



## Obscene or Exemplary? Robert Marchand's Cycling World Hour Record: Sport, Ageing and Neoliberalism in Contemporary France

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# **Obscene or Exemplary? Robert Marchand's Cycling World Hour Record: Sport, Ageing and Neoliberalism in Contemporary France**

## **1. Introduction: Robert Marchand as symbol of sport, ageing and work**

In January 2017 the amateur French rider Robert Marchand set a new cycling World Hour record of 22.547km at France's national velodrome in Saint-Quentin-en-Yvelines outside Paris.<sup>1</sup> In 2015, the Tour de France winner (2012) and multiple track cycling gold-medaled professional Bradley Wiggins had established an Hour record of 54.526km, so Marchand's 'world best' must immediately be contextualized by his competing in a new special category for... riders aged over 105! Consequently, no existing record was broken, but a mark and an example – in various ways – were set.

The record engendered what the media portal PureMédias described as 'media madness'. Although the LCI and France Info television channels showed only Marchand's final laps, the right-wing BFMTV and iTELE provided full coverage of the whole event, with studio experts discussing its significance. Overall, the television audience reached 400,000.<sup>2</sup> Another element of this 'media madness' was – discussed below – extensive debate in daily newspapers, where sports journalists, medical and other specialists and readers considered the event and its wider meaning.

Marchand's exploit was welcomed varyingly in France during January and early 2017, as sport, politics, culture and society debated the value and significance – or otherwise – of such a performance. Against the backdrop of the long-running 2017 Presidential election campaign, decided in May with victory by center-right candidate Emmanuel Macron and his La République en Marche (LREM) movement and confirmed in June with the return of a

LREM government to the National Assembly, Marchand's 'record' became an intriguing case-study of current thinking in France about sport, health, work, effort, performance and ageing. Specifically, Marchand's exploit, and the debate around it speak to ongoing tensions in French society and culture around neoliberalism, theorizings of 'performance', work, ageing and retirement.

France's 'neoliberal transformation' since the 1980s has been described by Charles Masquelier as a 'passive revolution' with, however, enduring 'acute ambiguity' towards neoliberal practices. In conceptualising neoliberalism Masquelier adopts definitions that stress *competition* infused throughout the fabric of society and culture, forming a political-economic value system and cultural moral order.<sup>3</sup> 'Competition' is thus both the free market, *and* emphasis on performance, measured results, and a society in which individuals are evaluated in comparison with each other. For Pierre Bourdieu, the new neoliberal order is '[...] the imposition everywhere, in [...] the economy and the state, as at the heart of corporations, of that sort of moral Darwinism that, with the cult of the winner [...] institutes the struggle of all against all and *cynicism* as the norm of all action and behaviour. [...] the public interest will never emerge, even abetted by fraudulent arithmetic, from the visions of accountants (in the past one would have said "shopkeepers") that the new belief system presents as the supreme form of human accomplishment.'<sup>4</sup> For Thierry Guilbert, the features and functions of the 'neoliberal discourse' in France institute the diagnosis it makes of society as natural and unquestionable, and he highlights the crucial role of the media and politics in promoting an 'entrepreneurial' vision of society and social relations, where everything and everyone must be productive and profitable.<sup>5</sup>

Since 2017, Marchand has remained in the public eye, as the media continues scrutiny of what he represents, and the 2020 Covid crisis has renewed interest in Marchand as a witness to past crises and symbol of future hope.<sup>6</sup> In August 2017 he became World

Champion on the roads, in a category again devised specifically for him by the UCI.<sup>7</sup> The Hour record anniversary in January 2018 produced further discussion, as Marchand took sporting ‘retirement’ on medical advice,<sup>8</sup> but in February he completed a 4000m time-trial at Saint-Quentin en Yvelines, and in October, he cycled for an hour on the track, hoping for another record.<sup>9</sup> During late 2020 Marchand was well, exercising gently indoors, and, Covid-19 permitting, walking to collect his daily baguette, fruit and vegetables, or occasionally riding the roads with his cycling club, but the restrictions on his active lifestyle led to a sudden decline in his health and admittance into an old-people's home.<sup>10</sup>

In the following analysis of Marchand’s performance, we shall consider firstly Marchand himself (because his persona is central to how his exploit was perceived) and the nature of sporting ‘records’, before examining the public and media sociopolitical and sociocultural reaction to Marchand in early 2017. We will then discuss what the Marchand ‘case’ can reveal about contemporary French attitudes towards sport, ageing, health and work and the ambiguities - as Masquelier would term them - of contemporary reluctance/resistance to France's neoliberal revolution.

