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Chapter 2

Social Images and Sport

We cannot approach society . . . as we do objects or events in the natural world, because societies only exist insofar as they are created and re-created in our own actions as human beings.

Anthony Giddens, sociologist

Most people begin the sociological study of sport with little knowledge about social theories, which are descriptions and interpretations about how societies work. They also typically understand little about the nature of social institutions, corporate organizations, and cultural practices and their compelling roles in the making of social and cultural life. Finally, there is often no awareness of the links between social theory, social life, and cultural practices like sport and other physical activities. In this chapter, I will begin to articulate these relationships by describing two social theories—which I call images—and applying their insights and interpretations to American social institutions (e.g., business, government, schools, religion, family) and cultural life.

Two Images of American Society

Trying to understand the social organization and cultural processes of a society begins with a mental picture—an image—of its structure and

dynamics. Social theories help construct mental images of a society. Thus, they are general perspectives for understanding various features of the social world.¹ They influence what one sees and how one explains the phenomena that occur within a society. This is how the theories, or images, discussed in this chapter should be understood. No attempt is made to fully articulate their subtleties and complexities. Instead, only the basic outlines of two prominent social images, or theories, are described in an effort to acquaint you with different ways of perceiving the social realities of American society.

The average person has usually internalized a particular view of American social life as though it were the one legitimate image of social reality, not realizing that there are several social theories that attempt to portray the salient features of social organization and culture in American society. This chapter introduces two contrasting social models of American society and their relationships to sport.

We begin with two general questions:

1. Who are the dominant sources of power and influence over the attitudes, values, beliefs, norms, and worldviews within American society?
2. What role do they play in American social and cultural life?

The importance of trying to understand the locus of power, control, and influence is that those who have these resources can mold and shape societal attitudes, values, and beliefs and thus influence all the social institutions and cultural practices, including sport.

Understanding how any society works is a complex and demanding task that is rife with differences of opinion. The two social-political images of society that I describe are the *pluralistic image* and the *hegemonic image*. Let us examine how each addresses the two questions posed earlier.

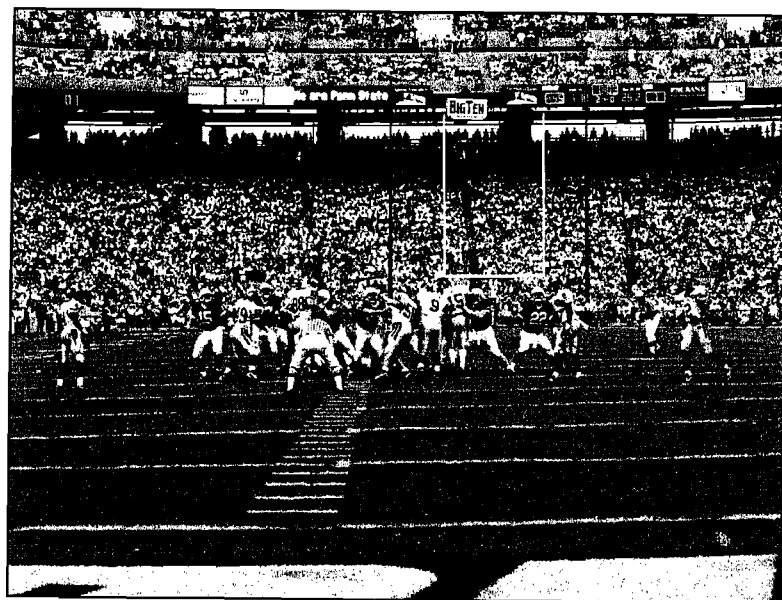
The Pluralistic Image

The orthodox view fostered by major American social institutions and cultural groups is called *pluralism*. A pluralistic image contends that a broad and diverse set of social institutions, organizations, and interest groups embodies the beliefs, values, and worldviews of citizens. This model asserts that power and influence are exerted by a multitude of interests whose countervailing centers of power check one another to prevent abusive power and agenda setting by any one group. Thus, according to the pluralistic version of American society, although groups are not necessarily equal in terms of power and influence, America is "a government of the people, by the people, and for the people"; we have "equality of opportunity," and we have

"liberty and justice for all." These are the underpinnings of pluralism, and they suggest that no particular groups are able to dominate, control, or influence attitudes, values, or beliefs in this society.

