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A League of Their Own: A Feminist Interpretation of Women's Sport in the U.S.

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Abstract

The goal of this essay is to examine American sports through the lens of feminist philosophy. I am particularly interested in the questions of what the American attitude is toward women's sports and the involvement of women in men's sports, does that attitude reflect a cultural limit that Americans have reached regarding women's sports (I intend to argue that it does), and does that limit reveal essentializing notions about sex which still haunt American society. In answering these questions, I will be using Wendy Williams' article, "The Equality Crisis," specifically her sections on the culture of men and women as aggressors and nurturers respectively, for her definition and recognition of the concept of the cultural limit, and the Joan W. Scott piece, "Deconstructing Equality-versus-Difference" in conducting a post-structuralist examination of women's sports in the U.S. as well as the work of various scientists and philosophers in examining the genealogy of women in sports. My primary focus will be the sports of basketball, baseball, and American football, along with what appears to be its female equivalent in cheerleading. Each of these sports, perhaps, apart from basketball, are traditionally associated with essential masculinity and each have a female equivalent, which seems to be less popular in mainstream entertainment.

It can be easy to view sports purely as entertainment, while not realizing their depth, in terms of cultural significance. But athletic competition has a long and rich history, and much can be learned about the culture of a nation by examining which sports are popular and the general attitude of a people concerning sports. Sports often serve as a reflection of key societal issues and social justice victories, ranging from Jesse Owens raising a fist after winning the gold medal in Nazi Germany, the desegregation of baseball, to activist causes like the recent Colin Kaepernick protests. The major role of sports in popular culture combined with the history of sport being traditionally viewed as the arena of masculine competition and the domain of essential masculinity leads me to the conclusion that a feminist examination of topic will shed light on some essentializing notions still held about women in mainstream popular culture which may seem contradictory to the values we now hold in our modern "post-feminist" society.

My intention in this essay is to examine the American attitude towards women's participation in sport through the lens of feminist philosophy, and what it reveals about the American attitude towards women in general. In doing so, I intend to argue that in spite of various successes of the feminist movement, which have resulted in some ground being gained for women's equal treatment in American society, the American attitude towards women's sports and the athletes who participate in them reveals essentializing notions about sex and gender that still exist in some form within the subconscious mind of American society; as well as a "cultural limit" which has been reached in our society of the kind described by Wendy Williams in her essay "The Equality Crisis". Further, I also intend to investigate how this limit came to be reached through a post-structural analysis, using the model described by Joan W. Scott in her piece "Deconstructing Equality-versus-Difference", of the sports of baseball, football, and basketball, as well as the participation of women in each of these sports; all of which are traditionally associated with essential masculinity and each have

some female equivalent which is less popular in mainstream entertainment.

In her article titled “The Equality Crisis: Some Reflections on Culture, Courts, and Feminism”, Wendy Williams introduces the idea of a “cultural limit” which can be reached by a society concerning the amount of progress they are willing to make on social issues which are contradictory to “our most profoundly embedded cultural values” (Williams, 697). Williams argues that a refusal to ignore certain culturally constructed gender norms can be reflected by certain cultural phenomenon. She uses the examples of particular court cases which show that a separate spheres gender labor policy, in which men occupy a public sphere and fulfill a “bread-winner” role and women occupy a private sphere and fulfill the role of “homemaker”, still exists embedded in the subconscious minds of lawmakers by tradition, while any actual legislation prohibiting women from entering the workforce had been stuck off the books by activist movements. In the same spirit of Williams’ work, I believe that a similar cultural limit has been reached regarding women’s sports in the U.S.