## **2. The Record is the man himself: what kind of man, what kind of record?**

Born in 1911, Marchand cycled competitively in the 1920s, but abandoned the sport at about twenty – around 1931– when advised that he was too small to succeed.<sup>11</sup> He claims his documentation from this period is lost, and is loath to discuss it, as he can prove nothing. He started cycling when his success at gymnastics – he was French champion at fourteen – enabled him to purchase a bike and join what was arguably then France's premier professional sport and working-class mass-participation leisure-sporting activity.<sup>12</sup> Cycling in the interwar years was a testing-ground for socioeconomic and sociopolitical theorizing about

sport and labor, with Left and Right espousing opposing social philosophies of sport in debates where cycling was often central.<sup>13</sup> Marchand's 2017 record showed how such debate over sport and work continues in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, with, for Marchand, the dimension of ageing in a contested neoliberal moral order.

Although he tried other sports during an eventful working life, Marchand resumed cycling in 1978 at age 67, riding with a communist-affiliated club near his home in Mitry-Mory, outside Paris. Favouring *cyclotourisme* (long-distance leisure/touring riding) rather than *cyclospor*t, Marchand rode many 'classic' events such as Bordeaux-Paris (eight times), Paris-Roubaix (four times) and Paris-Brest-Paris. He also rode new events – *cyclospor*tives – such as the Ronde Picarde, Marmotte (three times), Ardéchoise (twelve times), and the annual Tom Simpson memorial ride (Mont Ventoux), before trying distance/speed records. His most notable records before 2016 and 2017 were the 100km Time-trial (4.17.27 in September 2012, aged 100), 24.25km in an hour at the UCI World Cycling Centre track in Aigle, Switzerland (2012, aged 101), and an improvement of this distance in 2014, at age 102, to 26.952km. His long-distance cycling fame led to a 10km, 911m altitude Alpine pass between Lalouvesc and Saint-Félicien (Ardèche) being named after him in 2011.<sup>14</sup>

Marchand's previous 2016 World hour record – for centenarians – of 26.925km was calculated as the 'best' performance - physiologically - in any athletic discipline for any age group.<sup>15</sup> More generally, this study underlined how centenarians – who figure increasingly in sporting competitions worldwide – are 'becoming icons of healthy ageing'.<sup>16</sup> Rylee Dionigi and Michael Gard have observed that is also important to analyze 'the ways sport and age intersect with class, gender, sexuality, ability, family dynamics and/or race'.<sup>17</sup> Marchand's record in 2017 showed these intersections in 21<sup>st</sup> century France, for an aged, working class, communist male.

Marchand's biography is a working class synopsis of 20<sup>th</sup> century French political and social history. During World War One, he was separated from family, and forced by foster parents to miss school and work on their farm. From age thirteen, he worked in a Parisian shoe factory and other employment. Since 1926 he has subscribed to the (Communist) Confédération générale du travail (CGT) trade union, and his early espousal of Communism reflects solid left-wing *engagement*. He participated in France's Popular Front in 1936, and served a month in prison under the État français after refusing to act as sports trainer for children of collaborating officials. During Vichy he served with the Paris fire brigade, but after the Liberation in 1944 he worked on a farm again, in the Allier. In 1947 he emigrated to Latin America. After spending the 1950s in Venezuela as an agricultural laborer and lorry-driver he returned briefly to France, before moving to Canada as a lumberjack. From the 1960s, home in France, he traded wine between Paris and the Ardèche, alongside other occupations, until final *complete* retirement in 1989 at age 78, when he had eventually accumulated sufficient contributing years for a pension. In 1962, he joined the Communist party, and the CGT and Communist party celebrate his long membership, often publicizing his ninety-plus years of support. Marchand's working (he repeatedly stresses the difficulties of his various employments) and 'political' life has thus spanned the seminal events of France's contemporary political and socioeconomic history.

