

Review: Anyone But England

Anyone But England: Cricket and the National Malaise. Mike Marqusee. Verso Books. 273pp, pbk £9.95

Anarchist Communist Federation

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Marqusee is a rarity, describing himself as a deracinated American Jewish Marxist who follows cricket. This excellent book is similarly ground-breaking; a critical, political study of race, class and cricket. The game is used by the ruling class to maintain and promote class rule; society, like cricket, is a 'level playing field' where playing by the rules — those set by the rich and powerful — is all important. Similarly cricket is a potent metaphor for the new racism's language of 'mutually exclusive cultural identities' — which just happen to coincide with race.

Class

Cricket's origin myth is that of a single rural folk game which all classes—and both sexes, adults and children—played together as equals, free from the evils of commerce—betting, wages, sponsorship, and advertising until the recent advent of professionalism at the beginning of the 1960's. The reality is that of a number of rural folk games standardised and codified into one national game by the ruling class in the late eighteenth century due to the high stakes arising from large scale betting. Women were barred, though this was usually only enforced after puberty in order to protect men from the threat of female contamination. The founding of the new game was bound up with the capitalist enclosures of the common land in the second half of the eighteenth century. Breaking into the newly created closes was an offence—landowners now had to allow people to play in areas where they had previously played as a right. Class distinctions were institutionalised, and money pervasive in the form of betting and shamateurism; cheating necessarily followed. Almost from the beginning of cricket there was the lament that the game was not what it used to be, with technique, sportsmanship, loyalty, patriotism, crowd behaviour, and the corrupting qualities of money all cited. Cricket was associated with a rural childhood innocence and a social harmony arising from a 'natural' — i.e. feudal — hierarchy; the ills of the game and the modern world arise from alien intrusions such as money, politics and immigrants (particularly black ones). Marqusee rightly concludes that the world's first large scale industrialised society lived on a cultural diet of sentimental ruralism, a mythical golden age. Central to this was the game's development in and through industrial society under the control of the non-industrial class, the landed upper class.

Cricket Whites...

The elitism and snobbery between 'amateurs' and professionals was another illustration of the class system in cricket. The amateurs were members of the upper classes who played alongside working class professionals in teams, but enjoyed far higher pay, under the guise of 'expenses' and a range of privileges to show their supposed superiority. Dressing rooms were segregated along with entrances to the field; amateurs also had separate travel, accommodation and dining arrangements (all first class), and had to be addressed as 'Sir' or 'Mr' at all times. Their 'expenses' were often double the pay of professionals.

This divide parallels the split in the rugby codes between 'amateur' (until 1995) ruling class Union, and working class League, professional since the breach in 1895. Ostensibly the split was over 'broken time' payments which compensated workers for wages lost through playing rugby, but the main agenda was undoubtedly class. Arthur Budd (then RFU president) baldly stated

‘The troubles of the Union commenced with the advent of the working man. If he cannot afford the leisure to play the game he must do without it’.

Empire and Race

The Victorian sporting ethic was a paradox—the individual was subordinate to the team, and although winning was the driving force, the principle of ‘fair play’ overrode everything.

This was a moral for the higher and more important games in life, those of economics, politics and empire: those who lost these — the working class worldwide — must accept the rules and verdict of the system.

Cricket brought together the classes in a hierarchical way; racism was an inevitable consequence of this invented tradition of social inclusion. Playing cricket was a touchstone of people’s ‘Englishness’, their right to be included in Empire. Marqusee points out the inherent contradiction of English nationalism — based on (the now defunct) empire — compared with other nationalisms such as those of America and France (based on the nation, with a ‘popular and democratic content’). He is wrong to claim that nationalism can be positive however, which he does through asserting that ‘nation’ can be divorced from ‘race’; and of course this means ignoring the class struggle for the national interest i.e. that of the ruling class. Following the collapse of the English Empire — and national capitals faltering fortunes— English nationalism is a weak and faltering creature, which can only define itself negatively through what is not. Thus Norman Tebbit’s cricket test — ‘Which side do they (black immigrants, particularly Asians) cheer for?’ The ‘intrinsic Englishness’ of cricket is the background to this and other ‘cultural’ debates of the new racism. The new racists do not want to dominate, they merely want a space of their own —

