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## Imus

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR H-ARETE

Imus

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Anyone who has watched and listened to "Imus in the Morning" over the past several years cannot be surprised by the comments that were made last week in reference to the Rutgers Women's Basketball team. The only surprise may be the extreme tastelessness of what was said.

This may sound too much like saying I get Playboy only for the interviews, but I must confess that I do watch Don Imus, but mostly for the excellent interviews with interesting people who appear there. Granted this is only one aspect of the program and there are times when I do turn it off.

The program is certainly eclectic in character. In one segment you can hear a stimulating interview with Frank Rich of the New York Times, while in the next you are confronted by the idiotic thought processes of Bo Dietel. In one segment you can hear Jon Meacham talk about the significance of religion in American culture, and in the next you can hear Bernard McGuirk offering up an array of insults to the Catholic Church, which apparently scarred him permanently in the elementary grades.

And then there are the sports reports. Chris Carlin is made the pathetic object of fat jokes. Last week's Imus accomplice, Sid Rosenberg, and McGuirk repeatedly offer a stunning array of racist and sexist comments, slurs and innuendos. All of this is done in good fun and is no doubt very appealing to those frustrated white males whose masculinity can only be affirmed by degrading women, both black and white, as well as African-American men.

"Imus in the Morning" has a demographic profile that is decidedly upper middle class, very well educated, and well placed in terms of power and money in stolid white America. This is why he has become a cash cow for Viacom and MSNBC and why he is able to attract articulate, interesting and entertaining people to his microphone. It is also why Imus is likely to survive the firestorm of criticism dropped on him this past week, although advertisers have started jumping ship and MSNBC has dropped the show. If the show doesn't survive look for an Imus resurrection on satellite radio.

You may have noticed that this story has alternately been reported on the front page, the news pages, and the sports pages. No one seems to be sure whether this sorry tale is news or sports. It is probably more news than sports, but then it involves one of the teams that just played for the Women's Intercollegiate Basketball championship last week. It is, in fact, an American story and a sports story. It is an American story because it involves basic American attitudes about women and sport, and about African-American women, not to mention white America's obsession with blackness.

Imus' comments were both sexist and racist and reflected some fundamental attitudes embedded in American culture. The comment on hair texture of the African-American women was a central judgement on beauty based on the standards of the white world. It is a judgement that goes well back in the history of European society and has had remarkable staying power in modern white societies. It is a particularly harsh judgement that over the course of history has led to the popularity of hair straightening treatments in the African-American world. When rendered within the sports context it is doubly harsh because it carries the implication that these young women do not measure up as women, a judgment that historically has been made about women who participate in sports.

From the initial emergence of sport in the nineteenth century as a central activity in American society, the implication has been that women who play sports, particularly those that play it well, could not possibly meet the definitions of American womanhood. This notion, too, has its origins deep in the history of European societies, and is a notion that acquired significant power in the Victorian world which, of course, was largely a middle class world. To be "feminine" in the Victorian world was to be a lady, weak and dependent on the men who must do the heavy lifting in the society. To be involved in sport was to be suspect as a "tomboy" when young, and then a "lesbian" if the sports activity was extended into adolescence and adulthood.

Oddly, at nearly the same time in the nineteenth century, there were growing concerns about the feminization of society with less emphasis on physical work and the decline of the hunting and warrior roles for men. Sport, especially at the intercollegiate level, was offered as an antidote to the fear of feminization. It was supposed to build character and build men, who would then become the leaders of society. The underlying assumption was that these leaders would be white men only.

For those of us who came to adulthood in the decade of the Fifties these attitudes were still firmly in place. During the Sixties they began to break down, and they have been under assault with the coming of Title IX and with the changing attitudes toward gender and sexuality in the society.

Don Imus comes out of that earlier world and no matter how much he seems to be a "modern" figure, he and his sidekicks have shown a remarkable capacity to resurrect the earlier attitudes about race and gender, especially when they are doing what is called in radio "guy talk." You can hear this across the radio dial on AM and FM on a daily basis especially on sports talk radio where "guy talk" is the "lingua franca" and where talk radio web sites feature the "Babe of the Week."

It's all so quaint and nostalgic. It is also testimony to the fact that no matter how much things change, there still is a very strong tendency for them to stay the same.

On Sport and Society this is Dick Crepeau reminding you that you don't have to be a good sport to be a bad loser.

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