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Recommended Repository Citation
Bain-Selbo, Eric, "Sport as the "Opiate of the Masses": College Football in the American South" (2008). *Philosophy & Religion Faculty Publications.* Paper 1.
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Sport as the "Opiate of the Masses": College Football in the American South

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NOTE: A version of this paper was given at the 2008 Annual Conference of the Popular Culture Association/American Culture Association in March. It also represents a small part of a larger project entitled *Game Day and God: Football, Faith, and Politics in the American South* (forthcoming from Mercer University Press).

In a number of presentations and papers in the last few years, I have highlighted the array of myths, symbols, and rituals that infuse college football in the South with an aura of sacrality. I have shared survey data that suggested that college football fans in the South find their game day experience to be central to their communal and emotional lives. I also have detailed the ways in which the game day experience helps to create community across racial and class divides while also perpetuating those very divisions. In anthropologist Victor Turner's terms, I have shown how college football in the South both created *communitas* while also maintaining structure. In this paper I want to sharpen this latter analysis.

My question is this: If sport functions religiously, as college football appears to do in the South, then is it subject to the same kind of critique that Marxists and others have leveled against religion? For example, does college football in the South function as an "opiate of the masses"? Let me explain.

Karl Marx describes religion as the "*opium* of the people."[i] Along with his frequent co-author Frederick Engels, he argues that the character of a society is fundamentally shaped by the way in which it produces what it needs and how it organizes people through those means of production. This fundamental economic

base then gives rise to the superstructure. This superstructure is what we call culture. It includes art, religion, literature, and philosophy (social or political most importantly). In these various cultural manifestations we can find the dominant ideology of a culture, that core set of interconnected beliefs and values that shape a society.

Marx claims that the ideology of a culture is not neutral in regard to the various constituencies in that society. Ideology tends to support or justify the unequal distribution of goods and wealth. In other words, ideology tends to justify the superior position of the "haves" over against the "have nots." This makes sense because it is the "haves" who are in control of the means of production—not only for the most basic necessities of life, but also the means of cultural production. The "haves" control art, religion, literature, philosophy and much more. We might wonder, then, why the "have nots" put up with such a situation. The reason is that they too often fail to realize that the ideology and the elements of culture are simply human creations that serve some interests more than others. They see the ideology and the elements of culture as natural and obvious parts of the universe—not subject to refutation or even questioning. Alienation is the word that describes this condition in which people create an ideology and elements of their culture that they then do not recognize as their own creation. In short, they are alienated from the products of their own consciousness.

From a Marxist perspective, religion is the classic example of such alienation and of how a cultural institution comes to serve the hegemonic aims of

the ruling class or classes. The claim here is that the people fail to see religion as a human construction that serves some people better than others. Rather, religious elements are seen as essential parts of the universe—and God is understood as the creator of that universe. The moral laws of the universe are not those imposed by the "haves," but handed down by God. The commandment against stealing protects the property of the "haves" because the "have nots" fear eternal damnation if they break God's law (and, of course, the "haves" also have police and armies to guard their stuff). This still may not be enough for the "have nots" to accept economic and social disparity. Fortunately (in a sense), religion offers one important consolation. Despite the struggles of living as a "have not," as long as one follows along and accepts the status quo one at least can look forward to an eternal reward in heaven. Despite the injustice of economic forms like capitalism, religion acts as an "opiate" to pacify the "have nots" and preserve the advantages of the "haves."