According to this image, the major business, governmental, and cultural organizations are unable to achieve a collective dominance because the unorganized mass of people exercises some power over interest groups; thus, no one private or public sector is capable of acting with unity and power on the range of public issues. With respect to the corporate business community, it is argued that because of its heterogeneity, business has no collective interests at all. Business owners reflect a constantly shifting set of coalitions and thus find it difficult to form themselves into a solidified group.

Social and cultural influence within society is seen as broadly distributed among a variety of groups and organizations. Through public policy, cultural tendencies are seen to be set by a rough equilibrium of group influences, and there is therefore a reasonable approximation of society's preferences—a sort of equality of cultural production. According to this view of society, although most citizens



Intercollegiate sport has become a major commercial entertainment industry. College football games are played in stadiums packed with thousands of loyal fans while millions of radio listeners and television viewers follow their favorite university team.

may not participate directly in social-cultural decision making, norm setting, and value creation, they can make their influence felt through participation in organized groups; thus an underlying ideology of equality sets the social agenda.

It may be seen, then, that the pluralistic model of American society as an amalgam of the general population's ideals, values, and worldviews includes implicit assumptions about power and influence and their distribution. The most obvious of these is that commercial, governmental, and cultural organizations are personifications of everyone's collective attitudes, interests, and values because no group or class is significantly powerful and influential over others. All citizens have roughly the same interests in society, and all have basically equal shares of power and influence; thus, social order is based on a consensus of their cultural values. A pluralistic image represents society as though there are few serious economic or cultural problems, and minimal pressing conflicts of interest between social classes and various groups.

That the interests of the people form the policies of business and government is a pervasive theme perpetuated by many public forums that advance the notion of pluralism in the United States. These forums suggest that business and governmental goals correspond with and are indistinguishable from those of average citizens. Moreover, this mutual compatibility is seen as harmonizing and accommodating conflicting interests and values, thereby preserving the consensus and social accord.

The Hegemonic Image

A second and very different image of the nature of capitalist societies is called the hegemonic (\,hej-ə-'mān-ik\) image. Hegemonic social thought was constructed to apply to all modern capitalist societies, not just one nation like the United States. But because this book's focus is American society, I shall refer to the United States in describing the hegemonic image.

Hegemony literally means dominance, but when it is used to refer to the social relations that tend to exist in modern capitalist societies (e.g., United States), it has a less direct, autocratic meaning. In this case, it refers to a society in which dominant groups that control the critically important economic and political institutions of a society also have principal access to the other social institutions—education and mass media, for example—as well as many cultural norms and practices. They use their power and influence to promote and shape attitudes, values, beliefs, and worldviews in ways that ultimately secure a willing consent of the mass of citizens; this process forms a social cement that tends to promote and preserve a sense of unity for the entire society.

This image of society is quite different from pluralism because it suggests that major societal power, control, and influence emanate from economically, politically, and culturally dominant groups, even though they are muted and filtered through the popular consent of "the people."

The writings of Italian social theorist Antonio Gramsci, completed while he was in a fascist prison (where he had been put by Mussolini) from 1926 until 1935, have popularized the hegemonic image of advanced capitalist societies, and it is almost always associated with him. But the concept is not unique to Gramsci, and it has been used by a number of social scientists both before him and after his death. However, the strains of hegemonic social thought vary considerably, but the theme of socially dominant actors who establish their own moral, political, and cultural values as the conventional norms is common throughout. What is especially important from the standpoint of this book is that hegemonic social theory is considered to be applicable to all democratic capitalistic societies; thus its insights and interpretations may appropriately be applied to American society.²

Gramsci's writings contain no precise definition of hegemony. One social analyst described Gramsci's meaning of hegemony in this way: Hegemony refers "broadly to the organization of the cultural, moral, and ideological consent of the population to the prevailing political and economic system through the institutions of civil society, such as schools, churches, and [political] parties, etc."³ This consent exists because of the prestige (and consequent confidence) that such groups enjoy because of their position in the productive sector (meaning the economy) and their cultural power.⁴

A hegemonic image of advanced capitalist societies provides a powerful framework for analyzing social organization and social processes within these societies. It complements Marx's emphasis on the economic institution but goes beyond Marx to analyze the ways that political, cultural, and ideological institutions and practices are integrated with the economy to form the whole. Gramsci's work unravels the complex web of political, economic, cultural, and ideological practices that bind a society into a relative unity.