Several legal and societal victories have been won regarding women’s sports in the last 50 years, including the establishment of the WNBA in 1996 and the passing of title IX of the educational amendments in 1972, which prohibited discrimination based on sex in any federally funded institution and opened the door for female athletes to begin participating at the collegiate level. But title IX only demonstrates legal progress and you cannot legislate people’s attitudes and opinions. According to an article by Forbes, the average attendance of WNBA games is about 10,000 fans less per game than their male counterparts; the players in the WNBA are also paid 28% less than their male counterparts, only receiving 22% of league revenue, while NBA player receive 50% of league revenue. These statistics demonstrate that female basketball players are less popular and less appreciated by their league than male players, and I would argue are a result of essentializing notions held by the typical American sports consumer, who believes that the game is less entertaining if played by women. The female basketball player, and female athlete in general, is assumed to be less talented and less athletic than her male counterparts by the typical fan, which is a result of essentializing ideals which have been reinforced in American culture by tradition. But these assumptions appear to run counter to what is typically accepted to be the appropriate attitude towards women in modern American culture. For example, when Cam Newton, the quarterback of the Carolina Panthers, made a sexist comment to a female reporter interviewing him after a game, saying it was “weird to hear a female talking about (intricate game details),” he received overwhelmingly negative feedback on social media and from his colleagues. The feedback received by Mr. Newton regarding his comment demonstrates that the popular attitude is perhaps more progressive than the one held by Newton himself, but I would argue that there are cultural limits lingering in the American subconscious which prohibit most of those same people who came to the reporter’s immediate defense from asking larger questions about the role of women in football in general. Questions like why are women who want to be involved in football confined for the most part to the role of sideline reporter instead of analyst; to the role of cheerleader instead of player? It is not a lack of ability, athleticism, or physical toughness that prevents women from playing Football, as evidenced by the recent emergence of female players at the pop warner, high school, and collegiate levels, but rather the idea still held in the American subconscious that women are delicate and fragile and have no place in the violent world of professional football; which speaks to the larger problem of war and violence in general having been traditionally thought of as the domain of men, a phenomenon which Wendy Williams describes in detail.

In her article, Williams defines the notions of gender traditionally held by our culture, namely the role of man as aggressor in both war and sex, and the role of woman as mother or nurturer. She writes that war is identified as “essentially masculine” and has traditionally been defined as “the locus of traditional masculine pride and self-identity” and goes on to say that “contact sport is...just a subset of physical combat” (Williams, 699). I would take the comparison a step further in saying that male athletes in all mainstream sports, meaning football, basketball, and baseball, are routinely compared to “warriors” who are “doing battle” on the field of play, and this parallel between sport and war contributes to the reification of essentializing notions of gender. Regular use of this sort of language works to preserve the world of sports as the domain of men and makes sport synonymous with masculinity because of the deeper traditional association between war and masculinity, contributing further to notion that women who play sports are somehow less feminine or “not real women”. This association of sport and masculinity creates a sort of negative feedback loop, in which women in American culture are subtly dissuaded from participating in certain sports because of standards of beauty which discourage large amounts of muscle mass for women and essentializing notions about gender which paint women as weak, fragile and delicate, the apparent avoidance of these certain sports by women then works to reify the notions which discouraged them from participating in the sports to begin with.

Further evidence of a cultural limit reflected in sport is the traditional association with men and baseball, while women are encouraged to play softball instead. Softball has recently been gaining in mainstream popularity, in fact the 2017 college softball world series was recently broadcast on several major networks, including ESPN and CBS. The growing acceptance of softball as a mainstream sport, with big games at the collegiate level now being broadcast on major networks, may at first glance appear to be a victory for women in sports, but the segregation of the two sports by gender in the mind of society is not only problematic for women who would rather play baseball, as the two are largely different games, but also implies and reifies negative stereotypes about female athletes in general.