This Marxist approach to culture has been influential to the work of many scholars attempting to describe and evaluate contemporary popular culture. Guy Debord's *Society of the Spectacle* is a great example. Spectacles are cultural productions that act upon the masses like an opiate—leading people through a life detached from the real processes of existence and from real relationships. While spectacles are a product of the entire culture, they nevertheless function to the benefit of the "haves" rather than the "have nots." This is because spectacles implicitly or explicitly support or justify the existing socio-economic order. The spectacle thus functions in much the same way that religion does. In the society

of the spectacle, the "illusory paradise that represented a total denial of earthly life is no longer projected into the heavens, it is embedded in earthly life itself."[ii] The spectacle gives the illusion of "heaven on earth"—leaving people oblivious to the real world, particularly the world of capitalist exploitation, alienation, and general social injustice. He concludes that the "spectacle keeps people in a state of unconsciousness as they pass through practical changes in their conditions of existence."[iii]

The consequence of the society of the spectacle for the workers or the "have nots" is that the fundamental structure of the socio-economic world remains outside of their control. He or she is simply a cog in the machine, with little dignity or respect—except, Debord notes, as a consumer: "Once his workday is over, the worker is suddenly redeemed from the total contempt toward him that is so clearly implied by every aspect of the organization and surveillance of production, and finds himself seemingly treated like a grownup, with a great show of politeness, in his new role as a consumer."[iv] He is the consumer of spectacles, ranging from the hottest concert experience to the newest technological gadget. These are all designed to usher the worker through life without ever confronting reality (e.g., the socio-economic structure itself, genuine human relations not distorted by that very structure). Thus, the spectacles are not real. "The real consumer has become a consumer of illusions," Debord argues. "The commodity is this materialized illusion, and the spectacle is its general expression."[v] Our desires for these commodities also are produced and sold to us. In other words, the manufacturing of commodities, of spectacles, goes hand-in-

hand with the manufacturing of the desires for those commodities. We see here the "replacing [of] the satisfaction of primary human needs (now scarcely met) with an incessant fabrication of pseudoneeds."[vi] Debord adds, "Consumers are filled with religious fervour for the sovereign freedom of commodities whose use has become an end in itself. Waves of enthusiasm for particular products are propagated by all the communications media."[vii] This propagation is ubiquitous today, given the wide range of media vehicles for advertisers and marketers.

The generation of "pseudoneeds" by the media occurs on a daily if not hourly basis. The need that is really being met, of course, is the need of the system or structure itself. The "pseudoneeds" all "ultimately come down to the single pseudoneed of maintaining the reign of the autonomous economy."[viii] This need is met quite well, while the needs of the workers/consumers are met sporadically and unsatisfactorily. They devote themselves to the next big experience (the next concert in town, the next game against the archrival, etc.) without even recognizing their own impoverishment (economically, socially, politically, etc.). Debord concludes: "The image of blissful social unification through consumption merely *postpones* the consumer's awareness of the actual divisions until his next disillusionment with some particular commodity. Each new product is ceremoniously acclaimed as a unique creation offering a dramatic shortcut to the promised land of total consummation."[ix]

Of course, from a consumer perspective, 21st-century advanced capitalism seems to provide a cornucopia of wonderful commodities. The society of the spectacle indeed seems spectacular. But the incredible range of goods,

entertainment, and services provide us simply with choices among illusions, for they ultimately prevent us (even while obtaining our allegiance) from directly confronting or even seeing the real world. As Debord puts it:

> The false choices offered by spectacular abundance—choices based on the juxtaposition of competing yet mutually reinforcing spectacles and of distinct yet interconnected roles (signified and embodied primarily by objects)—develop into struggles between illusory qualities designed to generate fervent allegiance to quantitative trivialities. Fallacious archaic oppositions are revived—regionalisms and racisms which serve to endow mundane rankings in the hierarchies of consumption with a magical ontological superiority—and pseudoplayful enthusiasms are aroused by an endless succession of ludicrous competitions, from sports to elections.[x]

Even our sense of choice is illusory. We choose what we desire or need, yet the desire or need is not a matter of choice. It increasingly is thrust upon us by the culture industry.

This Marxist critique also is an element of contemporary approaches to the study of sport. Like other cultural productions, sport serves ideological and hegemonic purposes. Allen Guttmann lays out this case (though he is critical of it) in his 1978 work *From Ritual to Record: The Nature of Modern Sports*.[xi] And authors like David L. Andrews have extended it more recently in *Sport-Commerce-Culture: Essays on Sport in Late Capitalist America*.[xii] In Debord's terms, we can say that sport is a principal spectacle of 20th and 21st century capitalism.

