in Australian society can be interpreted as a manifestation of traditional British cultural values. However, a postmodern critique undermines the presupposition that Australian identity is based on British tradition, and moreover questions whether an objective identity can indeed be reached. Ultimately through these two conceptual frameworks, this paper will attempt to show that the significance of sport in Australian cultural identity is relative to one's approach to theory and knowledge.

The Sydney Cricket Ground

This site was selected, as it is one of Sydney's premier sporting venues, utilised extensively by a variety of different Australian sports and codes including Cricket (both Test and One Day matches), Australian Rules Football, Rugby League and Rugby Union fixtures. The ground can also be seen as an Australian sporting institution and cultural icon. Due to the centrality and pervasiveness of sport in Australian society, the Sydney Cricket Ground has emerged as one of Sydney's preeminent cultural and historical landmarks since its formal establishment in the mid 19th century. This study of the SCG will focus on demonstrating the extent to which the stadium both embodies and contributes to Australia's cultural heritage, and indeed the wider national identity.

Australia's Sporting Tradition

British Heritage

Australia's commonwealth heritage can be viewed as a prominent factor in establishing its national identity, with evidence of British ideology and customs permeating Australian legal and cultural traditions. The significance of sport, therefore, in defining the Australian identity relates to both the way in which sport was used to instill "traditional" values into Australian society, and the degree to which such values were embraced and cultivated.

The Sydney Cricket Ground can be seen as a product of traditional Australian culture, dating back to its British colonial heritage. Through the popularisation of sports such as cricket in Australian society, British values and customs were inculcated into Australian lifestyle, and over time have been adopted as Australian traditions. Historically, the site of the SCG has inextricable links to Britain dating back to 1851, in which the land was dedicated to the British Army as a soldier's cricket ground and garden. The Sydney Cricket Ground, as the preeminent and most historic venue for cricket in New South Wales, can be seen as symbolic of the constant presence of British culture in Australia since its foundation.

Stoddart, expounding on the work of Gramsci (1975) and Bourdieu (1978) purports that sport represents an important institution through which British imperial values were indoctrinated into its colonies, and that such values were fostered through the influence of educational and religious powers (Stoddart 1988). He asserts that through the playing of team sports, "participants were thought to learn teamwork, the value of obeying constituted authority, courage in the face of adversity, loyalty to fellow players, and respect for the rules." (1988, p. 653). It is thus conceivable that

traditional Australian values such as "mate-ship" and "loyalty" were instilled and reinforced through the participation in sport. Such a notion extends to other popular and uniquely Australian sports such as Australian Rules Football which, as a team sport, similarly embodies these admired, traditional principles. Furthermore, the introduction of other sports from England such as horse racing, have had a profound cultural and economic impact. Stoddart rightly points out horse racing's "traditional association with the English landed gentry" and "established gambling tradition." (1988, p. 656). The prestige and popularity of the annual Melbourne Cup epitomises the way in which this English sporting custom has become an established Australian tradition.

The cross-national diffusion of cricket into Australia is of particular cultural significance. The process of diffusion refers to the "transmission, adoption and eventual acculturation of an innovation by a recipient population." (Kaufman & Patterson, 2005, p. 83). Here Stoddart propounds that, "To play *cricket* or play *the game* meant being honest and upright, and accepting conformity within the conventions as much as it meant actually taking part in a simple game." (1988, p.653). Such sentiments are also echoed by Sandiford (1998), who describes the traditional didactic function of cricket in British society:

> "[British] educators encouraged cricket participation among their students in the profound conviction that it produced better citizens as well as scholars.... [They] argued that organised sports could bring order and discipline to aggressive groups of rich, spoilt and rebellious brats..." (1988, p. 14).

Such a reading of the game supports the proposition that the role of cricket in the development of Australian culture surpasses that of a mere leisure activity, and actively sought to imbue certain standards of behaviour into Australian society.

However, the popularity of cricket in countries such as Australia, India and South Africa far surpasses that of many other Commonwealth nations. Canada is a notable example where the sport has never been fully embraced as a prominent cultural tradition despite its close links to England. In Australia, the place of cricket in society recalls what Markovits and Hellerman (2001) coin a "hegemonic sports culture," in that the sport dominates the emotional attachments of the general public. Such an attachment is clearly reflected in the amount of coverage dedicated to the game on average in print, television and online media. Kaufman and Patterson (2005) attempt to account for the trends in the global diffusion of cricket. Their study places a strong emphasis on the role of social entrepreneurs in popularising the sport. While in Canada and the United States the introduction of cricket succumbed to class elitism, Kaufman and Patterson argue that social conditions in the late nineteenth century Australia were more conducive to the burgeoning of cricket as a social practice, with participants ranging in socio-economic class. They furthermore maintain:

> "The presence of many British military men… coupled with the colony's distance from England, made English pastimes particularly valuable to Australians, particularly those activities that did not require fancy concert halls or awareness of the latest fads and fashions." (2005, p. 100).