Gramsci, as well as others writing in this tradition, makes the underlying assumption that capitalist societies are first and foremost *class societies*. He saw the character of capitalist societies in terms of class relations and disharmony among classes, so the pertinent social institutions, organizations, and processes are exactly those through which the various classes are constituted and through which they are associated with one another. Gramsci noted that "though hegemony is ethico-political, it must also be economic, must necessarily be based on the decisive function exercised by the leading group in the decisive nucleus of economic activity."⁵

Societal Power

In the hegemonic image of society, sociocultural values and beliefs are viewed as embodying the values, ideals, and interests of dominant groups more than any sort of pluralistic, generalized interests. To be specific, the hegemonic image sees political-economic domination and intellectual and moral leadership carried out *not* by a single, unified "ruling class" but by a complex coalition of powerful and wealthy groups that own most of the capital, land, and technology and that employ most of the country's labor force. But beyond the political-economic characteristics is also cultural dominance, which has been historically manifested in male white-skin privilege. It is through dominant groups that the "commonsense" and everyday practices of the masses of people are managed. The ways of life and versions of culture and civilization of the dominant actors are fashioned in a direction that, while perhaps not yielding unquestioned advantage for narrow dominant interests, persuades the masses to embrace a consensus that supports the existing social arrangements.

In describing power relations, Gramsci identified two ways in which dominant actors exercise power and preserve social control: force (coercion) and consent. Gramsci said that the dominant social alliance "dominates antagonistic groups, which it tends to 'liquidate,' or to subjugate perhaps even by armed force; it leads kindred and allied groups."⁶ Concerning antagonists, Gramsci meant that powerful groups use their control over the resources of government, the legal system, the police, the military, and other services to establish their view of the society as legitimate, all-inclusive, and universal. By kindred and allied groups he meant those that are compatriots of hegemonic groups; they exercise influence on behalf of dominant interests through a moral and intellectual guidance whereby their interpretations and meanings become widely understood, shared, and supported. One analyst refers to this as a leadership based on the consent of the led, but a consent that has been established through a diffusion and popularization of the worldview of the dominant groups.

To a large extent, then, hegemony is a silent domination; that is, it is not consciously experienced because there is an orchestration of consent in conjunction with, and coercion (force, if necessary) of, subordinate groups into harmony with the established social order.

Hard-and-fast lines cannot be drawn between the mechanisms of consent and the mechanisms of coercion, but in any society they are interwoven. According to Gramsci, consent is normally in the lead but operating behind "the armour of coercion."⁷

Means of Domination

The specific actions pursued by dominant social alliances to maintain their power and status vary according to the prevailing conditions and the historical moment. They may range from various forms of persuasion, negotiation, concession, and compromise to manipulation and repressive action. Regardless of the tactics, the preferable means of domination is to subdue opposition, absorbing it into patterns of thought that are congruent with the ideological preferences of the dominant actors. Thus, domination is contoured primarily through an "active consent" of subordinate groups, but a consent that has been molded through intellectual, political, and moral leadership that ultimately rests on the officious apparatus of the state (i.e., government, the military, the legal system).

Reliance upon force in the long run will render hegemony unstable. Thus, hegemony cannot succeed by simply forcing beliefs and thought patterns of the dominant groups into the heads of subordinate groups. Instead, an important way in which it is produced and disseminated is through shaping "popular beliefs" because they help to organize human actions and are a way in which social consciousness itself is formed. How popular beliefs become part of the dominant group milieu is a complex process, involving the school system, mass media, religion, patriotic rituals and ceremonies, and a political system that enjoys a facade of popular consensus. But the specific means through which various ideas and assumptions become dominant material forces in society is through ideology.

Ideological Domination

As I previously noted, ideology refers to a set of explanations, justifications, and legitimations for the current social relations in a society. It is the driving force for dominant groups, according to hegemony theory. Ideology legitimates current social beliefs and practices in a way that makes them seem right and natural—just common sense, or just human nature. Gramsci stressed what he called *rule by consent or ideological domination*. He argued that the masses of people who enable a society to function smoothly tend to internalize and endorse dominant groups' explanations and definitions, and thus, through their consent, ideological domination succeeds. In this way, hegemonic groups can penetrate all levels of the society with their version of social reality.⁸

Hegemonic ideologies are produced and disseminated through social institutions—political and economic systems, the family, schools—and through popular cultural practices—art, music, sport. Intellectuals and other cultural workers (e.g., scientists, teachers, writers) are especially valuable for fostering ideologies that prescribe

conformist acceptance of existing social arrangements because they have the know-how and creativity to organize and mold cultural organizations.

