

Book Review

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Albert Grundlingh, Potent pastimes. Sport and leisure practices in modern Afrikaner history

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There is no shortage of books in South Africa that deal with sport, its history and its place in society. Equally prominent are books that document the demise of apartheid, the rise of democracy, identity politics, and the construction of South African nationhood in various eras. More infrequent, however, are books that deal critically with leisure and sport as key components of identity construction of a specific ethnic grouping, possibly because this could be seen as an essentialist or deterministic explanation of taste or aptitude. Albert Grundlingh, Head of the History Department at Stellenbosch University, negotiates a competent course between these traps and delivers a useful addition to the field. He combines (social) history with cultural studies and the sociology of sport to explore a variety of sport and leisure practices and their alignment with Afrikaner cultural and political aspirations from the 1930s onwards. By incorporating a cultural studies approach, Grundlingh is able to show that even less 'serious' undertakings in society reveal the operations of ideology and so-called 'deep politics'. In particular, the fact that these sport and leisure practices are *embodied*, makes them apt for an examination of some of the different ways in which a nationalist ideology can be asserted and enacted in society.

In his introductory chapter, Grundlingh presents an overview of his argument in the context of recent South African historiography and the contribution of postmodern thought to identity construction. He makes the point that the disenchantment with the grand narratives of nationalism makes it rewarding to look at the myriad other ways in which identity may be avowed through various signifying practices related to leisure and recreation. He shows how the communal participation in leisure and

recreation can act as social glue that binds communities together; a typical example of Benedict Anderson's imagined communities. *Grundlingh* starts with a chapter on dog racing in Johannesburg and then proceeds to examine the founding of the beach resort Hartenbos. In both these chapters, ideas regarding appropriate forms of leisure activities for *Afrikaners* are associated with specific class and political positions. Thereafter, four chapters are devoted to various aspects of rugby and the politics of nationalism and nation-building loom large in these discussions. The last chapter takes a look at cricket and its relatively late entry in the Afrikaner leisure market. In all these chapters, conflicting ideological positions *within* Afrikaner culture as well as with English-speaking and black South Africans are teased out to reveal the intricacies of cultural politics.

In the chapter on dog racing in Johannesburg, *Grundlingh* situates this pursuit within the context of Afrikaner urbanisation and adapting to industrialisation in the early decades of the twentieth century. From about 1932 to 1949, dog racing was one of the most popular leisure activities, for both men and women, and drew up to 10,000 spectators to the Wanderers each week. The link between gambling and working class people was perceived by middle-class cultural brokers to be inimical to upholding Afrikaner ethnic identity and values. A campaign by the Dutch Reformed Church, eventually in conjunction with the Protestant Church, succeeded in leading to the official termination of dog racing in 1949. *Grundlingh* demonstrates how working class Afrikaners embraced dog racing as a means to adapt to the demands of city life and express agency in an otherwise bewildering environment. It is also suggestive that from the 1930s onwards, during the heyday of Afrikaner nationalism, emphasis was placed on encouraging so-called appropriate forms of leisure that were underpinned by ethical and moral mores. Clearly, the *volk* was not doing what its middle-class leaders felt it should be doing, and intervention was needed in order to bring the working class back into the nationalist fold post-1948. This chapter, with its emphasis on class position in relation to the consumption of (mass) culture, offers interesting parallels with Richard Hoggart's influential *The uses of literacy. Aspects of working class life* (1957).

The next chapter flows seamlessly into a related topic, namely the use of beach culture to instil and maintain Afrikaner traditions and values. *Grundlingh* traces the origins of the popular Afrikaner beach resort on the Cape coast, Hartenbos, to the founding of the *Afrikaanse Taal- en Kultuurvereniging, Spoorweë en Hawens (ATKV)* in 1930. This organisation, which emanated from the South African Railways, was tasked with nurturing the culture of the working class Afrikaner, specifically because of the perceived negative impingement of cosmopolitan urban culture. To this end, a beach resort that catered for the **Afrikaner** railway worker was envisaged with the

establishment of Hartenbos in 1936. Grundlingh offers an engaging exploration that focuses on the imperative to provide appropriate forms of leisure for the *volk*: 'How free time was spent had an important bearing on the spiritual welfare of the *volk* and it preferably had to conform to the totalising impulses of nationalism' (p. 41). Grundlingh demonstrates how nature, as in so many other manifestations of nationalism, was enlisted to underscore the project of *volk* and fatherland. Nature, in conjunction with traditional pastimes and social leisure practices, therefore enacted a social imaginary that held sway beyond the confines of a beach holiday. As in the previous chapter, the point of entry is largely based on class position. This provides an interesting parallel with the burgeoning appreciation for the Drakensberg as a middle-class recreational landscape, primarily for English-speaking South Africans, in more or less the same period.¹

The next four chapters chart various aspects of rugby's association with Afrikaner (male) culture and its ability to adapt to changing imperatives of identity and nationhood. The discussion is again predicated on the notion that leisure and sport crystallised Afrikaner cultural and political endeavours and mobilised nationalistic impulses far beyond the rugby field. Accordingly, the alignment between male identity, patriotism and nationalism was made explicit in the belief that the game espoused middle-class Afrikaner qualities and values. Grundlingh shows how rugby came to assume the character of a carnivalesque *volksfees* enacted in male-dominated spaces.² The changing political landscape from the 1960s onwards and South Africa's exclusion from international sport led to the need to change public perceptions regarding the identity of rugby. In the next two chapters, Grundlingh outlines how rugby aided in breaking down racial divides, specifically by means of the iconic World Cup in 1995. The 'spontaneous ideology' of national unification offered a potent mechanism by which a formerly Afrikaner sport was re-coded and mythologised as an inclusive cultural practice. The last chapter on rugby looks at the outcomes of the professionalisation of the game in the globalised world: the rise of commercialisation, commodification, sponsorship, and the logic of consumer capitalism. In pandering to the demands of the marketplace and losing its amateur status, Grundlingh shows how rugby has succumbed to the imperatives to be entertaining spectacle, and offers an intriguing discussion on the explicit link between rugby and Pentecostal religion that has appeared recently.

The last chapter examines the ideological role of cricket in South Africa. Grundlingh argues that although both cricket and rugby had (upper) middle-class connotations in Britain, South African rugby was assimilated to serve the nationalist cause far more successfully than cricket, which continued to hold imperialistic and elitist associations for many Afrikaners. Despite strategic attempts at nation building via the Anglicisation

1. See J Pickles, 'Images of landscape in South Africa with particular reference to landscape appreciation and preferences in the Natal Drakensberg', unpublished thesis, University of Natal, 1978.

2. See also C Villet, 'Loftus as Afrikaner heterotopia: The life world of rugbymentality', *Image & Text* 19, 2012.

of Afrikaner cricket players, it only succeeded in attracting a wider following after republic in 1961 when it expressed the seeming cohesion between Afrikaans and English-speaking audiences. Grundlingh pays specific attention to the manner in which two exceptional Afrikaner cricket players, Kepler Wessels and Hansi Cronje, were represented by the media; by means of this, he returns to his earlier argument regarding the links between ethnicity, class, material conditions, and leisure.

Grundlingh succeeds in an engaging narrative that will also appeal to those who have no real interest in 'sport' as such. What is indicative is how ideology operates fluently across platforms and through a variety of signifying practices to uphold ideological positions, whether this be imperialism, apartheid, or the post-apartheid rainbow nation. This book is competent and engrossing – my only niggle, as someone trained in the significance of visual culture, is that the semiotics of the visual imagery could be used more, thereby adding another dimension to the discussion.