While favourable social conditions allowed cultural entrepreneurs to successfully promote cricket in Australia, as the popularity of the sport grew, public sporting infrastructure such as the Sydney Cricket Ground would allow cricket to be transformed into a cherished cultural phenomenon by reaching a larger audience. As a large-scale public venue, the SCG became instrumental in propagating and communicating to the general public the ideals and values that cricket embodied. Most notably the Sydney Cricket Ground is one the main venues for the biennial Ashes test series, which has been contested between Australia and England since 1882. Martin (1980) explicates the importance of such sporting contests between Australia and England in forging a sense of national identity in Australia. He suggests that Australia's early cricketing tradition represented a "symbolic battle against the motherland," (1980, p. 1012), which helped to forge a sense of pride and self-worth in the colonies. Expounding on the work of Inglis (1979), he suggests that in defeating England in these international games "Australia had not only proved itself against England, but shown its worth in a ritual which peculiarly encapsulated British virtues of manliness and fair play." (1980, p. 1012). Stoddart similarly expresses the impact of such accomplishments, stating "Satisfaction with sporting victories as symbolic of national achievement was particularly pronounced in cricket." (1988, p. 688). The Sydney Cricket Ground, having housed a number of famous Ashes victories for Australia, is thus in a broader sense symbolic of Australian sporting excellence. The cultural impact of sports like cricket in forging Australia's national identity in a traditional sense, is due to both the way in which cricket was used to instill cultural values in Australian society, and the degree to which such values were propagated and embraced in Australia.

Postmodern Critique

The Concept of a "Nation" and Tradition

The dichotomy of Crabb's (1985) conception of a national identity, which focuses on heritage and institutions that are "held in common" and the pluralism in Australia's cultural makeup, represents a considerable challenge in ascertaining the place of sport in Australian national identity. The very notion of a metanarrative to describe Australian identity is in direct conflict with Lyotard's idea of the "postmodern condition." (Lyotard 1997). Accordingly, a pertinent question that exists in evaluating the significance of sport in the Australian identity, is whether or not a "national" identity exists in Australia or can exist *per se*.

This issue can be investigated in relation to the broader concept of the "nation" or "nationalism." Anderson's conception of a nation is "an imagined political community" that is both "inherently limited and sovereign." (Anderson, 2006, p. 6). This seems a more moderate reworking of the sentiments of Gellner, who argues that "Nationalism is not the awakening of nations to self-consciousness: it *invents* nations where they do not exist." (Gellner 1965, p. 169). One must therefore be wary of the idealised or inaccurate ways in which nationalism is constructed. Here Hobsbawm's critique of history is also apposite to note, particularly as a criticism of "tradition." He warns that "all over the world people, and political movements, define utopia as nostalgia: a return to the good old morality" and recalls the sentiments of Ernest Renan, that "Getting history wrong is an essential part of being a nation." (Hobsbawm 1998, pp. 34-35). The implication of such scholarship is two-fold. Firstly, one must be

skeptical of the way in which the role of sport, and ideals it promoted, have been overstated or embellished by traditional discourse. Furthermore, if nationalism is established in order to create a sense of "community," so too are the "narrative" elements used to foster this sense of unity.

Critique of British Tradition

The influence of Australia's British heritage in shaping Australian national identity has been contested by recent scholarship. Gelber (2010) notes the influence of World War II in Australia's changing relationship with Britain. He purports that "There is no doubt… the Second World War shattered many of the old certainties" referring to Australia's military affiliation with Britain due to its Naval presence in the Asian/ Pacific seas. (2010, p. 89). He characterises British imperialism in the post war period as "a story of rapid economic, political and imperial decline" and describes "Britain's diminishing relevance to the economy and major political interests of Australia" (2010, p. 89); whereas the simultaneous ascension of America globally would begin to have a far greater impact on Australian culture and politics. Thus it could be argued that while British customs such as sport were influential in shaping Australia's early identity, changing global and political factors in the twentieth and twenty first centuries caused a change in Australia's cultural identity away from the traditional. This is congruous with Rashid's model of national identity, as "a continuously evolving process of negotiation, not a rigid entity." (Rashid 2007, p. 1).