Ideologies of dominant groups, according to the hegemonic model, legitimate the existing society and its institutions and ways of life by persuading the general public to consider society and its norms and values to be natural, good, and just, thus concealing the inherent system of domination. In this way, hegemonic ideologies are inscribed into everyday consciousness and become a means of "indirect rule" and thus a powerful force for social cohesion and stability.⁹

The fundamental consequence of hegemonic ideologies is to consolidate the present social conditions with rationalizations stemming from the status quo, thus protecting and shielding particularized interests—mainly those of dominant groups—and the existing society against alternatives. Opposition or struggles against dominant ideologies are made to seem disruptive and counterproductive to the social order. Labor union strikes and environmental protests would be two contemporary examples of unwanted disruptions.

Maintaining Hegemony

Although dominant coalitions certainly wield power and influence, it is a continual and formidable task for them to sustain their hegemony. As one social scientist points out, hegemony "does not just passively exist as a form of dominance. It has continually to be renewed, recreated, defended, and modified. It is also continually resisted, limited, altered, challenged by pressures not at all its own."¹⁰ Other writers make the point more emphatically: "Hegemonic ideologies are not monolithic apparatuses that a group of omniscient conspirators impose on a mass of cultural dopes. Instead, they are articulated by superordinates in ways that resonate with people's common sense, thereby winning popular consent."¹¹ Hegemony, then, is never guaranteed to a dominant group; indeed, a dominant group can only sustain moral, cultural, and intellectual leadership if it remains responsive to some of the demands of social and cultural opposition.

Thus, successful hegemony is an ongoing process of accommodation and compromise. Because there is never a single, unified ruling class, but instead there are coalitions of powerful groups engaged in an enduring ideological struggle for legitimate authority, patterns of hegemony vary according to their history, structure, and current circumstances. Indeed, one scholar argued that "ideological domination . . . requires an *alliance* between powerful economic and political groups on the one hand, and cultural elites on the other. . . . It is best understood as a collaborative process rather than an imposed, definitively structured order; in general, hegemony is a condition of the social system as a whole rather than a cunning project of the ruling

group. Indeed, the effectiveness of hegemony depends to a great extent on the inability or unwillingness of those subjected to it to organize together to oppose it."¹²

Although there has been a tendency to think of the hegemonic image of the distribution of social power and dominance as applying only to economic and social class considerations, the notion of hegemony has become much broader. The emergence of new social movements around issues such as gender and race has emphasized that hegemony cannot be subsumed within the logic of economic and class issues. Feminist and racial theorists have incorporated hegemonic themes into their work. They examine gender and racial domination as relatively autonomous yet related systems of power, inequality, and domination. They see a close link between economic inequality and other forms of social inequality involving race and gender. In this way, they have broadened the concept of hegemony, thus articulating a more complex hegemony with intersecting relationships of power. Those perspectives are particularly useful in the study of sport and are illustrated in various places in this book—especially chapters 4 and 5.

Dominant Groups

In any discussion of hegemony theory, the question arises, Who are the dominant groups? From a hegemonic perspective, there is no single dominant group but rather an alliance of factions of the most powerful, wealthy, and influential persons and groups in business, commerce, government, education, and mass media (and in some societies, religion). In every society, these individuals and groups have the most opportunities for intervening in and shaping cultural values, beliefs, and practices in their own interests, thus allowing it to become the social authority expressing "society's view."

Consider the following facts in reflecting on whether such a concentration of power, wealth, and influence could be said to exist that might constitute a dominant social alliance—and thus represent the societal view—in the United States.