In 2010 he was decorated by the state with the Médaille d'or de la Jeunesse et des sports. The ceremony was officiated by Roselyne Bachelot of President Sarkozy's center-right government, but Marchand failed to attend, preferring to receive the honor from the – Communist – mayor of Mitry-Mory.<sup>18</sup> In 2015 he was awarded the Ordre national du Mérite – second in prestige only to the Légion d'honneur – again accepting the award in Mitry-Mory.<sup>19</sup> The award citation was brief: 'Holder of sporting records. 86 years of service'.<sup>20</sup> This however amply reflected the Ordre du Mérite's aims to 'reflect the dynamism of civil society'

and 'show example'. Additionally, the order recognises 'diversity' and... 'contributions from young people'.<sup>21</sup> In terms of his (old) age - not youth - and diversity of *example*, honouring Marchand was emblematic recognition of a *dynamically* iconic individual. Honoured by the state and feted by many, at the time of his records Marchand nevertheless lived in a 20m<sup>2</sup> apartment, on a monthly income of €900. The modesty of his home and limited income may suggest that any celebration of Marchand as an iconic example - through sport - of 'successful ageing' could obscure the problematic situations of many French pensioners.

Interpreting the nature and cultural significance of Marchand's achievements invites some consideration of what sporting records can mean, *and how they can be used*. Summarizing discussions by Susan Brownell<sup>22</sup> of the theorizing of records started in the 1970s by Henning Eichberg, Allen Guttmann and Richard Mandell,<sup>23</sup> Jim Parry encapsulated their central importance: 'Modern sports emerged along with industrial society, and both are characterized by [...] achievement, rationalization and quantification [...] *and (the obsession with) records*'.<sup>24</sup> Parry stresses Mandell's earlier consideration of the genesis of the 'sports record', which provided a working definition of a record as 'a generally acknowledged statistic indicating the unique nature of a supreme athletic performance of a recognized kind'. Parry then discusses what he terms the three 'central ideas' of this definition: 'statistic', 'athletic', and... 'recognized'.<sup>25</sup> Marchand's 2017 record is certainly a statistic, but - lauded by some and decried by others - its athletic status is not equally recognized by all.

Many researchers on sport and ageing suggest that it is not just times, records and statistics that should be considered when analyzing 'performance' by senior athletes. For example, Dionigi argues that 'there has been very little research into the experiences of older athletes from a sociological perspective'<sup>26</sup> and Bevan Grant stresses 'the meaning people attribute to their experiences of physical activity'<sup>27</sup>. In this perspective, it should be noted that after his 2017 record, Marchand described cycling as self-preservation, asserting that 'at

my age, you mustn't ever stop' and 'if you stop, you've had it'. Such modesty was highlighted by comments such as 'I just go for rides to get my legs moving' and 'I don't want to be stupid, I prefer taking it easy', and saw little reason to pursue further records, arguing 'you can't do big things every couple of weeks, that'd be stupid'.<sup>28</sup>

Marchand generally thus downplays his achievements. Commenting on the motives behind his 2017 record, he attempted it 'simply to prove that at 105 it's still possible for people to ride bikes'. But his position is arguably somewhat ambiguous: although he has repeatedly stated - in various formulations - that he cycles not to establish records, but for enjoyment,<sup>29</sup> *unintentionally* establishing a record is difficult. He does not explicitly identify himself as an example, or claim much wider significance for his exploits than his individual enjoyment of physicality and activity in old age. He seems uninterested in the notion that he is in competition with others or, indeed with record marks, seeing his endeavours - in sporting terms - as essentially singular.<sup>30</sup> His satisfaction is in showing that old people can achieve things, rather than the statistical ranking of his performances. This ambiguity enhances the ambivalence of the records themselves and the variety of their possible recuperations. The logic of records is competition and exemplary target-setting, but if Marchand does see himself as an example, it is - in contradistinction - one of positive ageing through sport conceived as amateurism, sharing and fraternity, and - significantly using a French *anti-globalization* slogan - as proof that 'another world is possible'.<sup>31</sup>

Far from the extreme 'anthropofacture' (discussed below) of doping, and remote from any understanding of his training regimens as Foucauldian 'culture de soi' (discussed later) Marchand counters any suspicion of his abilities by stressing simply 'getting out on the bike' and using *natural* products: 'Jealous people ask what drugs I put in my bidons. Well, there's water and honey in my bidons!'<sup>32</sup> He emphasises exercise, training, diet, and a lifestyle of variety and moderation. Marchand's amateur status and 'everyman' approach to performance



amplify his record's exemplary strength. Established not as remunerated (professional) effort, but as personal endeavour, his performances are identified not as part of elite sport, but intrinsic to civil society. Niel and Sirost suggest that an athlete's 'purity of soul and of body' are a necessary condition for records to become legendary: established cleanly, 'records re-instil metaphysics into athletics, and timing charts become ethical rules'.<sup>33</sup> Positioned in opposition to the murky world of professional cycling and self-distanced from neoliberal ethics, the symbolism of Marchand's performances as 'resistance' is reinforced.<sup>34</sup>