Sport certainly is bound with the dominant ideology of American society. As Andrews writes, "contemporary American Sport culture must be considered as both a product, and producer, of the social formation (contemporary American society) in which it is situated."[xiii] College football, for example, reflects the

society in which it exists, in the same way that the superstructure reflects (in a distorted way) the base in Marxist analysis. Like all sports, college football is about winning, and sometimes at any cost. It is about conquest of opponents' territory and opponents themselves. It is about a strict division of labor and the "survival of the fittest." Thus, the game itself embodies some important elements of the dominant ideology of our society.

If college football functions—like religion—as an ideological tool, then does it also blind fans to some reality around them? What reality is obfuscated by college football in the South? The standard Marxist approach would be to look at issues of economic class—and this certainly would yield some insight. Turner's concepts of *communitas* and *structure* could help here. Structure refers to the predominant social roles, relationships, and stratifications in the society. *Communitas* refers to the transcendence of this structure through powerful and emotional ritual behavior. It involves bringing people into community who otherwise would be separated by virtue of their positions or roles in structure. From a Marxist perspective, the rituals of the game day experience are part of the superstructure of the society. They give rise to *communitas*. There is nothing inherently wrong with this, except for the fact that it perhaps blinds us to the persistent injustices in the social structure.

The typical stadium at a major university in the Southeastern Conference is the site of many rituals and the experience of *communitas*. This is good, and certainly a limitation of a Marxist approach to this phenomenon is that it fails to fully recognize and account for the good achieved.[xiv] At the same time, the

stadium is very much structured along the lines of economic class and social status. While fans may chat about the game and "high-five" one another as they enter the stadium (an example of *communitas*), they inevitably will head to separate seating sections. Some of these will be in the "nose bleed" sections in the upper deck, while others may be lower level on the 50-yard line. Others still will be in "luxury" or "sky" boxes. Clearly there is an economic and social structure within the stadium. Those lower level seats or box seats will be much more expensive than those in the upper deck, sometimes by thousands of dollars. There also is class division manifested in the simple fact that some people can afford tickets to the game but many cannot (Tennessee football tickets begin at $50 each). And there is no guarantee that one can even get a ticket if he or she had the money. Many games "sell out," and the only way to be assured of getting a ticket for a game is to be a season ticket holder. But this usually entails a significant contribution to the school's athletic fund (running into the thousands of dollars) just to be eligible. So when a season ticket holder talks football with a fellow fan working at the gas station, the genuine bond they may share also conceals (probably for the season ticket holder more than for the gas station worker) the economic structure that legitimates the disparity of wealth between them. Of course, this structure is easy to forget when the team wins—for that certainly is "heaven on earth."

Race is another social structure obfuscated by major college football in the South. The racial divide in major college football in the South will be apparent to anyone who has witnessed the pre-game walks of the football players to the

stadium. The players make their way through the crowd, as it forms a pathway for the athletes—the fans reaching out for "high fives" or handshakes or simply to touch the players. The fans are overwhelmingly white, while the players often are black. In the state of Alabama, 26 percent of the population is African American. At the University of Alabama, the student body is only 11 percent black—less than half the state percentage. The football team, however, is 53 percent black—twice the state percentage. In the state of Mississippi, 37 percent of the population is African American. At the University of Mississippi, the student body is only about 15 percent black—again, less than half the state percentage. The football team, however, is 64 percent black.[xv]

