

MODERN AGE

A QUARTERLY REVIEW



The New Pantheons of Our Civic Social Order

"A TECHNOLOGICALLY-SUPPORTED secularism would make men as gods whose mere desires transform material reality to suit their needs." So writes Dr. John Caiazza in the concluding section of his essay in this issue of *Modern Age*, "The Arrival of Techno-Secularism." The sentence quoted is only one of many insightful sentences to be found in an essay that alerts us to a phenomenon that poses clear and present dangers to American society and culture in the new millennium. Caiazza's essay helps to remind us of the continuing displacement of the values, principles, traditions, and institutions that are the foundations of moral, spiritual, and social order. The current signs of our decline and decadence as a nation and people now move beyond the prophetic warnings of great social thinkers like Irving Babbitt, José Ortega y Gasset, T.S. Eliot, and Russell Kirk.

Today an especially dramatic sign of deterioration is that of the sports scene, often referred to as "Sports Culture." Even those who are not sports enthusiasts, or barely attuned to sports matters, are becoming aware of what is happening in the world of sports. It is, in fact, a world from which one can hardly escape, even for one day, and even in times

of national crisis. On television, in periodical literature, and in the national newspapers, sports are in constant and unalleviating evidence. In educational institutions, at all levels, sports are an incontestably dominant concern and subject.

Sports celebrities become "icons" indiscriminately revered by young and old alike. The focus of our consuming attention, they ascend to a mythic status in the minds and hearts of many Americans and are transformed into heroes and even martyrs. An entire city will suddenly explode in ecstasy when its victorious sports team returns, to be paraded and garlanded as new divinities of athleticism. Sports contests become panegyric occasions for frenzy, climaxing even in pandemonium. Revels are the order of the day, when the only veneration we seem to summon is impelled by athletes of prowess.

The nature of our loyalties is repeatedly tested and measured by the extent of our acceptance of a reigning sports culture and its particular ethos. This ethos has much to reveal about us as a people, both individually and collectively. It tells us something about character and culture; about our principles and

standards; about the inner and outer condition of our institutions and polity. In short, it tells us something about the condition of American civilization as we enter the twenty-first century.

To be sure, the forms that a super-athleticism takes can be anchored in effort, discipline, devotion, if not in imagination, which are admirable qualities in themselves. But when the law of measure, of moderation, is violated to the point of excess, a resultant impressionism and superficiality accrue. Unfortunately, the classical view of human existence, one that counsels order, is one that, along with the moral virtues, is now rejected in a postmodern world that glorifies imperial might in all of its passions and irrationalisms.

Increasingly sports culture also becomes a metaphor of violence as is variously demonstrated in a number of major sports. The offshoots of this orientation of violence are to be observed widely, whether in the participation of the onlooker (in the context of professional wrestling, for instance) or in actual acts of violence by players themselves and by supporters (in soccer and hockey matches). What we end up with here is a transmutation of courage and fairness in contests of strength as the heroic concept itself is turned on its head. "Over-reaching glory is a ruin," Aeschylus rightly reminds us.

There are many incidents, large and small, that illustrate the magnitude of violence that can affect sports and that seems to be on the upswing. One recent incident, much in the news, discloses just how grave the problem is. The story of this incident, which occurred on July 5, 2000, at a hockey rink in Reading, north of Boston, Massachusetts, dramatizes the perils of Americans' adulation of sports. That, in this case, the story revolves around a summer practice game for boys, some barely in their teens, further heightens the significance of the event. At the

Reading rink, it appears, one of the fathers had organized a hockey match in which the three older sons of another father had been outplayed by the ten-year-old son of the organizer. The older children, who were on the losing end of the match, began "hitting, fighting and slashing," though the game itself was supposed to be "stick practice, not a contact practice."

The two fathers, both in their early forties, one a 156-pound carpenter, the other a 270-pound truck driver, soon got into a fierce dispute as the yelling turned into a brutal fight. The confrontation ended with the death of the smaller man, accused by his assailant for encouraging rough play, whose head was almost severed from the neck during the struggle. This vicious episode, according to authorities, was to mark the first time that parental violence in youth sports was to lead to a death and, in turn, to a trial that resulted in a jail sentence for the man beating to death the other father. The physician performing the autopsy, it should be added, reported that the fatal injury took place when an artery to the brain, protected by a layer of ligaments, was torn by a force equal to 2,000 pounds of pressure—a figure that tells us something about emotions and attitudes that go out of control, even in youth sports.¹

Collegiate and professional sports have their own ongoing scandals and casualties, as sports pages in the press, as well as television news, regularly inform us. We see entire teams suddenly converging on the field to battle it out over some questionable incident or an official's decision. We see spectators, some or many of them inebriated, celebrating a victory, or lamenting a defeat, taking part in protracted mayhem causing property damage and physical injuries, some serious. We see college and university students angrily vying with each other to buy tickets for a major contest, and then following up the final

results of a contest by proceeding *en masse* to register their own muscle and glee (or ire) by setting fires that threaten entire buildings and their occupants.