Softball is assumed to be much less difficult and less physically strenuous than baseball, because the field which is played on is smaller, and the ball is larger and easier to hit. The implication of the fact that women are encouraged to play softball as an alternative to baseball further reflects the aforementioned ideas which are still subconsciously held about gender. Although women are no longer dissuaded outright from participating in sports because of changes in the popular attitude, women’s encouragement to participate in sports which are thought to require less strength, coordination and athletic skill, like softball, demonstrates a reluctance by our society to accept the possibility that men and women are not as different in potential for athletic ability as we assume that they are. What I mean by this is that the assumption that women are so physically inferior to men that they belong in a different sport is an uncritical one and the reluctance to abandon the “women are weak, men are strong” trope, which is implied by the separation of sport by gender reflects what I believe to be a cultural limit in our society that prohibits us from moving beyond traditionally held values which associates strength and athletic ability with men and weakness and frailty with women. I want to be clear in saying that I am conscious of the biological differences between men and women in terms of average muscle mass and naturally occurring hormones which promote muscle growth and am not arguing that these facts should be ignored altogether. However, what I am arguing is that the apparent disparity between males and females in terms of athletic ability, or the popular notion of such a disparity, which amounts to the same thing,

is at largely culturally constructed, and if certain cultural factors were changed, then this gap in athleticism, if it still existed at all, would narrow significantly.

The question of where these notions of gender and sports come from is one that I find particularly interesting because the genealogical examination which is required in attempting to answer the question not only reveals the impermanent nature of certain ideas which we take as essential or having always existed, but also provides the possibility for the righting of certain societal wrongs. The realization that problematic values which we have held in the past and may still continue to hold are not fixed and permanent but transitory gives us as a society the option to make corrections. The technique I will be using to attempt to answer such a question is a poststructural analysis as described by Joan W. Scott in her article “Deconstructing Equality Vs. Difference”, in which she provides a detailed description of what such an analysis entails and how poststructural analysis can be beneficial from the standpoint of feminist philosophy.

Scott defines post-structuralism as a “way of analyzing constructions of meaning and relationships of power that called unitary, universal categories into question and historicized concepts otherwise treated as natural (such as man/woman) or absolute (such as equality or justice).” (Scott, 758). This theory, when applied to the question of the cultural attitude towards women in sports, accomplishes much in the way of providing answers which call into question traditional conceptions of gender, e.g. man as strong, brave warrior, and woman as gentle, meek nurturer. Scott highlights four key elements or structures which must be the central focus of any post-structural analysis, namely, language, discourse, difference, and deconstruction. Language refers to not only verbal communication, but to “any system...through which meaning is constructed and cultural practices are organized,” meaning that a post-structural analysis of the language used within sports would not only focus on the words but also on the socially constructed ways in which men and women reveal themselves to themselves and to each other in meaningful ways. Discourse refers to the complex web of “historically, socially, and institutionally specific” structures which shape how we operate within a given society (Scott, 760). Scott writes that the movement of such structures over time come to constitute what we take to be given as true, e.g. that popular opinions about our understanding of the science of human biology come to shape the so called “truth” that men are vastly superior to women in terms of athletic ability. Difference is the notion that “meaning is made through explicit or implicit contrast...” (Scott, 760) and that such a contrast contributes to how certain things or people reveal themselves to us. The example Scott uses is how the term feminine comes to be defined in terms of a direct opposition to masculine, therefore causing men to be associated with the positive traits which are implied by masculinity, while women come to be associated in terms of the antithesis of masculinity, e.g. men are strong, women are weak, or men are tough, women are fragile. The final element is deconstruction, which refers to the exercise of examining in a critical way the “ways in which meanings are made to work” (Scott, 761). Another way to think about deconstruction would be to examine something that originally shows up as an either/or scenario and realize that it in fact is a false dichotomy and the two terms in question are not actually mutually exclusive.