### **3. Public debate: ageing, sporting effort and work**

After his 2014 world Hour record, *Le Figaro* had described Marchand as furnishing a 'lesson in living' and in 2017, *L'Est Républicain* went so far as to suggest he was the 'smiling face' of future demographic trends.<sup>35</sup> For these newspapers, as elsewhere, in attitude and performance, the centenarian rider was an example to be celebrated. President Hollande, receiving Marchand at the Elysée in January 2017, declared that he was a 'sign of hope for everyone'.<sup>36</sup> Such positivity was welcome in a context of social and political discord, but such interpretations - perhaps conveniently – ignored ways in which Marchand's efforts could read as a symbol of 'resistance' and failed to situate them within the context of the increasingly neoliberal nature of French labor laws.

As backdrop to Marchand's 2017 record, a central divisive issue of French politics was reform of employment legislation. What became the 'el Khomri Law' entered effect in August 2016, after troubled gestation dating from 2014 under François Hollande's socialist administration.<sup>37</sup> During 2017, the furor around how labor laws should be 'modernized' to provide more flexibility for employers troubled the Socialist government's final months and

the start of President Macron's République en Marche administration. Macron's campaign in spring 2017 promised to further the el Khomri legislation of 2016.<sup>38</sup> This political and social debate transformed the record-setting efforts – physical and athletic 'work' – of a centenarian Communist cyclist into a metaphorical challenge to France's imagining of age and effort, application, responsibility, discipline and other values.

The conceptual and 'contractual' (in terms of paid labor) link between cycling and work is long-standing in France and elsewhere, although in France the Tour under Henri Desgrange in the 1920s and 1930s arguably catalyzed the linkage more acutely. Conceptually, the metaphor of cycling *qua* 'work' – in the scientific sense of energy moving matter – is informed by centuries of thinking about the 'human machine', and, during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, by analogies between human sporting exercise and mechanized industrial production.<sup>39</sup> Metaphors of the human body as motor facilitated considering cycle racers as machines producing power, speed and distance, and – 'contractually' – treating them as industrialists might consider fixed plant, rather than as human beings. Supported by Desgrange, these discourses on cycling as work were the conceptual background to debates about the 'contractual' (mis)treatment of the 'pedal workers', and famous scandals such as that in the 1920s about Tour riders viewed as 'forced laborers of the road'.<sup>40</sup> Within a discursive framework where sportspeople were considered machines, their dehumanization to beasts of labor was straightforward, and (left-wing) opponents of such social philosophies of competitive sport criticized the exploitation inherent to commercial 'sport-spectacle' such as cycle-track racing or the Tour, where riders' suffering was sold as entertainment. As employees, rider-workers mobilized against race-organizers such as Desgrange, complaining to the press, disobeying the most egregious requirements of their bosses, and staging strikes.<sup>41</sup> Where rider-workers had to acquiesce to ever harder, higher, faster racing, apart from cheating (taking a train, or missing route sections) another

solution to producing the 'work' demanded was found in doping. During the early twentieth century, the dominant conceptual paradigm for labor was Taylorism and the factory production line, or 'travail à la chaîne' (an expression whose closeness to cycling is clear). Thus sport in general, and particularly cycling, have close discursive and conceptual links in France, where theories and practices of work and social and political philosophies of the left and right have repeatedly clashed over cycle sport, and how, in particular, emblematic performances such as victories in the Tour – or world Hour records – are readily recruited into opposing discourses.

