

From Barthes to Foucault and beyond – Cycling in the Age of Empire.

Martin Hardie

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'Whilst the onomania lasted, bickerings and divisions endured.'

Barthes is right in that he tells us that there is an onomastics of the Tour.

But in the time since Barthes, in a manner the semiotician may not have envisaged, that onomastics has descended from the heights of myth and epic having the status of Greek gods. They have descended from being these lofty signs of the valor of the ordeal, of beings signs of old European ways and ethnicity – *Brankart le Franc, Bobet le Francien, Robic le Celte, Ruiz l'Ibere, Darrigade le Gascon*; to being patronymics of the biopolitical, of *homo sacer* and the spectacle that sustains Empire.

Although Barthes' idea of an onomastics of the Tour still holds fast, sadly, in the time in which we live, Barthes' classic piece on the Tour de France as Epic no longer depicts the essence of events such as *la Grande Boucle*.

Cycling, entangled in the process of its own globalisation, is a game in flux. It is no longer the pure myth or epic as Roland Barthes wrote. *Mont Ventoux* remains a moonscape, bare, barren, rising out of the lavender plains of Provence and on this landscape those playing this game are no longer heroes of epic proportions but bare life, *homo sacer*.

The precarity of existence better depicts the state of the peloton today: Free as the birds to soar to the greatest heights – Pantani, Rasmussen, Dajka, Valverde, Vinnicombe, Vinokourov ... the list is endless; but unlike those Greek gods of the time of Barthes in this age they are free to be shot down at a whim.

The onomastics of the Tour today is an onomastics of criminality.

Cycling has always been an assemblage and a line of flight – from the factory, the farm, from the peloton itself. Cycling finds itself in the eye of the storm as the processes of globalisation seek to reform it in their own image. On the frontline is the very body of the cyclist – this is the object of control.

Can we contextualise the globalisation of professional cycling in the age of Armstrong, the successive doping crises and the responses to them as events which signify the coming of Empire and the permanent state of exception?

A few brief scattered observations might provide some signposts for future work and thinking about sport, doping and control in the society of the spectacle that is Empire. There are a number of ways in which Foucault, and of those that have come since, might provide us with the tools to rethink what is at play.

How is cycling situated in the state of exception? What relation does it have to the management and administration of bodies through discipline and control? What can the position of these cyclists tell us about the condition of *homo sacer*?

A few events for example:

- *Operacion Puerto* and its onomastics is not related to heroics, but to bags of frozen blood, and the mystery of their identity and the performances they produced - Names such as *Birillo*, *Amigo de Birillo*, *USA*, *Hijo de Rudicio*, and *Piti*, treatments such as *Siberia*, *Vino*, *Alubias*, *Pelas*, and *Polvos de la Madre de Celestina*, events such as *San Isidrio*, *San Fermine*s and *Vendimia*;
- *Puerto* and noology, or the distance between the discursive processes of the media and the material process of 'tardy' (i.e. dysfunctional) Spanish justice and the manner in which in the spectacle it has been played out, so that the old ways and law of old Europe and ideas like the rule of law have become expedient and are forgotten so that 'law' simply becomes a servant of the pure functionality of preserving the integrity of the investment of state and capital;
- Of Pantani, Dajka and Rasmussen, all appear deemed to be lives no longer worthy of living. In Rasmussen's case of becoming unnameable. None failed a positive doping test set forth by the rules, but all were banished for, respectively, failing a health test, or for not telling the truth. Cases of the law being tossed aside in the name of pure functionality. Cases of death by media, Pantani and Dajka's horrible, slow, real deaths and in Rasmussen's case a living death; or
- The issue of surveillance, the Whereabouts system, of tracking bodies by Blackberries and Biological Passports and the proposed final solution of a 24 hour a day GPS-based surveillance of athletes.

Beyond Epic, beyond Foucault:

The old notions of law based upon a definable state, its boundaries, its people and its sovereignty seem to have vanished before our eyes. What is at stake in politics is the very control of the body, where the cyclist can be killed but not sacrificed.

The current moral panic surrounding doping in cycling is complete with its own *Sonderkommando* leading these bodies off to the slaughter [*What role does the South Australian of the Year play here?*]. Lynch mobs bring to the fore the question as to what actually is at stake in the game? What

is the role of sport today and why do we put so much effort into being so vigilant about maintaining the apparitions of fairness and normalcy? Is this moment of normalcy, as Agamben asks, the true horror of our times?

Why the moral panic and crusades to ensure that sport is made to seem to be fair, to the point that in the United States more is spent by the Government on anti doping than is spent on research into blood diseases? What is the link between this focus on the body and a society founded upon immaterial labour where possibly the only use that the body is now put to is that of sport and sex? These are questions for contemplation as the season of the Tours are upon us, while we try and recall the heroics that were played out in the day of Barthes. It is not a question of trying to return to those days of grandeur. But it is necessary to contemplate those days so that we can try and understand the processes currently occurring, to situate the debates about sports, drugs, of sports people and their behaviours.

Can we learn from the way 'law' is played out in the game of cycling in order to inform our understanding of what law is about within the broader parameters of Empire? All I can hope to point to are problems which this intersection of theory and sport throw into the air.

I do not claim cycling is unique, only that here we find the exception attenuated - is it the vanguard, so to speak, of the times in which we live? If law no longer is that thing that we believed it to be in those more certain times of Barthes - and if my hunch is correct, and cycling and the problematic of doping are symptoms of the state of exception, what must be addressed in the end is the 'age old' Foucauldian problem, as to whether the the door to justice in our times is 'more law' or whether is it an ethics of life? What does it mean if it is correct that life should no longer be lived looking above to the barren peak of *Mont Ventoux* for an answer, but should be made in the village, situated in the *Vaucluse*, below?