The general attitude towards women in sports is reflective of the historical attitude towards women in general, and in an effort to examine this attitude I will be referring to the work of various philosophers and scientists, namely Bonnie Morris and her article on the history of women’s sports, Leslie Heaphy and her article sport, philosophy and women, as well as research done by

the Japanese Center for Women in Sports. The commonly held attitude that women are not good at sports or are at least not as good at sports as men are, is the result of attitudes regarding women and their health, which date at least as far back as Aristotle, who posited that human beings had a “limited amount of energy” and that a woman’s menstrual cycle on its own used up a good deal of this finite amount of energy which flowed through the body. Women were therefore discouraged from participating in strenuous mental or physical activity because it was believed that the stress of such activities, combined with the stress of the menstrual cycle, could use up this energy and render the woman infertile (Morris). This belief that women are physically inferior to men became calcified in the subconscious of western culture, evolving alongside our understanding of medical science into the belief, which was popularly held among experts in the 19th century, that women have delicate constitutions and need to be confined to the home and to light house work because strenuous physical activity was bad for their health, especially in terms of fertility and childbearing (Heaphy).

These beliefs, which were commonly accepted as truth, bled into our current understanding of the differences between men and women, and even though modern sensibility has changed in such a way as to be more accepting of women’s participation in the workplace as well as in sports these attitudes still linger in our society, as demonstrated by the still popularly held idea that women are physically inferior to men. Beliefs such as these also contribute to which sports are traditionally played by women or are thought of as feminine. The 19th century belief that women were more delicate and should avoid strenuous physical activity limited which sports women could participate in at that time. Ladies were confined to the sports of swimming, tennis, golf, croquet, and archery because of the relatively low level of exertion required for each of those sports (Morris). When the Olympic games were re-founded at the turn of the century, an all-male Olympic committee was charged with determining which sports women should be eligible to participate in. By the fourth Olympic games, four sports were deemed to be “feminine” and therefore eligible for the participation of women, and these four sports were tennis, archery, swimming, and golf, the same four sports which had previously been deemed socially acceptable for women to participate in because of the historical conception of women as weak (JCRWS). This kind of discourse is also responsible for why women play softball instead of baseball, as softball was originally developed as a less strenuous form of baseball which could be played indoors or in the off-season, as was thus deemed a natural fit for women because of these same antiquated conceptions of health.

The beliefs about the difference between the bodies of men and women are also made manifest in the way in which women, proximally and for the most part, occupy space and move their bodies. Iris Marion Young, as quoted by Leslie Heaphy, argues that the different ways in which men and women perform similar tasks, like throwing a baseball for example, are affected by the ways in which men and women understand themselves physically. She writes that Women traditionally “throw like girls”, or in a restricted manner, not using their entire body, but rather throwing with just the arm, because of constraints placed upon them by the societal understanding of the female body, not because of “breast size, shoulder width, or muscle size” (Heaphy) which is often offered as a scientific justification for these beliefs which actually have their roots in cultural habituation rather than scientific fact. It is helpful to understand this distinction in terms of the post structural aspect of difference, and the definition of the feminine in opposition to what is masculine. Women are expected to act in a manner which society deems to be feminine, and what is feminine is defined as the opposite of what is masculine, i.e. strength, courage, a propensity

to act; while the feminine, and by extension the way in which women are expected to act to be properly called women, is exemplified by weakness, compassion, and passivity.

Despite several victories for feminist equality movements and a more progressive attitude towards women in general now held by our society, the attitude towards women in sports and women as athletes is still one that assumes men to be physically superior to women to a degree that is far beyond the limits imposed by human biology. This attitude that women are physically inferior to men to the degree that they are currently understood to be in popular culture is what I think to be a cultural limit reached by our society regarding how much we are willing to change our understanding of the differences between men and women. Sport is still thought of as the domain of men, and while women's participation in sport is no longer explicitly discouraged, certain social and cultural factors limit women to participating in either a less strenuous version of the sports played by men or in different sports all together. This discouraging of women from participating in certain sports, or even exercising and moving their bodies in such a way as to support physical activity, is a far greater factor in what appears to be the difference in athletic ability between males and females, and as such is entirely contingent on our historical moment. I would argue that if these specific social factors were to change, the gap between male and female athletes, if it continued to exist at all, would narrow significantly.

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