Views expressed in *Libération* will be discussed in the next section, but other major national daily newspapers also covered Marchand's story, in greater or lesser detail. Foremost – providing a telling right-left contrast – were the right-wing *Le Figaro* and the Communist *L'Humanité*. Soon after Marchand's exploit, *L'Humanité* published a short and sober CGT communiqué congratulating its long-time member on his success, and glossing this example of the progressive values of Communism and Communist approaches to sport.<sup>42</sup> Adapting Desgrange's assertion that cycling requires both mental and physical talent – 'la tête et les jambes'<sup>43</sup> – the CGT stressed Marchand's possession of 'legs, heart and *mind*', competencies enabling him, amidst frenzied comment and interpretation, to remain modest and aware of social injustices, desiring only to 'demonstrate that at 100 plus, you can still achieve something'. Less virulent than the perspective of *Libération* and focused more closely on politics than on wider sociocultural issues, this reaction formed part of a left-wing discourse celebrating Marchand's accomplishment as individual achievement and minimizing linkages between his 'performance' and activity in the sense of work.

*Le Figaro* covered the Marchand record assiduously, and more extensively than either *Libération* or *L'Humanité*, with some ten articles profiling Marchand or commenting his performance. Most articles were in the sports pages, some categorized more specifically as

'health', and much discussion focused on what the centenarian rider's exploits revealed about ageing, health and society, rather than on cycle sport itself. Coverage was supportive and celebratory. Articles on the online site were 'shared' extensively by readers, demonstrating the topicality of the themes evoked by Marchand. For example, on 4 January 'At 105 Robert Marchand rides 22.547km in a single hour' was the subject of 17,000 'shares'; on 3 January 'At 105, Robert Marchand establishes a cycling world hour record' was shared 9,000 times; published on 5 January 'Marchand' "At my age, if you stop, you've had it" was shared over 5,000 times.<sup>44</sup> Many articles generated prolific 'comments', and overall, the ten principal articles were commented on over 400 times.

As usual in such social media, the comment 'threads' on the *Figaro* articles can easily digress, but the 400 plus contributions show recurrent themes.<sup>45</sup> Contributors have reasonable understanding of cycling's physiological demands and sporting organization, and many focus on the nature of Marchand's 'record' and on his training and health. In almost every thread, politics, society, economics and age/health/work/activity surface, in discussions of Marchand as a communist, his working-class 'active' life before retirement, frugal life-style, modest accommodation, basic pension entitlement, and so on. Marchand was a prism of readers' concerns – and hopes – about work, retirement, health and ageing, pensions and, indeed, the relationship between sport and politics in contemporary France.

Marchand's Communism is either gently mocked, or ironically emphasized in terms of the potential paradox for (neoliberal) government and society of celebrating the (athletic) work, discipline and effort of a lifelong member of the CGT. Some comments suggest Marchand should receive the Légion d'honneur, others satirically compare Sarkozy's previous support for the by then disgraced Lance Armstrong to how Marchand should now be viewed by the state. Criticisms are voiced about the Sports minister's uninterest in the record event. Marchand as 'example' is a frequent theme, discussing lessons that – essentially younger –

people can draw from him in physical-sporting terms, and in terms of a moral-ethical approach to life. Comments center around unhealthy modern life-styles, people's laziness in seeking work, and young persons' apathy. The prevalence of these perceptions at presidential level was demonstrated in September 2018, when Macron notoriously advised a jobseeker that all he needed to do to find employment was 'walk across the road'.<sup>46</sup> Marchand's pensioner status and modest income elicit various reactions, either celebrating the integrity of a life of hard work and healthy exercise, or ironically musing on how his ability to 'perform' - and work - at age 105 might encourage government to raise retirement age to ninety. Negative comments suggest that if everyone became centenarian, the pension system would collapse completely, despite – as some readers note – Marchand and millions of others' minimal entitlements.

The most commented article (with 162 reactions) was 'At 105, Robert Marchand establishes a cycling world hour record'.<sup>47</sup> Notably, as well as sharing views on the meaning of Marchand's exploit, here readers engage directly with a controversial *Libération* article (discussed below) that had criticized Marchand as a 'circus animal'. The readers' debate, catalyzed by *Libération's* 'political' stance on the affair, adopts increasingly ideological tones:

Bravo Mr Marchand! Much as it might upset the Lefties at *Libération*, who are showing their true colors, you're a real beacon of hope. They're a disgrace!

What an example, but what an example... BRAVO!

As well as the enjoyable news article, I note the immense majority of people on the Internet are rightfully admiring of this achievement. Yesterday I read in *Libération* an article comparing Mr Marchand to a circus animal! Every time I see a thing like that I understand more why I subscribe to the *Figaro* and not to a newspaper run by cold and miserable flat-footers.