The impact of immigration on Australia's evolving national identity is certainly significant. Rashid (2007) identifies the abolition of the White Australia policy and the development of multiculturalism as a critical change to Australia's identity. The subsequent influx of immigrants from diverse backgrounds and nationalities into Australia, however, further dilutes the potency of British tradition as a common narrative element fostering national identity. Phillips (1996) aptly demonstrates both the way in which Australia's national identity has evolved to incorporate multiculturalism, and the contrasting conceptions of identity that exist within Australia by juxtaposing the views of older and younger generations of Australians. His findings indicate that, "the aging 'Digger' generation are fighting a rearguard action to defend Australia's sacred national symbols and boundaries", whereas younger generations are more inclusive and have effectively broadened such national boundaries, allowing for "a strengthening of economic and political ties with Asia, increased social rights for Aborigines and an increasingly cosmopolitan civic culture." (1996, p. 128). These studies strongly attest to the fact that the way in which modern Australian society views itself has diverged away from the traditional. British imperial values are far less persuasive cultural influences in contemporary Australian society, while America's global prominence, multiculturalism, and more recently the rapid growth of newly industrialised Asian economies, have significantly influenced Australian politics, culture and economy.

Such changes in national identity have manifested themselves in Australian sport. While sporting traditions such as the Ashes series and annual Rugby League ANZAC test continue to reflect our historical alliances and heritage, extrinsic global factors have significantly altered Australia's place in international sport in recent years. The most notable example of this is Australia's admission to the Asian Football Confederation in 2007. The strategic importance of the Asian region in terms of

economics and foreign affairs, given the rapid growth of economic giants such as China, has thus given rise to significant changes in Australian sporting culture.

An analysis of the SCG itself, through the discursive lens of postmodernism, undermines the traditional view that the venue is a product of British cultural values. The ground is put to various uses other than simply to facilitate cricket, or indeed sports of any kind and instead represents a postmodern pastiche of differing experience often with nothing to do with British culture. The fact that popular American musical artists Madonna and Green Day have held concerts at the venue, for instance, reflects the notion that the Sydney Cricket Ground is merely a space that is put to a variety of uses, and means vastly different things to different people.

Ethnic Minorities and Sport

A further criticism of the traditional discourse in relation to sport is that it downplays or omits the significance of indigenous Australian culture and immigrants in shaping national identity. Edwards (2009) for instance argues that traditional histories of sport in Australia focus almost exclusively on Eurocentric sports, and undermine the cultural and social importance of indigenous sports and games in Australian history. McNeill (2008) explicates how the traditional "gendered personification of national character" in Australia, of a white, masculine "caricature," permeates the invented tradition of Australian identity. As a consequence, he argues that the Australian sporting tradition both undermines the contributions of indigenous athletes, and facilitates racism and exclusion. In applying this tradition to Australian Rules Football, McNeill concludes,

> "This process of exclusion is not merely a contingent effect of the attempt to define a national culture in terms of any set of necessary and sufficient conditions but is, rather, its inevitable product." (2008, p. 26).

There is, however, evidence that participation in sports such as Rugby Union and Rugby League, whose roots are traditionally English, has actively fostered a sense of identity in certain minority groups, and promoted their culture in the broader sense of the nation. Bergin (2002) stresses the importance of such sports in fostering the "cultural identity" of Maori immigrants in Australia. He propounds that achievement in sporting arenas is an essential vehicle for Maoris in Australia for cultural exchange, economic advancement, and to gain social acceptance, while trans-Tasman sporting contests allow Maori Australians to "discover and experience their own cultural traditions." (2002, p. 257).

Conclusion

Australia's national identity and the role that sport plays in fostering this identity is a matter of discourse. British sporting traditions have no doubt played a substantial role in shaping Australian cultural values, and hold historical importance. However, to attribute Australia's national identity too squarely on the influence of British sporting tradition as a unifying factor seems inadequate, firstly because of the pluralistic nature of Australian society, and moreover because of the inherent ambiguity in achieving an objective Australian identity.

The primary purpose of the Sydney Cricket Ground is to facilitate the demand for sports such as cricket and Australian rules. Yet in the context of Australian culture and identity, the site quintessentially embodies Australian sporting heritage, and played a role in propagating the ideals represented in sport, many of which were derived from British culture. The SCG is however not limited to this traditional function, and its uses will continue to adapt to reflect changes in Australian culture and identity in the future.

Notes on Contributor

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