

Book Review and Analysis of *Sports Geography* by John Bale

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Synopsis

Sports Geography by John Bale dives into the correlation between geography and sports, specifically concepts such as space, place, landscape, geographical diffusion, geographical imagination, economy, and culture. By relating these concepts to sports, Bale presents the idea that geography is in fact a key concept to both past and present sports. Bale focuses on three themes which include “the location and spatiality of terrestrial phenomena, human-environment relations, and regional differentiation” while tying in the concepts mentioned previously (Bale 1). Sports are far more complex than simply throwing or kicking a ball. They are also rituals and spectacles, disciplinary mechanisms, and representations that have an impact on political, economic, and social ties. The relationship between sports and geography is not a new concept. The two share similar attributes such as environmental influences like weather, temperature, and altitude that can impact a sport event just as it can impact a location. (Bale 2). Bale presents the idea that the term ‘sport’ is more encompassing than most people give credit. True sport is different than recreation and play. Both place and space play crucial roles in the definition of sport by depicting spatial limitations (Bale 11). Modern sport did not just come to be but was influenced by geographical development such as globalization through national and international organizations. Rules and regulations have firmly distinguished sports today from their original prototypes in history (Bale 36). Regional dimensions have had an impact on how various cultures throughout the globe have adopted sports. There are obvious spatial variations between sports as one transitions between cultures such as Jamaica’s track athletes compared to Cuba’s baseball players (Bale 59). People’s connections and beliefs towards sports vary from region to region and culture to culture (Bale 161). Growth is a major topic because it embodies the everchanging landscape between sports and geography. Landscape change due to various sports is common. One can look at more obvious changes such as golf courses, baseball stadiums, and

ski slopes. Less obvious landscape alterations can include running and biking trails (Bale 129). Location is a prominent factor due to movement, sports clubs/facilities, and player production. A prime example on the significance of location and growth is the summer Olympic stadiums built every four years in a symbol of prosperity, only to be forgotten with time (Bale 84). This also has an impact on society and the economy. A region that is hosting the Olympics will see a boom in economic and societal prosperity, but shortly thereafter will return to how it originally was (Bale 108). Throughout his book, Bale's in-depth analysis proves the immense impact that geography does in fact impact sport and should be a topic of contention between geographers.

Critique

Sports Geography by John Bale connects the concepts of sports and geography in an easily digestible way to the everyday reader. Bale not only provides thorough definitions for the sport and geography specific words throughout but gives in depth examples to further exemplify and relate the meanings.

Personally, I found the book to be rather thought-provoking. Geography and sports are two concepts I never thought to relate. A sports fan myself, I never realized just how deep the complexities of sports go—especially in terms of geographical concepts. Geographically, sports make huge impacts on society, economics, politics, and the landscape in many ways. Bale emphasizes these points through various illustrations and examples, which allows the reader to break down perhaps unfamiliar concepts.

Overall, this is a book I would recommend, especially to those who hold interests in both sports and geography. My only qualm is that some sections I found myself skimming and then having to reread due to the large amount of information presented at once. However, Bale manages to break it down so the reader may better be able to take it in.

Analysis

When one thinks of sports, they often think of loud stadiums, premier athletes, and extraordinary talent. It's not often that people think of the true intricacies of sports that impact society throughout the globe. Sports are far more complex than simply throwing or kicking a ball. There are numerous concepts involved that determine how a sport is played and the regional success it hinges on. *Sports Geography* by John Bale combines themes from both geography and sports to examine the economic, societal, political, and topographic impacts that they have on modern society.

It is important to understand the concept of sport before delving deeper into how geography and sports are interlinked. There is a difference between 'recreation' and 'sports'. While they influence one another, recreation isn't dependent upon results and records. It pertains more to fitness, healthy lifestyles, and fun. It is movement for the sake of movement. Sports, however, are "almost invariably subjected to rigorously enforced spatial parameters" (Bale 9). A prime example that distinguishes the two concepts from each other is running. These spatial parameters for sports are seen in the following example: "The Olympic 100 meters final cannot be run on a beach or in a field or on a running machine in an aerobics studio. It has to be undertaken on a very specifically designed track, precisely measured, and timed to one thousandth of a second. The track must be of a prescribed surface and there is no room for mistakes on the part of the athlete. It is a serious business" (Bale 7). Running for recreation can be done pretty much anywhere without concern for distinct rules and regulations (Bale 8). This paradigm for recreation and sports can be applied to every field of activity, as often there is a more competitive, regulated side to what starts as recreation.

The globalization of sports has ultimately impacted society, economy, politics, and topography in big ways. The growth of sports from a recreation, to a local, and finally a national level has been firmly noted throughout the globe (Bale 42). On a cultural level, a sports effect on the aforementioned concepts does as well, impacting how a sport is globalized. An example on how culturally sports differ can be seen with fan interaction in international soccer matches. For example, in Mexico fans are known to get rowdy and rambunctious, whereas in a place like the United States the fans are not as into it. Hispanics also exhibited higher attachment to soccer than Caucasians. Results suggest that the Hispanic sample in this study were more significantly more motivated than Caucasians by game quality, the desire to escape, socialization, entertainment, and achievement” (Jensen et al. 2016). When a sport is popular in a country, it has a large economic, societal, and political impact with changes in landscape as well. This can be seen with the popularity of the summer Olympics internationally. Every four years, a new country is chosen to represent the Olympics and are tasked with providing stadiums for the various events. The country often has to build these large stadiums to house both athletes and spectators. This allows the country to bring in a large influx of tourists who not only pay for events, but also hotels, food, sightseeing, and other amenities. Politically, this can be seen as a chance for countries to come together in unity. An example is when North Korea sent its first female gymnast to the Olympics in 2016, giving a connection to the world that has not been done in this sport previously. There is a picture of the South Korean gymnast taking a selfie with the North Korean gymnast which garnered hope from many (Taylor 2018).