For once that people abroad are talking about France due to something other than strikes at the Eiffel Tower or at Air France! Bravo sir, all by yourself you're raising the level in our country.

- Okay... But we'll refrain from reminding you that Mr Marchand was a committed communist, for fear of spoiling your day.

All by himself, he's jeopardizing the pension funds Arco and Agirc. The least he could do would be to wear a jersey advertising their logos.<sup>48</sup>

BRAVO! And I'd rather have this Robert Marchand than little Miss Charlotte Marchandise. He's the France that Wins; she's the embodiment of "France's suicide"<sup>49</sup>

Unbelievable, and a great object lesson in hope and optimism for all the sullen whingers inhabiting this country. So, Robert, go go go! We'll see you for your 110th!

Here, comments engage with the opposing national (sporting, and generally) discursive tropes of 'Winning France' ('la France qui gagne') on the one hand, and decline and catastrophism (*déclinisme/sinistrose*),<sup>50</sup> and traditional left-right conflict is referenced in relation to both sport and politics. One comment contrasts Marchand's winning 'voluntarism' (even *qua* communist) and – in the 2017 presidential election – the 'citizen-candidate' Charlotte Marchandise (who aimed to stimulate interest in politics amongst French voters) here presented as betrayal of French values.

#### 4. Left-wing critiques of athleticism: heroic example or absurd parody?

The reaction to Marchand's 2017 exploit was not unanimously celebratory. As articles and public comments in the *Figaro* demonstrate above, some noted his performance as *personal* achievement and some viewed him as a *positive symbol* for an ageing society. But others - mainly on the left - interpreted the affair as an egregious example of 'sport' and athletes exploited by a cynical sports-media-business complex within a neoliberal sociopolitical context where work, retirement and active ageing were key issues.<sup>51</sup> Foremost in this strand of debate, and serving as a focus for wider subsequent examination of the 'Marchand Record' as a mirror of French concerns over politics, culture, society, work and ageing was journalist Pierre Carrey, author of a mordacious article in the left-leaning national daily *Libération* on 4 January. Entitled 'Robert Marchand, age 105 and a cycling record. Good for him, absurd for us', this was clear about what Marchand's 22.547km meant for French society, namely a disgraceful 'spectacle':

[...] this event is not sport in any way. It's a circus where performing animals are exhibited for what they are rather than what they do. Marchand's main achievement is simply to be alive and healthy. That's a lot for this lively and apparently engaging man. But it means nothing for anyone else, unless this parody of athleticism actually reveals a corrupted understanding of our relationship to death and to sport. [...] Naive and superstitious, this spectacle is obscene.<sup>52</sup>

Furthermore, Carrey was quick to critique linkages between current political agendas about 'old age' and what he interpreted as Marchand's ultimately 'obscene' - rather than exemplary -

exploit. The media furor around Marchand was disproportionate, and reflected the ongoing political debate about age, work and retirement:

We can wager there will be many spectators track-side in 2018. Old age is fashionable, as demonstrated by various political manifestos designed to please retired voters. Chic, an old-timer who does sport! But in cycling there are also young women who race events almost as hard as the Tour, youngsters who suffer in this anachronistic sport, handicapped people who give their all [...]. None of these will receive during all 2017 as much media attention as Marchand in a single day. We choose our own heroes.<sup>53</sup>

Carrey's perspective draws implicitly on a long tradition of discourse on the left in France about sport in general and commercialized sport in particular. His reference to Marchand being a 'circus animal' echoes long-standing criticism of 'sport spectacle' dating from the 1920s and 1930s and earlier, which sees commercialized sport as another element of capitalist societies' alienation of ordinary people.<sup>54</sup> Since the 1970s, this thinking on sport in France has been represented most strongly by the *Quel corps ?* (and subsequently *Quel sport ?*) movements grouped around Jean-Marie Brohm.<sup>55</sup>

Brohm's body of analysis - known as the 'critical theory of sport' or the 'radical critique of sport' - contests the nature of sport in capitalist systems in terms of politics, economics and ideology. It sees sport as a spectacularised product, and a locus for ideological struggle over citizens' bodies, and a technique of government. Specifically, in relation to our discussion of Marchand, the radical critique of sports' view of sporting activity as ideologically valorised 'effort' shows another facet of the potential recruitment of such iconic 'performance' as work and productivity within the discourses of a neoliberal capitalist labor market. If the athletic body is disciplined to be efficient, productive and reliable, so



Marchand's 'metronomic' effort - a recurrent theme in reports of his laps of the track - is an iconic example - negatively, in the view of the critical theory of sport, or positively, in capitalist terms - of labor.