The starting point in all of this should be an examination of the way the Tour and it's participants are no longer the epic or mythical heroes they were once viewed in pre Foucauldian times. It brings us back to the state and the changes that have been wrought upon its integrity.

A few briefs words about the role of the Tours:

In those times the Grand Tours played a role in marking out and defining the territory, the nation and the people. Unlike any other sporting events the three Tours of the year embody the dramatics of life played out over a full three weeks. To those involved they seem to be a lifetime. These races embody all the aspects of life in such a way that they are so much more than sporting events. They are above all human dramas of an intense, immense stature. Each is part and parcel of the consciousness of societies, and a search for some truth and meaning to the human condition. All are built upon an idea of moulding the individual, the land, and people through a spectacle of involving superhuman figures that seek to mark out their own territories and conquer the boundaries of their

precarious existence.

In their marking out of a territory, of a nation and of a people, the Tours were as much a part of creating the Europe of the 20th century as was the documentation and administration of life as Foucault so very well describes in his lectures entitled of *'Society Must be Defended'* – the people, customs, fetes, fairs and fiestas, each day complete with the local version of cheese, chorizo and champagne. The Tours were created and maintained by an alliance of the state, industrial capital and the media. *[In France, the Tour was started by the newspaper L'Equipe, its impetus to sell more editions of a motoring magazine, putting cycling to work in the pay of an intersection of the car and newspaper industries. With its resumption after the Civil War in 1941 Spain's La Vuelta covered the longest route in its history demarcating the victor's territory across the country and particularly the former Republican strongholds. For some years it was restricted by Franco to only Spanish participants.]* In modernity these races all played their role in reinforcing the status of a unified territory, a people, a nation and its capital.

The Tours have also been the place that traditionally have allowed Europe to think of itself as the place where subjectivity could still 'do' rather than the place where subjectivity was simply relegated to 'being'. The Tours were centres of action in lands that might otherwise be petrified into museums of the old world amongst the chaos of the new world and modernity. *[Is this the problem with the American?]*

But with the coming of the age of Empire, things changed. It was with the coming of those from outside continental Europe that the practices of the peloton and in particular doping first become problematised.

It is with Simpson's death – the Englishman who helps start the process of globalising the Tours - that doping first becomes a political matter. Still it remains an internal issue, something for the sport to deal with. *[The mid sixties also coincide with the demise of national teams and the introduction of what are known as the Trade Teams.]* The late 1990's mark the point at which it becomes a matter for the sovereign – it is here with the *'Festina Tour'*, with borders being crossed that we see doping becoming criminalised. It is here that we first see cyclists being taken from their bikes to the jail cells. But it is in the age of Empire, an age that arrives with the American, *[a Texan no less]* that things really start to escape their bounds.

The State of Exception:

Agamben tells us when writing of the camp as *nomos* *[his is a concept not to be forgotten, here in Adelaide where young cyclists enter a camp – the AIS; at an early age, either to emerge 'victorious' or on the scrapheap]* that it is at the point when the modern nation-state enters into a lasting crisis that the sovereign decides to assume directly the care of biological life as one of its proper (or quite possibly its principal) tasks. This nation state had been founded upon the functional nexus of a

determinate territory, a determinate order, and a determinate people.

It is when the Tours begin to exceed their national boundaries, both by entering into foreign territory and by bringing those from outside Europe into its ranks on a permanent basis that we see the body of the cyclist becoming an issue for the sovereign. And it is at precisely this point, when the body becomes the focus of politics that the old rules of law and justice no longer seem to apply.

It is at this point – and this is what is at issue since Pantani, with Rasmussen, Valverde and Dajka; that the those who have taken it as their task to undertake the administration of doping, and to ensure the fairness of sport, the normalcy of the game, no longer orientate themselves according to a rule or a situation of fact. The decision maker no longer needs to decide whether a given fact falls within the rule. What is decided at once is a rule and a criterion – what becomes 'natural' is a rule that decides the fact and decides upon its own application without reference to any norm other than of preserving the integrity of the investment in the spectacle. As the coming of the Biological Passport tells us, the law of doping is neither now definable as a rule nor as a breach but upon what is said to be 'natural' or 'normal' values - in the world of cycling the formation and the execution of the rule are indistinguishable moments.

There is one thing (well, many in fact) that I have missed here and it relates to the double sided nature, or the two faces of *homo sacer* itself. Is it a matter again that may relate to the problem of the American? In describing the relation between *homo sacer* and the sovereign, Agamben introduces the wolf man (a subject also taken up in another vein in *A Thousand Plateaus*), the one subject to the ban and its special proximity to the sovereign. Does this proximity help us understand in any way the problem of the political interest in the body of the cyclist? - '*this animal has wits and intelligence/ ... I will give my peace to the beast/ and for today I will hunt no more*'. For today not only is the cyclist subject to the banishment of which I have alluded, at one and the same time, he is also brought in from the cold to live with the sovereign – even it seems to be the sovereign. As we saw in Adelaide this last January, with the third coming of the American, this proximity is such, that it may be, that now it is not the wolf that licks the feet of the sovereign, but that, in some cases, it is the sovereign that comes to lick the feet of the wolf.

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Martin Hardie,
Law Lecturer,
School of Law,
Deakin University (Geelong Campus)
Pigdons Road,
Waurm Ponds,
Victoria, 3216,
Australia.

Tel: + 61 (0) 3 522 71307

<http://newcyclingpathways.blogspot.com/>

<http://auskadi.mjzhosting.org/>

mhardie@deakin.edu.au

martin.hardie@gmail.com

skype/irc: auskadi