Still, at Ole Miss, the racial climate often has made it difficult to recruit the best black players. Dr. Charles Ross, Director of African American Studies, suggested to me that some Ole Miss alumni and fans would rather maintain school traditions (the Rebel nickname, the frequent playing of Dixie and display of the Confederate flag, etc.) than win football games. Given how important it is to win football games in the South, this perhaps reveals the depth of racism or at least racial insensitivity in Mississippi. On the other hand, many white fans expressed to me that perceptions of Ole Miss often were distortions created by the media. One fan described for me the intimacy that blacks and whites have in Mississippi. She said they live "elbows to assholes." Yet this physical proximity has not always translated into strong relationships across the racial divide. Another fan insisted that people simply need to be better educated about what the symbols of Ole Miss mean—typically, that they refer to pride in the South

rather than to racism. While there undoubtedly is some truth to this position, it really is just another way of standing one's ground. In other words, someone arguing along these lines is saying "If you were better educated about these matters, you'd adopt my position." Both of these Ole Miss fans agreed that sports (college football in particular) have helped to bridge the racial divide. And there certainly is some truth to this. Sports (especially team sports) often have served as effective vehicles for integration in the South.

In some ways, college football in the South helps to erase the distinctions between "us" and "them"—the rich and the poor, whites and blacks. College football creates unstructured *communitas*. It does this at individual campuses by created a larger "us" that is pitted against another (sometimes even demonized) "them." In Alabama, "us" and "them" means the University of Alabama and Auburn University. The divide is intense. As one fan suggests, the intensity or passion that fans have for their teams can even divide families.[xvi] In Mississippi, the primary rivalry is between Ole Miss and Mississippi State University. Each year they compete in what is called the Egg Bowl, named in honor of the trophy that the winner receives. As one Ole Miss official put it: "It's kind of like the situation in the Middle East. . . . Fans of one grow up hating the other and really don't know why."[xvii] The fans, of course, are predominantly white (at least those who are able to attend the games) while the players are predominantly black. This creates a perplexing situation. Michael Lewis writes of a recent game:

> The circumstances were that the Ole Miss football team, like the Mississippi State football team, consisted mostly of poor black kids from Mississippi. When the Ole Miss defense gathered in a single room, the only white people were coaches. On

the football field the players became honorary white people, but off it they were still black, and unnatural combatants in Mississippi's white internecine war.[xviii]

This situation is seemingly inexplicable or at least paradoxical. But the approach described above might help. College football, as a social construction that supports the fundamental ideology of the society, temporarily blinds the white spectators to the problem of race. For an afternoon the players are not white or black or brown. They simply are Ole Miss Rebels or Mississippi State Bulldogs. The *communitas* formed by the two fan groups allows them to ignore the problem of race. Yet, the very formation of these groups requires the exclusion of others. The formation of the supporters of the Rebels excludes all Bulldogs, though it includes black Ole Miss players. The same is true for the formation of the supporters of the Bulldogs. But when the game is over and the players are out of their uniforms, the Ole Miss player might be just another young black man to the Ole Miss fan—and now that young black man becomes the excluded one while the Ole Miss fan goes off to play golf at the country club with his white Mississippi State friend. Strangely constructed alliances also arise in cases of class here. Think of the two fans—a Rebel and a Bulldog—playing golf. On game day, they may sit in separate areas of the stadium, fraternizing with fellow Rebels and Bulldogs respectively and doing so regardless of income. However, once the game is over, the friends return to the country club where the lesser-income fans they fraternized with in the stands are excluded.

Of course, the us/them dichotomy is an inherent aspect of human beings and human collectivities. Seeing it in college football should not be surprising,

and, indeed, this could be another point of contact with religion. Regina Schwartz explicates this dynamic in the context of the Biblical traditions in her book *The Curse of Cain: The Violent Legacy of Monotheism*.[xix] She argues that a scarcity of resources (God's favor) culminates in violence, for example, in Cain's slaying of Abel. In a college football game, obviously only one team can win (college football's adoption of an overtime system in 1996 eliminated the possibility of ties). Even more, only one team can earn the honor and adulation that comes with victory. Only one team can have "bragging rights" (often until the teams meet again the following year) after the game. All this undoubtedly contributes to the fervor and violence of the game. Little wonder then that violence breaks out occasionally among fans (as it does, of course, with religious fanatics as well). Combined with a tradition of violence in the South, it is not unusual to have stories like the one where the South Carolina fan shot his friend (a Clemson fan) when they argued about a $20 bet on the game (the game having been won by South Carolina). One would imagine that it was not so much the sum of money that was in dispute, but what the money signified—victory, honor, superiority, etc.