"Sports madness" can take on different forms, some of these dangerous and sometimes fatal, others ridiculous and grotesque. On television the level of decadence is magnified manyfold, as was confirmed recently by the extraordinary success of a Fox network special, "Celebrity Boxing," which attracted 15.5 million viewers, especially males between the ages of 18 and 34. The boxing event on March 13, 2002, featured Tonya Harding, the former Olympic skater whose supporters had at one time clubbed a rival, Nancy Kerrigan, in the knee with a lead pipe. Her opponent in the ring was Paula Jones, the selfsame woman who had lodged a sexual harrassment suit against President Bill Clinton. The Harding-Jones bout ended with the latter's defeat in the second round, and was the last fight in a card that featured contests between once well-known television personalities, including actors from "The Partridge Family" and the "Brady Bunch" of yesteryear. The executive producer in charge of "alternative programming" believes that, in the future, "the pool of names looking to participate will grow because of the success of the show." (Other special editions of "Celebrity Boxing" are being planned.) Alas, there is no end in sight for the staging of sports impieties, happily enacted by "faded" celebrities and avidly embraced by viewers and advertisers alike.²

On the campuses of many American colleges and universities the size and volume-capacity of the library can hardly compete with that of a sports arena into which millions and billions of (taxpayers') dollars have been poured. Individual faculty members who protest the commercial priorities that school administrators often place on sports programs are muzzled or punished or fired, and

always mocked, when they cite improprieties in recruitment and in athletes' grades. Nothing must impede the expansion of athletic programs even if this means reduced appropriations for other educational programs—especially in the humanities. Indeed, courses in sports culture attain heavy enrollments and are counted as important as courses in the humanistic disciplines.

The spectacle of sports, in all its glitter, inevitably overshadows the reputation of an institution of higher learning in the outer world, and we come to recognize its standing on the basis of conquests in team sports and the reputation of individual players, many of whom never graduate. Even when an accomplished athlete is guilty of violating the law, whether for taking a bribe or drugs or excessive alcohol, his transgression is deemed an embarrassment, to be excused after he has been in "rehabilitation." Everything possible is done, then, to retain or to favor *the* athlete.

Student and alumni loyalty revolves around sports, especially those that draw the greatest attendance *and* gate receipts. One need only look at the sprawl of parking lots built close to sports facilities, often at the sacrifice of greenery, to discern how sports occupy a pivotal role in the life of an educational institution. No aesthetic consideration can possibly be entertained when it comes to an entire highway being re-routed so as to facilitate speedy entrance to a dazzling sports center in which thousands of spectators are united, shoulder-to-shoulder, in a cause that signals true loyalty. Nor does it seem to faze anyone in the least that the budget for sports programs and for the salaries of coaching staffs can be astronomical.

One could go on at great length in recording other examples of how sports culture in America mirrors and intensifies the abnormities and the aberrations that are the benchmarks of a secular

epoch. It is the rapidity and the immensity of the process of displacement that, as Caiazza reminds us, is most alarming, as foundational values are usurped so as to make room for the new social and moral order. Every axiomatic belief has to be abandoned in favor of what is immediate, sensational, titillating; of what most excites our sense of adventure, our emotions, our instincts and appetites; of what, in short, gives us free rein. Sporting events, as we witness them in their mystique and ubiquity, help to define ersatz religion in the postmodern world, with its vast structures, its priesthood, its phalanxes of young, highly-paid warriors, its doctrine of wins and rewards, its community of worshippers in their neo-pagan ritual.

A regnant emerging sports culture is thus another highly visible sign of the displacement of Spirit in a profane, secular age that seeks to triumph even over mortality itself. Sports events provide for participants and spectators the basic constituents of the romantic attitude: thrill and adventure, fantasy and yearning, spontaneous connection and unity. Too often, then, these events become a debauch that liberates one's emotions and behavior from any discipline of restraint or reason. They become, in effect, a means of escape from reality and responsibility, and dramatize utterly what Simone Weil calls "the power of the social element."

Idolatry is a dimension of the value that is now placed on sports in America, and is expressed in unbridled adoration of physical feats, and in bowing down to the things of the world. What is especially symptomatic of the constant obsession with sports is a consequential distancing from the "Permanent Things" as these should play an integral part both in our interior lives and in our higher selves and allegiances. What, we must ask ourselves, do these excesses tell us about ourselves, our society, our

culture? And what should we do about this situation, as it speaks to us in alarming tones? These are questions, however, that we hesitate to grapple with, our hesitation perhaps testifying to our intellectual and spiritual lack of courage in addressing ultimate questions.

