

Steve Lasorsa. La rivalité Canadien-Nordiques. (Québec, Les Presses de l'Université Laval, Collection l'Évènement, 2011. Pp. 152. ISBN : 978-2-7637-9094-7)

Terry Vaios Gitersos

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The interconnection between the sporting and political realms, despite allusions from elements within the sport industry that these two worlds do not and should never intermingle, is so obvious as to be unmistakable. While sport may not quite be “war minus the shooting,” as George Orwell so pithily remarked, it is a highly malleable symbol that can be mobilized for any number of political ends. From Spain to South Africa, sport has been among the most visible foci of identity politics. Indeed, something about sport’s symbolism makes it particularly useful in the construction, articulation, and dissemination of nationalisms and national identities. Sport and the nation are so intimately connected that sports sociologist Alan Bairner, taking his cues from Scottish political scientist James Kellas, pointed out that sport is the most common popular form of nationalist expression in most countries.²

This holds as true for Québec as for elsewhere, especially with respect to hockey. French Canadians, according to sports sociologist Jean Harvey, “took up hockey and made it a symbol of their national identity, of their fight for the survival of their culture, on an English speaking continent and within a continent dominated by English.”³ Historically, the preferred vehicles for these impulses have been the National Hockey League’s (NHL) Montréal Canadiens and the club’s players such as the right winger-cum-folk hero Maurice “Rocket” Richard, whose suspension in 1955 triggered a riot in downtown Montréal that was interpreted as a nationalist uprising both at the

2. Alan Bairner, *Sport Nationalism, and Globalization: European and North American Perspectives* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001): 17
3. Jean Harvey, “Whose Sweater is This?: The Changing Meanings of Hockey in Québec” in *Artificial Ice: Hockey, Culture, and Commerce*, eds. David Whitson and Richard Gruneau (Peterborough, Ont.: Broadview Press, (2006): 34.

time and *ex post facto*. As a result, much of the academic work devoted to Québec sport, and almost all of that concerned with professional hockey, has concentrated on the Canadiens and their socio-political importance. However, the Québec in which the Canadiens gained prominence was drastically different to the Québec of the late 1970s and 80s, when the Québec City-based Nordiques appeared on the hockey landscape and challenged the Canadiens' provincial hegemony. As Steve Lasorsa argues in *La rivalité Canadien-Nordiques*, an adaptation of his master's thesis in history at Université Laval and the first book-length academic treatment of the Nordiques-Canadiens rivalry, the on-ice competition between the Canadiens and Nordiques was intimately connected to Québec's bitter national struggles of the 1980s.

Lasorsa's thesis is very clearly laid out. He postulates that the intense and polarizing rivalry between the Canadiens and Nordiques mirrored the political conflict of the province after the 1980 referendum on sovereignty-association, as Québécois nationalism coalesced around pro- and anti-independence camps. The Canadiens and Nordiques, by virtue of the passion channelled to them by Québécois fans and the social importance of hockey in Québec, served as a vehicle for national debates, in effect absorbing and reflecting the province's socio-political polarization. In this sense, Canadiens-Nordiques games became a site for the dramatization and ritual showcasing of Québec's deep schisms.

Lasorsa provides plenty of examples attesting to these divisions: the intense and often violent games between the Canadiens and Nordiques; the frenzied media coverage of the rivalry, which assumed and furthered a Manichean distinction between the two teams, compelling fans to choose one side or the other, and, most interestingly, the corporate rivalry between the Canadiens' and Nordiques' beer-brewing bosses, Molson and Carling O'Keefe, who used their hockey properties as vehicles to boost their sales in Québec's intensely competitive beer market. Lasorsa does indeed prove that there was a polarization, but fails to demonstrate that it was *the* polarization referenced in his thesis. While the rivalry between the Canadiens and Nordiques was, by all accounts, one of the more intense and colourful in NHL history, it was by no means unprecedented: it was not the first sporting rivalry, and will not be

the last, characterized by robust play, passionate fans, an irrepressible news media, and corporate antagonism.

In other words, Lasorsa ultimately fails to provide a smoking gun linking the Canadiens and Nordiques to larger social and political debates in Québec society. This is due in large part to the author's limiting his primary research to the 1983-84 season and its notorious culmination, a fistic confrontation between the two teams in the 1984 Stanley Cup playoffs. While the "Good Friday brawl" undoubtedly drips with symbolism, an analysis of the newspaper coverage of preceding NHL campaigns would have unearthed controversies speaking directly to that era's most significant socio-political debates: the Nordiques' adoption of a language policy eliminating English from public announcements at their home arena, and the Canadiens' ensuing decision to stay the course with bilingualism (1980); media scrutiny of the teams' ethno-linguistic composition, both on the ice and at management level (1979-1982); allegations by former Nordiques players that the team actively discriminated against Anglophones (1979-1980); the Canadiens' ill-fated hiring of Bob Berry as head coach, despite an almost universal desire, on the part of the French media, for a Francophone (1981); and the Canadiens' purge of their front office, interpreted by the French sports media as a much needed francization of the club's management structure (1982-83).

Similar evidentiary deficiencies afflict all parts of the book, including the most accomplished chapters. For instance, in a fascinating argument, Lasorsa hypothesizes that the enmity directed against the Canadiens (and, conversely, the popular support afforded to the Nordiques) can be read as a popular protest by Francophones against Molson, Québec's most successful brewery. But the only evidence provided to substantiate this claim is a short-lived boycott of Molson beer organized by hockey fans in 1979, before the Nordiques even entered the NHL. Lasorsa does not provide examples of anti-Molson discourse from the province's newspapers; similarly absent are statistics showing a Molson's decline in Québec during the 1980s. Lasorsa overplays his hand by assuming a province divided neatly between two teams and two breweries, ignoring the fact that Labatt, a company with no relationship with either the Canadiens or Nordiques, had significant operations in the province and an important share of its beer market.

Such oversimplifications are doubly disappointing because Lasorsa asks the right questions throughout his book. What makes sport such an ideal vehicle for political symbolism? What are the repercussions of this for the wider society? How are the media and corporations involved in such processes? These are the questions that have marked the best academic analyses of the intersection of sport, nationalism, and national identity; that Lasorsa fails to answer any of them satisfactorily should not detract from his achievement. As a Master's thesis, *La rivalité Canadien-Nordiques* is very good. As a book it is a well-written, fast-paced, enjoyable first foray into a very rich topic. Researchers examining the Canadien-Nordiques rivalry in the future will have a solid base upon which to build.

Jacques Cherblanc (dir.). Rites et symboles contemporains
Théories et pratiques

(Québec, Presses de l'Université du Québec, 2011.
 Pp. 206. ISBN : 978-2-7605-2983-0)

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Jadis bien encadrées par l'Église, l'État ou la famille, l'intervention rituelle et la gestion des symboles sont aujourd'hui sous tension ; comment expliquer qu'on y voit d'un côté une effervescence, alors que de l'autre, le désenchantement du monde et l'hyperindividualisme conduisent inévitablement à leur déclin ? Évitant intelligemment les écueils d'un tel débat, cet ouvrage s'intéresse aux transformations des rites et des symboles qui sont, elles, certaines.

Ce collectif dirigé par Jacques Cherblanc, professeur à l'Unité d'enseignement en études religieuses, en éthique et en philosophie de l'Université du Québec à Chicoutimi (UQAC), fait suite au colloque *Penser la mise en sens aujourd'hui. L'intervention rituelle et symbolique d'hier à demain*, qui s'est tenu à Montréal en mai 2010. Ces deux réalisations sont dues à l'initiative du Laboratoire d'expertise et de