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Lou Antolihao

Playing with the Big Boys: Basketball, American Imperialism, and Subaltern Discourse in the Philippines

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Book Reviews

LOU ANTOLIHAI

Playing with the Big Boys: Basketball, American Imperialism, and Subaltern Discourse in the Philippines

Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2017. 189 pages.

A lecturer at the National University of Singapore, Lou Antolihao specializes in the study of sports, transregionalism, imperialism, and postcolonialism in Asia. *Playing with the Big Boys* is his first book, although chapters 2 and 4 were originally published as articles in *Sport and Society* and *Philippine Studies*, respectively (xviii).

Antolihao's question is straightforward: Why is basketball popular in the Philippines? The question, seemingly so innocent, comes loaded with a host of historical and cultural baggage—from the sport's origins as a tool of American imperialism to modern-day concerns about the average Filipino's genetically imposed height ceiling. In fact, basketball's ubiquity across the archipelago and its supremacy over all other sports within the collective national consciousness have often left foreign and local observers scratching their heads in disbelief.

Richard Holt ("Historians and the History of Sport," *Sport in History*, 2014: 1–33) observes that, at least in sports history, sociologists have tended to "take general history as a 'given' in the sense of consulting a small number of well-known secondary works rather than attempting to explore a wider range of historical works available." This is not the case with *Playing with*

the Big Boys. Antolihao's bibliography shows a plethora of secondary sources and an extensive list of archival materials that were consulted in crafting his historical narrative. Thus, the book's interdisciplinary approach combines abstract sociological theorization with a rigorous historical methodology. Antolihao's routine citation of primary source material lends much weight to his analyses of the sociocultural phenomenon that is Philippine basketball.

A lengthy introduction sets the stage for much of his conceptual framework. A key focus is the presentation of Philippine basketball as a phenomenon outside of the common binaries in postcolonial studies. The usual juxtaposition of the native against the foreign, the colony against the empire, or the local against the global is transcended by locating Philippine basketball in local and regional arenas beyond the purview of the country's colonial relationship with America. The book's title, therefore, not only refers to the struggles of the subaltern Philippines to attain recognition and growth vis-à-vis its hegemonic colonizer (7), but also sets up a postcolonial discussion on a nation trying to locate itself both in its immediate locality of Asia and the world at large.

The rest of the book can be roughly divided into two parts, with a narrative-based approach slowly giving way to more sociology-based analyses of current phenomena in the latter segments. The first three chapters deal with events located further in the past and thus are more historical in nature. Chapter 1 traces basketball's obscure origins in Philippine colonial history and identifies it as one of the many sports introduced by the trifecta of American colonial forces that brought modern sports into the archipelago as part of its "civilizing mission": the American military, the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA), and the public education system. Here, Antolihao highlights how "physical education and sports were used not only to mold the body, but the spirit as well" (57). Insightfully, he contrasts the Spanish conquest through "the sword and the cross" with the efficacy of American colonial power through "the rifle and the baseball bat" (56–57).

Chapter 2 provides a historical analysis of the battle between ballgames in the Philippines, as basketball slowly overshadowed baseball in terms of popularity during the decades of American rule. The discussion includes the symbolic dichotomy between notions of metropole and province, modernity and parochialism, bourgeois and populist, that basketball and baseball, respectively, came to represent. It also showcases the many accomplishments of different iterations of the national basketball team in international

competitions as factors in its final cultural victory over baseball. Strong finishes in the international arena are also central in Antolihao's discussion of Philippine basketball's subaltern nature since its national teams represented the former colony's ability to play with—and even overcome—the “big boys.” The rush of national pride brought by such achievements propelled basketball's transformation into a hegemonic national sporting culture.

Chapter 3 asks how basketball remained popular despite the Philippines's dismal performance in international competitions during the latter half of the twentieth century (118). Titled “The Hollywoodization of Hoops,” the chapter analyzes the cultural transformation of basketball into an arena of mass media entertainment, transcending its once international achievements by catapulting its most famous players into the ranks of national celebrities. Antolihao observes that “the general emphasis of local basketball during the late Cold War period had shifted from an externally oriented national symbol to an inward-looking and self-perpetuating aspect of local popular culture” (119).