- A small percentage of America's population owns a large percentage of the nation's personal wealth. The *wealthiest 10 percent* of America's families and individuals now own 71 percent of the nation's wealth; the *superrich* families and individuals, the *top 1 percent*, now own 40 percent, a greater share than at any time since the 1920s. Meanwhile, the *bottom 90 percent* owns just 29 percent of the wealth, a drop of 22 percent in less than 20 years (see figure 2.1).
- A great deal of wealth among the wealthiest individuals in the United States is inherited. According to information

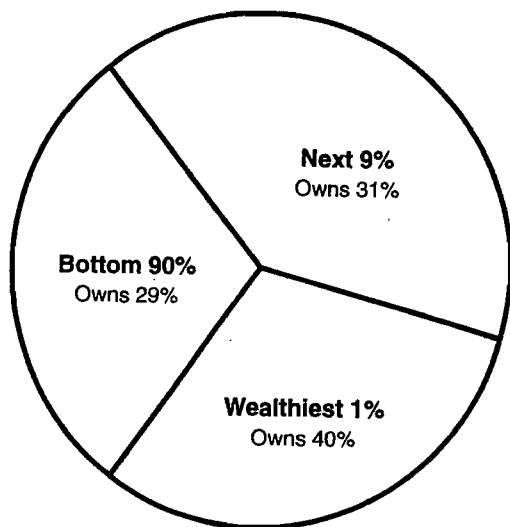


Figure 2.1 Ownership of private wealth in the United States—1998.

published in 1996 and 1997 in *Forbes* magazine, 56 percent of individuals and families in the United States inherited wealth of more than \$1 million, and 43.5 percent inherited sufficient wealth to rank among the *Forbes* 400 wealthiest.

- The corporation has been instrumental in influencing key economic and political activities. The top echelons of American corporate life are occupied primarily by people of upper-middle-class and upper-class social origin.
- Of the 500 largest industrial corporations, 150 are controlled by one or more members of a single family.
- About half of all top corporate and governmental leaders are alumni of just 12 well-known private universities, most notably Ivy League colleges.
- Most politicians in America are white, male, and affluent; a preponderance of them are lawyers. Many past and present top politicians (such as the Roosevelts, Rockefellers, Kennedys, and Bushes) were born into wealthy families and inherited great wealth. Twenty-nine percent of current U.S. senators are millionaires. Of the 100 senators, only nine are female and only one is African American.

- According to the authors of *The Buying of the President* (1996), "The wealthiest interests bankroll and, in effect, help to preselect the specific major candidates months and months before a single vote is cast. . . . We are thus allowing our government of the people, by the people, and for the people to be led by someone initially chosen by only some of the people—narrow, vested interests with a direct financial stake in specific government policies and decisions."¹³
- It is estimated that about 6,000 Americans—*less than .003 percent!*—exercise formal authority over institutions that control roughly half the nation's resources in industry, finance, utilities, insurance, mass media, foundations, education, law, and civic and cultural affairs.
- About 32 percent of some 7,000 top corporate positions are interlocked with other top positions, resulting in linkages among corporations in which some individuals serve on the boards of directors of two or more companies.
- The people who control the flow of information in America are among the most powerful. American television is dominated by four private corporations—ABC, CBS, NBC, and Turner Broadcasting Company. These networks are only subsidiaries of even larger corporations. ABC is owned by Walt Disney/Capital Cities Communications, NBC by General Electric, CBS by Westinghouse, and Turner by Time Warner.
- Leadership positions in American corporations are overwhelmingly occupied by white males. Very few top corporate leaders are female or members of a minority. Only 57 women out of 2,430 people (2.4 percent) held positions in the highest ranks of corporate America, according to *The 1996 Catalyst Census of Women Corporate Officers and Top Earners*. In the annual lists of top chief executive officers, 90 percent to 95 percent are white males.

These facts about American society, of course, are not themselves sufficient evidence that the rich and powerful exercise dominance directly or uniformly over social discourses, values, or cultural norms or that they set the national social agenda. But they do indicate the existence of an extensive network of economic, political, and social alliances and mutual interests in a complex system of institutional, organizational, and cultural alliances. Although no social grouping does hegemonic work only, those who are a part of this network certainly have the resources of material wealth, status, and power to

specialize in producing, relaying, and sustaining hegemonic ideologies. However, their primary hegemonic influence is exercised through the organizations they control, the social networks to which they belong, and the cultural resources they command.¹⁴

A Conspiracy of Power?

The actual degree of coordination and implementation of ideology by dominant interests in America is hotly debated by social analysts. Pluralists typically argue against any significant accord among powerful private and public organizations. But their argument is belied by considerable evidence that wealthy capitalists and the top managerial class have sufficiently mutual interests to evolve a collective strategy and, furthermore, that there is a symbiosis between top governmental officials and the capitalist class. So the hegemonic analytical framework sees much more unity within the dominant group community than does the pluralistic one, as shared material interests as well as cultural traditions, such as those that oppress women and minorities, engender consent and, if necessary, coerce behavior in the interests of the system of power and privilege.¹⁵

Which Social Image Is Accurate?