The sort of partisanship that divides the world up into "us" and "them," Rebels and Bulldogs, Tide fans and Tiger fans, may be particularly prominent in the South. David Goldfield notes that "southerners are quite fond of flag-waving, from flags snapping from car antennae on football Saturdays, proclaiming, 'My college is going to cream yours,' to a mindless patriotism that, like most southern religion, asks no questions and generates no doubts."[xx] This somewhat

"mindless" devotion to one's team or region becomes particularly problematic when it blinds Southerners to the problems (like racism, economic disparity, etc.) that are right in front of their faces. The socially-constructed divide between "us" and "them" obfuscates the fundamental injustices that lie at the very basis of our society.

At the same time, college football in the South provides an effective form of escape from those problems when they *are* brought to consciousness. This is true of most sports, religions, and forms of entertainment. They take our minds off the pressing problems of the day and allow us some peace of mind or at least diversion. A Tennessee fan writes that "going to UT games provides an escape for a few hours. It doesn't matter what is going on in the world, how bad the world is screwed up, who is fighting who [sic] in a war, when I am over there everyone gets along with everyone and for those few hours everything seems ok."[xxi] Given such escapism, one might think then that diehard sports fans would be apolitical. Apparently not. Daniel Wann and his collaborators note that there is little evidence that sports fans are any more or less political than non-sports fans.[xxii] The real question, however, is what kind of politics sports fans practice. Both Democrats and Republicans fundamentally defend the status quo. Neither party seeks any immediate or radical remedies for the fundamental injustices (often accentuated in cases of racial or ethnic difference) of the socio-economic system. College football fans in the South may be Democrats or Republicans (more likely conservative in either case), but they primarily are Americans imbued with beliefs and values that support the status quo. And, of course, supporting the

status quo means preserving the wealth and power of the "haves" versus the "have nots."

In conclusion, what we see with college football in the American South is what we can see with sports in general in other regions of the country. While providing some measure of equal opportunity for all, it paradoxically conceals and reveals the underlying injustices of American society. As sport around the country continues to become a communal and emotional fixture in people's lives—as it has with so many college football fans in the South—it increasing is becoming the new "opiate of the masses."

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[i] *Karl Marx: The Essential Writings*, Second Edition, edited by Frederic L. Bender (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1972), 46.
[ii] Debord, 12.
[iii] Debord, 14.
[iv] Debord, 22.
[v] Debord, 24.
[vi] Debord, 25.
[vii] Debord, 33.
[viii] Debord, 25.
[ix] Debord, 34.
[x] Debord, 30.
[xi] Allen Guttmann, *From Ritual to Record: The Nature of Modern Sports* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1978).
[xii] David L. Andrews, *Sport—Commerce—Culture: Essays on Sport in Late Capitalist America* (New York: Peter Lang, 2006).
[xiii] Andrews, 4.
[xiv] A fuller account can be found in my forthcoming *Game Day and God: Football, Faith, and Politics in the American South* (Mercer University Press).
[xv] Data for school enrollments and racial make up of the teams is from a 2006/7 review of institutional websites and a review of photographs of players on the websites or in the football media guides.
[xvi] E-mail correspondence received October 10, 2006.
[xvii] Quoted in Michael Lewis' *The Blind Side: Evolution of a Game* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2007), 272.
[xviii] Lewis, 280.

[xix] Regina Schwartz, *The Curse of Cain: The Violent Legacy of Monotheism* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1997).
[xx] David Goldfield, *Still Fighting the Civil War: The American South and Southern History* (Baton Rouge, Louisiana: Louisiana State University Press, 2002), 84.
[xxi] E-mail correspondence, August 28, 2006.
[xxii] Daniel Wann, et. al., *Sports Fans: The Psychology and Social Impact of Spectators* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 203.