The new left theory based around Brohm can be characterised within the philosophy of sport as a normative externalist perspective. It relates sport 'externally' to wider social, economic and political structures, borrowing from Marxism, structuralism and other approaches to show how sport functions in capitalist societies to perpetuate existing power relations. This externalist perspective contrasts with internalist approaches to sport, which stress sport and sports practitioners' own logics, values and agency.<sup>56</sup> Thus how Marchand - for example - views his sporting activity is essentially irrelevant to an externalist philosophy of sport: what athletes 'do' is significant only in how it relates to the organisation of politics, culture, and society. Furthermore, in neoliberal capitalism, where governmentality occurs increasingly through careful management of citizens' interests, sport - as an example of healthy ageing and productive old age - can be recruited by public policy. Finally, the record - seen by Brohm as the key notion in all sociology of sport - is indissociable from the concept of performance, itself central to the neoliberal value system.

Carrey's most telling criticism - reflecting critical theory of sport perspectives - in *Libération* is that Marchand's 'parody of athleticism' reveals a corrupted understanding of sport, physical activity, and death itself. Staging the spectacle of Marchand's record, and people admiring it, is in no way exemplary. Celebrating the ability of a 105-year-old to perform his physicality in ways normally inconceivable at his age, in this view, partakes of a magical and talismanic interpretation of mortality. Naively and superstitiously, people are tempted see in Marchand's vitality protection from inevitable physical decline and death during life after retirement from work; he has remained physically active beyond what the French language terms 'la vie *active*' (literally, 'active life').

The philosopher and sociologist Robert Redeker, writing in 2001, also in *Libération*, described how the radical critique approach sees sport (and thus by extension Marchand's physicality) as a laboratory producing - via a process of 'anthropofacture' - prototypes of the future of the human body. He thus anticipated the 'spectacle' of a centenarian establishing a world record: 'A crime is being committed against society as a political community, and sport in this murderous context answers the reverse of the question asked by Ionesco, namely: how to *preserve* the corpse? How to *keep* the body? But [...] the victim is very much alive.'<sup>57</sup> Sporting 'anthropofacture' has a dual nature; it refers both to physical reshaping of bodies through exercise or - potentially - what Redeker summarises as 'biotechnology', and influence on thought and behaviour. Redeker explains that:

Sporting spectacle works as anthropofacture to remodel people, fabricating a planet-wide human type, the perfected avatar of Herbert Marcuse's 'One-dimensional man' [...]. Anthropofacture shapes both the invisible 'inside' of human beings - by ensuring sameness of thinking and cloning of imaginations - and, through gyms, fitness, jogging and so on - their exterior appearance: the body. From this two-fold retooling process emerge the modern-day substitutes for soul and body that are the *mental* and *physique*, and the new, improved body.<sup>58</sup>

There is no suggestion that Marchand has doped; he is lauded for his frugal diet and dedicated training. But Redeker's linkage between sport and transformation of sporting bodies speaks to current concerns about body-technologization of athletic performance and traditional understandings of sporting competition and social mores. The 'outlier' performance of Marchand – for critical theories of sport like Brohm's a 'victim still alive' in extreme old-age – intersects with France's other cycling psychodrama of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, namely Lance Armstrong's doping, analyzed by Ted Butryn and Matthew Masucci as

'cyborgification'.<sup>59</sup> More specifically targeting what it saw as misleading linkages between sport and health, in 2009 the radically critical website Halte au sport ! stridently refuted neoliberal discourses which conflated sport/competition with health/productivity.<sup>60</sup> In the editorial 'Lift the taboo', Halte au sport !' was typically intemperately unequivocal:

The myth of sport being 'good for health' that is methodically upheld with the connivance of some in the medical profession relies on the amalgam - crude but unfortunately effective - between physical activity and sport, and presents sport as the antidote to sedentary lifestyles. But benefits attributed to sport such as decreased risk of cardiac illnesses are mere statistical trickery [...] sport is by definition exceeding physiological limits, and thus exposure of the body to brutal damage or premature wear.<sup>61</sup>