The book shifts gears in chapter 4 with the narrative approaching more contemporary times. Here, Antolihao discusses basketball's popularity through an analysis of spectatorship and further subalternity in the mass appeal of the Philippine Basketball Association (PBA) professional team Barangay Ginebra during the 1990s. He borrows heavily from the frameworks of Filomeno Aguilar's analysis of cockfighting as a colonial pastime and Reynaldo Ilet's use of popular texts to peer into the world of mass-based popular movements. The chapter makes use of two popular songs written by Gary Granada — “Kapag Natatalo ang Ginebra” and “Kapag Nananalo ang Ginebra” — to unwrap the mentality of the typical Filipino basketball fan. Antolihao portrays this mentality within the context of the subaltern but describes it as outside of the colonizer–colonized tension of Spanish-era cockfighting. Instead, he portrays Philippine basketball as a subaltern spectacle:

an important arena where the struggles of ordinary people are symbolically played out. As they root for the underdog, whether in the arena or in front of television, Filipino basketball followers are clearly not only cheering for their favorite teams but also for themselves, and for the many other real underdogs outside the playing court. (148)

Chapter 5 deals with the impact of globalization on Philippine basketball, focusing on the decline of the PBA due to the increasing popularity of the US National Basketball Association (NBA), the failure of foreign-born players to connect with Filipino fans, the rise of the local collegiate scene, and the continued failure of the national team to win a substantial international victory (156). The PBA's decline is evinced by professional and collegiate league ticket sales, NBA market surveys, and PBA annual revenue reports. Supporting the narrative are observations of journalists, quotes from basketball players and personalities, and interviews with long-time fans. However, despite its adverse effect on the country's premier professional league, globalization has not diminished basketball's popularity in the Philippines. Antolihao explains the sport's "cultural embeddedness":

the immense popularity of basketball is more deeply rooted and its history as a hegemonic sporting culture goes back more than a century. . . . Unlike most countries, the mass appeal of basketball in the Philippines could not be solely attributed to the more recent surge of globalization, which only became prominent toward the end of the last millennium. In fact, local basketball is so deeply rooted that its branches hardly spread out, largely remaining domestically oriented until today. Philippine basketball runs the court as a mature national sporting culture; it is ubiquitous, all-pervading. (175)

Ultimately, Antolihao's use of archival sources and a historical consciousness enables him to convincingly answer his book's main sociological question: why is basketball so popular in the Philippines? His approach allows him to transcend the simplistic explanation of pervasive Americanization by narrating the internal dynamic of the sport's development in the Philippines. Beginning as a colonial tool to "Americanize the Filipinos," basketball was appropriated by Filipinos; international victories associated it with the nation-state, and "Hollywoodization" entrenched it as a cultural icon, subsequently becoming symbolically perceived as a "game of the masses," whose liking for the game stood firm amid globalization (181–82). Although primarily sociological, *Playing with the Big Boys* is a much welcome addition to Philippine historiography. It is a pioneering work that delves into the country's sports history, a field that deserves more recognition and eagerly awaits further studies by scholars.

Some segments of the book, however, feature abstract concepts without the citation of primary source materials. While easy to ignore in the book's latter portions, where Antolihao deals with facts that can be held as common knowledge of the average Filipino, such segments attract attention in chapters dealing with topics that have greater historical distance. An example of this lapse in documentation is the discussion that pits interscholastic baseball against collegiate basketball from the 1900s to the 1960s. Although of sound logical argumentation, the paragraphs that describe the characteristics of both sports do not feature any citation to specific sources (82–83). Other examples are his points about Asia's "Americanization" (105–6) and the history of Filipino basketball celebrities (111). Nevertheless, these lapses are minor and do little to detract from the book's significance. Given its robust bibliography, conceptual rigor, and tight narrative—not to mention the game's ubiquity—Antolihao's *Playing with the Big Boys* is a must-read for scholars interested in Philippine sports history.

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