What we have, then, are two visions—the pluralistic image and the hegemonic image—about the dominant sources of power and influence over the attitudes, values, beliefs, norms, and worldviews in American society and the role they play in social and cultural life. The first image assumes the existence of equality of opportunity, that everyone plays a somewhat equal role in affecting society. The pluralistic perspective maintains that where power and influence do exist, they are the collective result of all citizens' attitudes, interests, and values.

By and large, the pluralistic view is the "official" model of social reality conveyed by the dominant groups through private and public organizations and social groups that they control or at least exert a great deal of influence over. The image of pluralism so thoroughly permeates the major organizations that shape American attitudes and beliefs that it is considered to be "common sense" and is taken for granted by the average person—which is not surprising, because alternative visions of social reality are marginalized or discredited as inaccurate, even un-American.

The second vision, the hegemonic image, argues that dominant groups exercise power, control, and influence in the creation and maintenance of the national social agenda. In this view of American society, dominant groups do not normally exert their power and

influence by force, intimidation, or violence; they do it more subtly, by controlling the major social institutions and agencies. Thus, they are able to orchestrate social life through an alliance of factions. Publicly, they promote a pluralistic version of American life because it is in their interests; after all, they are the major beneficiaries of the present system.

Sufficient empirical evidence demonstrates that the hegemonic model is more consonant with American historical experience and corresponds more closely to the realities of contemporary American life than the pluralistic one, which has a very restrictive and inadequate conception of power and influence.

Still, the question of whether the pluralistic or hegemonic image more accurately represents American society cannot be settled with ease or with certainty. Each image should be seen as a sensitizing perspective, each providing a different interpretation of social reality, each having plausible elements.

The most important result of understanding the pluralistic and hegemonic images is realizing that there is more than one view of the social reality in the United States and other modern capitalist societies. And likewise there is more than one way of understanding the relationship of sport and leisure activities to the larger society.

Applying the Social Images to Sport

Having examined how the pluralistic and hegemonic images view society at large, we are now in a position to turn to an analysis of how they relate to sport and physical recreation. Their perspectives of how society is structured and controlled have necessary implications for the structure and control of sport as a cultural practice.

Pluralism and Sport

In the pluralistic model, sport is seen as an arena in which society's collective interests are promoted and sustained through the sociocultural attitudes, values, and beliefs promulgated in sporting activities. Accompanying that assumption is the notion that sports' main organizational structures, systems of rules, and collective meanings have been constructed by and are shared by most of society. Baseball, for example, is said to be the "national pastime"; the Dallas Cowboys are called "America's Team."

Beyond that, though, sport and society are seen as discrete, separate social domains, with sport a realm of social life set off from the "realities" of the political and economic world, an escape from the pressure and problems of everyday life, a place that allows people to

release tensions and enjoy themselves. Therefore, sport is viewed as apolitical, and political intervention into sporting activities is resisted. Indeed, many sport leaders publicly condemn the increasing expansion of government involvement into sport and the "politicization" of sport that seems to have accompanied this expansion.

Hegemony and Sport

Applying the insights of hegemony to sport activities produces a number of implications that are quite different from pluralist notions about sport. One of the most foundational is that, in order to grasp the social significance of sporting practices, we must see them as part of larger political-economic and ideological configurations. Although there is an essential internal logic in sporting practices, contemporary institutional sport is not a separate and distinct social entity. It is fully integrated with the broader social organization and processes of society. It actually plays a role in advancing hegemonic interests.

Hegemonic ideologies require social institutions and cultural practices to reinforce and reproduce them. Dominant groups use their power and influence over social institutions (e.g., economic, political) and cultural industries (e.g., mass media, sports) to subtly mold and shape a willing consent of the masses to the legitimacy of their ideologies. From a hegemonic theoretical standpoint, modern sport, rather than being merely a diversionary entertainment, is considered to be an important popular cultural practice upon which dominant ideologies are constructed, maintained, and reproduced; sport thus plays a broad social reproductive role in American society.

This is the case because sport's institutional and ideological features have evolved in a way that corresponds with, and helps to strengthen and reproduce, the norms, values, and worldviews upon which dominant ideologies are based. In other words, the norms, practices, and ideas surrounding sport continually create a setting in which the interests of the dominant groups are served. Indeed, one of the most compelling roles of sport is to serve as a symbolic expression of the values and beliefs of the broader society, thus strengthening the structure of the economic, political, and cultural hegemony of dominant groups. Sport's importance, then, is rooted in its power to promote and structure relations in accordance with the proclivities of the dominant interests.

