



Critical review

Golf and the environmental politics of modernization

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ABSTRACT

In this critical review we reflect on findings from a socio-historical study of golf's relationship with the environment. We focus especially on the golf industry's pursuit of modernization from the early 1900s to the present. Golf's quest to 'be' modern, we contend, has specifically constituted three particular 'turns': a first turn in the early 1900s involving the scientific rationalization of golf course development and maintenance; a second, 'exemptionalist' turn in the post-war years whereby science and technology fueled a perception of immense control over nature; and a third, more recent turn to ecological modernization (EM) whereby science and technology are leveraged toward environmental stewardship – or at least claims thereof. We ultimately argue that the golf industry's recent adoption of EM principles in their environment-related work has political implications, as it 'protects' the industry from more radical environmental alternatives.

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1. Introduction

This article features reflections on a multi-method research project carried out since 2008 on the topic of golf's relationship with the environment. Herein, we reflect specifically on one empirically-based narrative that emerged from this research: that of the golf industry's pursuit of modernization across the twentieth century.

In light of golf's leisurely dimensions and its association with outdoor physical activity, it is perhaps easy to overlook the sport as a topic meriting serious scholarly attention. Yet our research began from the premise that golf is inseparable from many key

social and environmental issues. In 2010, Perkins et al. (2010) coined the term 'Critical Golf Studies' in their call for further research interrogating golf from social science and humanities perspectives. The characteristics of golf, they argue – for example, golf's ecological impacts and social exclusivity – make the sport ripe for scholarly exploration (e.g., see Briassoulis, 2010; Neo, 2010; Stolle-McAllister, 2004). Indeed, the politics of golf course development and maintenance periodically come to the fore through mainstream news media. A recent case in point involved Donald Trump's (ultimately successful) bid to develop a championship golf course on Scotland's Eastern coastline – a project that fomented a resistance campaign motivated in part by the view that the course threatened the region's coastal sand dunes, a site of special scientific interest (see Jönsson, 2014).

Our own research focused mainly on the American and Canadian golf contexts, though we were attuned as well to golf's

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global dimensions in various ways (see Millington and Wilson, in press, 2013). To assess golf's relationship with the environment, we employed a range of qualitative methods, including: interviews with golf superintendents and with representatives of health and environmental groups; site visits to two organic golf courses abstaining from synthetic chemical usage; interviews with key figures in the anti-Trump campaign; news media analysis; policy analysis; and analysis of golf industry trade publications from the early 1900s to the present. The golf industry's quest to 'be' modern was one key narrative that emerged from these different forms of data collection. As outlined below, this is a quest that has constituted three particular 'turns' – the last involving golf industry representatives positioning themselves as environmental stewards.

1.1. Modernization as rationalization

The American trade publication *The Golf Course* provides insight into how the golf industry saw itself in the early 1900s. Golf had only recently arrived in North America, and there was evidently a sense that architects and greenkeepers could 'do better' than their Scottish forbears. Such was the assessment, for example, of golf course architect A.W. Tillinghast (1916a), writing under the heading 'Modern Golf Chats' in one of *The Golf Course's* earliest issues. In the 'old days', Tillinghast (1916a) wrote, golf course architecture might involve a professional player surveying a natural landscape and knowing instinctively where a hole should lie. By 1916 times had changed: "The modern golf architect devotes many days to exhaustive study of conditions; the ground must be surveyed and charted, and greens and hazards are modelled in miniature before work is begun" (Tillinghast, 1916a: 9). Tillinghast (1916b) had one month earlier made similar claims in this same publication: "The golf courses which we Americans are constructing to-day are very different, and so carefully are they built, after a thoughtful preparation of plans, that some of our productions are not surpassed even in the old home of golf" (Tillinghast, 1916b: 1).

