

KELLY, JOHN D. *The American game: capitalism, decolonization, world domination and baseball*. 175 pp., illus. Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press, 2006. £6.50 (paper)

In February and March 2009, the second World Baseball Classic (WBC) was played among sixteen qualifying national teams. The championship was won by Japan, which had also won the first WBC in 2007 by beating Cuba in the finals. This time, it defeated South Korea, which had ousted the US team in the semifinal round. Much was made of the success of the East Asian and Caribbean national teams, and many commentaries likened the WBC to the football FIFA World Cup.

In this lively polemic, John Kelly (no relation to this reviewer) insists that these assessments are doubly misleading. First, they overstate the nation-state as the crucial unit in this sporting competition. Moreover, they misrecognize the real force behind the WBC, which is not an international federation like FIFA but a powerful commercial sports monopoly, Major League Baseball (MLB), which operates the professional baseball leagues in the United States. The Japanese national team may have won the championship game, but the MLB controlled the rules of the game. The WBC is an instrument of the MLB to consolidate its control of world baseball, and Kelly uses this case as the centrepiece of his analysis of the dynamics of 'the American game' – which is not so much baseball itself as it is a broad economic imperialism, of which this new world stage of baseball is but an instantiation.

This is persuasive, and of broad relevance beyond the seemingly special world of critical sport studies because sports have generally been overlooked in studies of governmentality and globalization. This is unfortunate because organized sports were among the earliest nineteenth-century secular organizations to develop imperial and international expanse. FIFA, the International Olympic Committee, and the International Amateur Athletic Federation all preceded the League of Nations, and modern sports regulations and organizations have been powerful arbiters of sovereignty, citizenship,

and governance (as well as race, gender, and class).

Sport's importance for any theory of global capitalism and governance is well demonstrated by Kelly's study, but its real importance is to delineate the distinctive trajectory of baseball. Certainly some gifted and critical economists have analysed baseball economics, in micro and macro terms, and there are historians and anthropologists who have detailed the sport's colonial and neocolonial arenas and its racial and ethnic orders. Kelly's contribution is to bring these two together as an argument that the century-long efforts of the MLB to control baseball as a capitalist enterprise reflect the particular arc of American capitalism and enterprise behaviour. His is a brief for American exceptionalism: in sports, but, more significantly, in the lineaments of American capital.

Kelly's analysis of this WBC tournament is triangulated by a historical sketch of critical events in baseball history and by a wide-ranging theoretical palate. The former is a selective chronology of a century of efforts by the MLB to contain multiple threats to its expanding hegemony within the US and abroad. The latter, which will be of more interest to most *JRAI* readers, is really Kelly's ambition 'to talk about baseball in social theory and vice versa' (p. 4). Bakhtin (baseball as a genre of game) is more useful to him than Durkheim's search for elementary forms; Marx's cramped notion of use value and Ronald Coase's model of firm behaviour are deficient in light of Weber (baseball as a genre of capitalist enterprise) and Veblen, who was especially prescient about the capacities of the American firm to use American power and law as cover for market domination. What this litany of theorists leads to, however, is Marshall Sahlins, because at heart this is Sahlins anthropology, locating 'rapid economic change within histories of cultural structure' (p. 126) by explicating critical events and uncovering the historically contingent and culturally meaningful conditions of possibility for social action.

Inevitably, in a relatively short book, Kelly's claims are broad-brushed and under-specified, and they may well be nuanced in future writings. They are overstated, for instance, because mobilizing (or perhaps marketing) national sentiment is critical to the corporate success of the MLB, which has depended on a powerful legal protectionism uniquely accorded baseball and which has cannily played upon a peculiar American ideology about the national pastime. And Kelly's argument for American (sports and capitalist) exceptionalism could be

buttressed by closer attention to other powerful global sports formations (e.g. football, athletics, rugby, and skiing), which centre on nation-states as formal member units and constituencies.

Even so, this is a provocative and original analysis. The subject is baseball – how and why diamonds are an (American) boy's best friend – but, more lastingly, it is an exemplary historical ethnography of corporate imperialism.

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