“Two broad approaches have been used in geographical studies of sport focusing on the identification of where superior athletes come from. Until the 1930s, such approaches were rooted in the geographical philosophy of environmental determinism. By the 1950s, however, a

spatial analytic approach to sports geography had succeeded it, mirroring the trend within the broader field of human geography” (Bale 59). Human activities are influenced by several factors that include climate, soil, vegetation, topography, relief, and altitude. Geography has added onto environmental determinism’s impact of sports by adding in cultural and historical factors (Bale 60). “In promoting sport, or individual sports, different nations may adopt different emphases. Some may feel that most of their ideological eggs lie in the welfare or mass-participatory sport basket and they therefore devote a considerable effort in engaging a large proportion of the population in sport, albeit at modest levels of performance when measured by the standards of the world’s élite” (Bale 65). For example, this is the model the United States follows. There is an exceedingly large number of people who participate in sports, while only a select few actually succeed and continue on to the next level. In other countries like North Korea or Russia, “sports ministries may feel that they ought to put a disproportionate amount of investment and effort into producing a small number of highly visible world-class performers” (Bale 65). A country’s view towards how athletes are made has an impact on how the population views sports.

Sports can be viewed as patterns. These patterns include sports clubs/facilities, movement, and variations in the production of players internationally. Globalization hinges on these patterns (Bale 42). “Modern sport continues to adjust geographically, not only in the ways described in the last two chapters but also through processes of relocation and through the growth and decline in importance of different sport locations” (Bale 84). Economics and profit influences the patterns due to the involvement of modern sport in the entertainment industry. For example, a club which trains athletes may relocate due to a variety of reasons outside of simply landscape. These factors include profit, sports shift success in growth, growth/decline in

economy, and overall desire for success. Ultimately, the choices for the relocation for clubs does have a geographical impact, especially on the community it leaves behind.

Landscape change is an unavoidable factor with the growth and globalization of sports. Some are temporary, but others are permanent to the landscape of a region. One particular example of a landscape change includes that of stadiums. Stadiums, throughout time, have evolved to the mammoth structures that they are known to be today. They have strong boundaries, encompass thousands of acres in some instances, have a synthetic field and concrete bowl, and totally segregate the players from the crowd (Bale 134). These stadiums take up a large amount of space to build, altering the landscape of a region to do so. Skiing is another sport that has required changes to the natural landscape. In the beginning it took place on natural slopes whereas today slopes are assisted by wooden or even concrete structures that are more durable and can stand the test of time. Another example of how skiing has modified the landscape is through the use of artificial snow, artificial ski slopes, and artificial lighting at night. These significantly impact the ecosystem of an area when introducing this type of technology into a previously ecological area (Bale 138).

When looking at the relationship between geography and sports, it is important to look at the different types of geography that are present. These include mental maps and imaginative geographies. “Mental maps are images that are received from various stimuli; imaginative geographies are those that are constructed” (Bale 176). Because it is impossible for one to visit every sports game and venue with our own eyes, we consume sports-place images presented by the media and draw the conclusion what they are actually like through the outside sources. “Gary Whannell (1992) has put it, ‘television does not simply relay sport to us. It presents a particular view of sport.’ Successful clubs often obtain greater media coverage than their unsuccessful

colleagues, hence obtaining free advertising which helps develop the link between sport and place” (Bale 162). The media has a large impact on how people view the ecological, societal, political, and economical impact of sports by painting it in a light that is favorable or not favorable. Imaginative sports geographies, on the other hand, are created rather than recorded. They are created through the use of writing, movies, photography, and art. While claiming innocence, there are often alternate meanings behind the imaginative works detailing sports. One poem that has a deeper meaning is *Twice a Week the Winter Thorough* by A.E. Housman. In this poem, a man is playing baseball and cricket twice a week through winter in order to keep his sadness at bay. However, by looking at the time that this was written, economical status of the man can be inferred by the sports being played and where they are being played (Tearle 2021). This is indicative of many other works that are related to sports.

Overall, sports geography is concerned with three concepts that have been documented in this essay. These include the spatial distribution of sports and how it’s changes over time, the changes to the landscape and the relationship between environment and those participating, and spatial and environmental change that occur within this area (Bale 5). By examining the relationship between sports and geography, a pattern emerges that shows just how the two are impactful globally. Without geographical concepts, sports may not be as established and regimented as they are in modern society. The impact sports have on a societal, political, and economic level are prevalent, especially as changes to communities and the landscape are made. Geography and sports are interconnected and will continue to evolve together.

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