Tillinghast's (1916a, 1916b) views, we contend, are reflective of a first 'turn' in golf's modern history. This is modernization as *rationalization*, with the golf course increasingly seen as 'controllable' by means of calculation, and with golf course architecture and greenkeeping deemed scientific vocations. Indeed, Tillinghast (1916a, 1916b) was not alone in this modern inclination. *The Golf Course's* publishers took up a similar position in the bulletin's first issue: "In every section of the country new courses are being built and old courses reconstructed along scientific lines ... Nowadays turf is produced and maintained to such a high degree of excellence that the early efforts are made to appear amateurish by comparison" (Anon., 1916a: 2; also see MacKenzie et al., 2013). Moreover, and as Bale (1994) recounts, there was a general shift underway in the early twentieth century from pre-modern folk games characterized in part by the use of already-existing spaces (e.g., fields and city squares) to *modern* sport defined by formalization in rules, equipment, and, most pertinently, playing terrain. When it came to 'treating' the earth, golf industry representatives were turning away from an allegedly primitive past.

1.2. Modernization as human exemptionalism

And yet, it is safe to say that the golf industry in the early 1900s was also *constrained* – specifically by the state of technological development at the time. The 'war' against pests – weeds, insects, and fungus – was evidently laborious, as indicated by one detailed description, found in *The Golf Course*, of weeding with a border fork and basket in hand (Anon., 1916b: 81).

In hindsight, however, it is clear too that the problem of manual weeding would not last long. In 1947, golf superintendent Joseph Valentine noted in the superintendent publication *Golfdom* that,

since World War Two, thrift in course maintenance was being achieved through "more mechanized operations" (1947: 68). In reference to his own course in Pennsylvania, he recounted how a 16-foot wide dusting machine was used on fairways to apply DDT, lead arsenate, or in some cases both (1947: 70). Valentine's observations can be understood through the lens of the 'treadmill of production' theory – an economic change theory that bespeaks how labor is changed through investment in technologies that are ever more efficient, though ever more resource-intensive and environmentally impactful too (see Gould et al., 2004). The golf industry was capitalizing on wider developments in science and technology – DDT emerged out of wartime research, for example – and was in turn arriving at highly effective ways of manipulating the land upon which golf was played.

This last point is the basis for our argument that golf's second modern 'turn' – one that took hold especially in the first decades after World War II – was based on a perception of human exemptionalism. The exemptionalist paradigm rests on the premise that humans are unique among Earth's species – particularly in their technological wherewithal – and in this uniqueness are exempt from constraints under nature (Catton and Dunlap, 1978; also see Foster, 2012). Indeed, in the post-war years the golf industry was working in a context in which the environmental movement was gathering steam. Trade publications from this time offer not just evidence that potent synthetic chemicals were being used on a broad scale in turfgrass maintenance, but fervent defences of such activity as well. For Richard C. Blake, president of the Golf Course Superintendent's Association of America, 'chemical tools' should not be denied to golf superintendents; civilization only began once people exerted control over their surrounding environment (Blake, 1971: 7).

1.3. Modernization as ecological modernization

Exemptionalism brought out a confrontational tone – golf vs. environmentalists – and brought out language that effectively denied golf's environmental footprint (or, at least, denied that this footprint is disconcerting). By the end of the 1970s, however, golf industry representatives were proactively positioning *themselves* as environmentalists, as opposed to environmentalists' natural foes.

What did this nascent environmentalism comprise? Certainly to some extent it comprised changed practices. In pesticide spraying, for example, whereas in 1967 the superintendent publication *Golf Course Management* featured a synopsis of how helicopter-aided DDT spraying was both effective and cost-competitive with "ground-based mist blowers or hydraulic sprayers" (Anon., 1967: 8), by 1983 we find calls to 'Spray with restraint'. "There is a logical way of fighting pests with pesticides," the magazine's readership was told in this latter article, "and that is to do so with some discretion" (Williams, 1983: 78). Beyond exhortations of this kind, restraint was also formalized through 'best practices' such as Integrated Pest Management (IPM), a system that, in theory at least, privileges other forms of pest control (e.g., biological control using pests' natural enemies) and calls for the use of chemicals only as a 'last resort'.

At the same time, golf's environmentalism from the 1980s onwards must be understood as involving changed perspectives too. A 1982 article in *Golf Course Management* featured the view that humankind must adapt to surrounding changes (Anon., 1982) – a humbler perspective than that expressed by Richard C. Blake (1971) a decade before. More to the point, the golf industry's 'irresponsible' history when it comes to chemical use has been explicitly referenced by key industry spokespeople in recent years. Said golf course architect Mike Hurdzan in regards to the use of heavy metals such as cadmium, arsenic, and mercury on golf

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