The phenomenon of our national addiction to sports, and of the inestimable time, energy, attention, and funds we invest in them, inevitably points to the proliferating disease of social boredom that affects much of the population. We sink ourselves in sports, it seems, to such depths that it is obvious we do so in the absence of a deeper human purpose and meaning. Aimlessness and deracination produce boredom, and out of boredom, as Russell Kirk warns, "grow vice, crime, and the destructive compulsions of the mass mind." He goes on to ask a question that too many Americans simply refuse to ask, or dare to answer: "What better relief from boredom could there be than the demolition of the moral codes of the ages?"³

Americans' compulsive obsession with sports is still another symptom of a massive flight from the demands of moral responsibility, discipline, effort; it further underlines a confluent debasement of leisure as a "state of spirit" by turning it into mindless amusement, pleasure, recreation, frenzy. In essence a sports event devolves into a collective egalitarian refuge that provides temporary therapy for "hollow men," as T.S. Eliot expresses it, who hide in "death's dream kingdom." Our stadia are now the temples of physical feats, in which the cries of our enthusiasms soar beyond time and eternity, and in which the illusions and energies and passions of eternal youth rush on like unending chariots of fire. In these stadia we confirm our human solidarity as athlete and spectator are joined together in a common *agon*, the great contest that helps to raise one to godhood, if only for one splendid, fleeting mo-

ment.

Clearly our spiritual afflictions are many and deep but we choose continually to bury these, to keep them out of sight, to insist that the present moment is a never-ending moment for man who is at last superman. The enormous roaring crowds we unfailingly find in the sports stadia, which are our new churches, testify to a worldly religion of winning and all the miracles and rewards that thereof accrue. In these new

churches the life of the soul remains stagnant "in the lake which burns with fire and brimstone, which is the second death."⁴ We are without a doubt at the most precipitous stage of Western civilization when "the wisdom of our ancestors" has less and less a voice in human destiny—a voice now being drowned out by the roars from and the convulsions in the new pantheons of our civic social order.

—George A. Panichas

1. For the specifics of the information found in this and in the following paragraph I am indebted to Fox Butterfield's "Fatal Fight at Rink Nearly Severed Head, Doctor Testifies," *The New York Times*, January 5, 2002. 2. See Bill Carter, "Fox Puts Gloves on

Faded Fame and Achieves Ratings Glory," *The New York Times*, March 15, 2002, C1 and C2. 3. "The Problem of Social Boredom," *A Program for Conservatives* (Chicago, 1954), 101-139. 4. Revelation 21:8.

The Arrival of Techno-Secularism

John Caiazza

I

IN THE THIRD CENTURY, the dissident Christian theologian Tertullian asked rhetorically in the midst of a theological controversy, "What has Athens to do with Jerusalem?" He was condemning in effect the use of Platonic philosophy to defend the Christian religion and provide an intellectual basis for its theology.¹ The theme of the two competing cities has characterized the relationship of Christianity and Western civilization to this day. According to Leo Strauss, Western civilization attains its vitality and uniqueness because in it two major sources of knowledge and inspiration are in contention: the secular and the revealed.² Perhaps, ironically, it has been the fact that integrating revealed knowledge, as found in the *Bible* and in religious tradition, with secular knowledge has never been actually accomplished so as to provide the essential motive force for the advance of Western civilization.

In the third century the form that secular knowledge took was the neo-Platonic philosophy that the Hellenistic culture of the time inherited from the Greeks, hence Tertullian's reference to "Athens." This was the same neo-Platonism later inte-

grated into Christian theology by St. Augustine. While the source of revelation remained constant—the Gospels and the authority of the Western and Eastern bishops of the Christian church—the source of secular knowledge changed, from ambient neo-Platonism in the late ancient world to re-discovered Aristotelianism in the high middle ages.³ In modern times, however, secular knowledge has been represented not by ancient philosophy, but by modern empirical science, and the conflict has continued under the rubric of "religion versus science." It is in this context that the 150-year-old controversy between evolution and religion is best understood.

Professor Stephen J. Gould has recently published a book, *Rocks of Ages*, whose tone is, if not elegiac, somewhat tired, for in it Gould gives us the benefit of a professional lifetime's effort of a Darwinian publicist and scientist struggling with the religious enemies of Darwinian evolution.⁴ It may seem odd, therefore, that in this small book Gould praises no less than three popes, including Pius the Ninth, Pius the Twelfth, and John-Paul the Second. There is a reason for this, however, for the latter two popes published documents permitting Catholics to research and even to accept some of the main tenets of evolutionary "orthodoxy,"⁵ excluding the materialist thesis that all life

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