Tebbit attacked British Muslim fundamentalists for their fatwah against Salman Rushdie and accused Rushdie of an assault on his own religion. If black immigrants (particularly those with Asian fathers) cheered India or Pakistan in tests/Internationals against England they failed. This cultural test is (un)surprisingly not applied to white English settlers in Australia, or Scots, Welsh or Irish settlers when their national sides played internationals against England. The games authorities have ignored the racism of the cricket test but continue to accuse those who adopt political stances such as condemning apartheid for ‘whipping up hatred’. Similarly there is frothing at the mouth by the establishment and the media over the Mexican wave amongst spectators, but deafening silence about racist chants and abuse from crowds. Yorkshire cricket club is notorious for its racial exclusion policy — ‘we only play (white) Yorkshiremen’. Until the 1992–3 season they were the only County side never to have played a black overseas player; worse they have never selected a Yorkshire born black player for the first team, despite the counties’ strong Asian Cricketing leagues they are largely ignored by the white cricket establishment and media. Sections of the Hendingley crowd are notorious for their racism: after a match against Somerset where the great West Indian batsman Viv Richards was repeatedly abused, his teammate Ian Botham called the culprits ‘racial idiots’. The response of the Yorkshire Committee was to demand an apology from Beefy. In the good old days before the West Indies began beating England regularly, their cricket was patronised and condemned with faint praise by most white commentators as erratic — they were described as ‘eager’, ‘confident’, ‘unorthodox’, ‘joyous’, ‘uninhibited’ and ‘masterful’ at times, but losing heart when things were against them. With the rise of Clive Lloyd’s all conquering side of the late 1970s and 80s, (based on all an all out barrage of four highly

skilled fast bowlers, copied from the successful Aussie Blitzkrieg of Lillee and Thomson), the patronising mask disappeared. The Windies were described as (an) 'army of weary mercenaries', and derided for their 'slow play' after their 5-0 'blackwash' of England in 1984 (although their over rate exceeded England's). David Frith described their cricket as "founded on vengeance and violence and fringed by arrogance... Even the umpires seem to be scared that the devilish looking Richard's might put a voodoo sign on them". The West Indies clash with England issue as the savage verses the civilised; Caribbean skill is ascribed to 'national ability' and 'spontaneity'. Marqusee points out that cricket is in fact a difficult, unnatural game (e.g. the side on axis required for batting and bowling), so to make it look natural requires great skill. Similarly, spontaneity means risktaking; complicated calculation, quick reaction and sophisticated technique.

Pre-national

The carnival spirit of West Indies crowds, particularly at English grounds, is foreign to the mores of the modern English game (though part of its folkroots). The pre-national folk games which presaged cricket were always staged as part of the local saturnalia: on festival days the lord of the manor provided meat and ale, and tolerated disorder and insubordination in order to lessen class antagonism. At Caribbean cricket grounds the local lords of misrule entertain the crowd with music and mockery. Some cross-dress (e.g. Chickee at Trinidad) an ancient symbol of social inversion mirroring the world turned upside down on the field of play as ex slaves beat the former master. Carnival is naturally very unsettling for the upholders of authority and hierarchy. The first West Indies victory over England in 1950 was dubbed 'calypso cricket', it coincided with the start of the large scale immigration from the Caribbean. As the West Indian community grew and their national side achieved dominance, the cricket establishment and media's amused tolerance changed to shrill hostility. Complaints grew about the 'endless din', 'mindless cacophony' and 'inescapable racket' of black fans who banged cans, and blew bugles and conch shells. In 1987, in reaction to disorder at the Edgbaston test against Pakistan (partly due to racist baiting of black fans by whites) the cricket authorities barred spectators from bringing in flags, banners and excessive amounts of alcohol. This was soon followed by a ban on the spirit of carnival. Within 2 years open areas at Lords, the Oval and Edgbaston (the haunt of boozers and chanters) were covered in seats and ticket prices rocketed. Although there is very little crowd trouble at matches, Tests and one day Internationals are heavily policed by robotic stewards eager to stamp out the first sign of carnival. Additionally the vast majority of seats for major fixtures now have to be booked in advance. The net effect of these changes has been a huge decline in black spectators for the last 3 West Indian tours (1988,91 and 95), particularly at Edgbaston and the Oval, which were previously strongholds (due to their large black population).

This important book looks at the mythology and politics of cricket worldwide, and benefits from the author's honesty, humour and warts-and-all love of the game. The analysis is flawed by the leftist politics however, for example the notion that nationalism can be positive, and the failure to discuss the broad question of whether competitive team sports can be libertarian.

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