The popularity of spectator sports make it easy for them to penetrate everyday life and to represent and reproduce the dominant ideologies. Contemporary sports' popularity among the masses may be seen as one manifestation of their incorporation into the reigning ideological system. From this perspective, sport serves as one means

of winning the hearts and minds of subordinate classes and of instilling their respect for and conformity to society's power holders. This acquiescence by the public actually inhibits the development of a critical social consciousness about the consequences of modern sport for human development, much less the characteristics of the broader society. This does not mean, however, that there is only passive compliance to hegemonic domination; resistance to, evasion of, and challenges to the autocratic, bureaucratic, and oppressive characteristics of contemporary sport and the broader social hegemony are constantly taking place.

Analysts of societywide hegemony contend that contemporary sport reflects and promotes capitalist ideology through its emphasis on competitiveness, individualism, obedience to authority, work discipline, and glorification of commercialism. One sport-studies scholar has made a point that deserves to be quoted at length: "One cannot help but be struck by the degree to which so much of the organization and culture of modern sport seems to have been influenced by capitalist productive forces and relations. For example, 'amateur' sports at their highest levels have almost become monuments to such new sciences as biomechanics, exercise physiology, and sport psychology where a market rationality is expressed in a mechanical quest for efficiency in human performance that is indentured to state and commercial sponsorship. Professional sports, meanwhile, have gone a great distance toward reducing the meaning of athletic contests to a simple dramatization of commodity relations."¹⁶

To illustrate, elite athletes now train year-round in special Olympic training centers where resident sport scientists use the latest technology to enhance performance for the sole purpose of producing medal winners. In addition, professional athletes are bought (drafted) and traded in much the same way as Wall Street tycoons buy, sell, and trade securities.

The whole domain of popular culture is a crucial area for constructing forms of consent and conformity. Cultural practices like language, informal education, the media, art, the theater, and habits and customs help to fashion hegemony. One form of popular culture is sport culture, and it functions through symbols and rituals embedded in various aspects of it—sports literature, sports customs, media sport presentations, and "official" sport mythology—that closely reflect the culture of the dominant social actors. Dominant groups use sport effectively to reproduce their views and interests through its myths, rituals, and ceremonies and through its communal celebrations that provide opportunities for large masses of people to be "part of the action," such as the Super Bowl, World Series, Stanley Cup play-offs, and so forth.

In many ways sporting practices—indeed, all leisure activity—help to continually reinforce the hegemonic structure of power and privilege in capitalist society. Spectator sports in particular, because they are commercialized, are mediated by the press and broadcasting, and are subject to government intervention. Thus they provide many opportunities for dominant groups to associate themselves with them in various ways and to intervene in and use them to advance their own interests.

By understanding sport through a perspective of hegemony theory, one becomes more aware of its societal role for producing and reproducing the present power and dominance relationships. One will also likely become more skeptical of suggestions about the “naturalness” of contemporary practices and events and more willing to seriously consider alternative ways and means for the promotion of personal development and social justice through sports activities.

Summary and Preview

The reality of American society is not perceived by everyone in the same way. As a consequence, there are various social images about how our society works—how power, control, and influence are distributed in the major social institutions and cultural practices—and who the major beneficiaries of this system are. Whoever has power, control, and influence can set the social agenda; the powerful are the dominant forces over societal attitudes, values, beliefs, norms, and worldviews.

I have identified and described two social images—the pluralist and the hegemonic—in terms of two foundational questions: (1) Who are the sources of power and influence over the attitudes, values, beliefs, norms, and worldviews within American society? and (2) What role do they play in American social and cultural life? I believe that the hegemonic image more accurately reflects the realities of contemporary American society.

One of the consequences of social organization in America is that people with certain characteristics are treated unequally. Despite popular beliefs that in America there is equality of opportunity and we are all treated equally, the fact is that widespread social inequality exists. Sociologists call this structured inequality *social stratification*; it exists when entire categories of people have unequal access to various societal rewards. As a cultural practice that supports and helps sustain hegemony, sport in America has historically promoted and supported various forms of class, gender, and racial social inequalities. These issues will be taken up in the next three chapters.

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