The analyses of Carrey, Redeker (and Halte au Sport !) thus contrast starkly with positive linkages between sport and ageing common in sports/exercise sociology internationally, such as those of Lepers, Stapley and Cattagni which, fundamentally, underly neoliberal public policies about 'active' ageing, in France as elsewhere. Such positive perspectives underpin views of Marchand's achievements as *inspirational*.<sup>62</sup> Carrey's striking counter-critique that Marchand's record was fundamentally 'obscene' - rather than merely negative - can suggest another line of inquiry. The Larousse dictionary defines the 'obscène' as something that is 'openly offensive to decency'. Doing what Marchand did was - for Carrey - in some way offensive to 'decency' ('pudeur') and the 'propriety' of a natural order or value system in which such performance is *simply not done*. 'Decency' links strongly to the anti sport-spectacle perspective on the commercialization of sporting effort/suffering in which professional

sportspeople exchange 'labor' for individual or capitalist profit. Surveying cultural meanings of 'pudeur', Gaëlle Deschodt stresses its centrality to multiple disciplines of research, and how it is 'a strange concept existing at the intersection of individual and of community, lived experience and prescribed behavior, what is shown and what should be hidden'.<sup>63</sup> This indicates how Marchand's individual example can engage with a collective debate in sport about the performance of older athletes, and more widely, with issues of performance, activity/work and ageing/health in French society in general.

### **5. Resisting neoliberalism: Marchand and social relations of power and domination**

The meaning of Marchand's record is to be found in a nexus where old age, sport and exercise, records and performance, work, activity and retirement overlap. The overall context for this nexus of meaning is a France that has undergone a neoliberal transformation - with elements of reluctance/resistance such as Marchand himself, commentators such as Carrey and currents of thinking such as the critical theory of sport. More and more, in this neoliberal France, individuals' choices, such as their sport and desire for health, for example, are recruited into governmentality as self-motivating behaviors supportive of public policy.

Alain Ehrenberg has suggested that from the mid-1980s France has adopted free market values, competition (in general), and *action*, and the closely associated concept of 'performance'. For Ehrenberg, an element particularly facilitating this transformation has been a shift in the sociocultural meaning of sports champions from specifically working class heroes to symbols *for all* of achievement.<sup>64</sup> Sporting success - in direct competitive *performance*, or the measured *performance* of records - has thus become a model for citizens' behaviour no longer based - as traditionally - in *obedience* to authority, government, or

religion but linked to *self-realisation*. Marchand's self-realising competitive 'record' performance - quantified and compared, spectacular and celebrated - can be recruited into a neoliberal vision of society as illustration of older individuals' ability to remain active and productive.<sup>65</sup> Describing neoliberalism as the 'new way of the world', Dardot and Laval gloss Foucault's concept of neoliberal governmentality as 'governing through freedom' to encourage citizens to 'bring themselves to conform with defined norms'.<sup>66</sup> Celebrations of Marchand such as those in the *Figaro* reflect how his 'example' of 'healthy ageing' through sport is recruited into France's neoliberal transformation.

Marchand's devotion to training, to performance, and to health speaks intriguingly to Foucault's concept of the 'care of the self' (*souci de soi*) applied to ageing subjects, and to the growing influence of 'healthism' (*santéisme/santéisation*) in French neoliberal discourses on citizens generally and older people in particular.<sup>67</sup> One definition given by Foucault of 'care of the self' reflects Marchand's lifestyle: 'those intentional and voluntary actions by which men not only set themselves rules of conduct, but also seek to transform themselves, to change themselves in their singular being, and to make their life into an oeuvre.'<sup>68</sup> Marchand's status as exemplar can be read as a symbol of how focusing on *individuals* in above average health may deflect attention from a focus on the health of society *as a whole* in an era of neoliberalism and privatization.

In recent decades, French social security system and pension reforms have made it likely that people will work longer before retirement. Revisions to the French pensions system were made in 1993 (the Balladur reform) and 2003 (the Fillon reform), and the immediate context to the Marchand 'affair' was the Woerth reform (November 2010) which pushed retirement age from 60 to 62 in 2011, and in 2016 raised the age for full pension to be taken from 65 to 67.<sup>69</sup> Government policy, demography and economic difficulties are thus reconfiguring the age-based expectations that France places on older citizens. Focus is

predominantly on continued participation in *la vie active*, alongside growing ambitions for health (and physical or sporting ability). In French, it seems increasingly significant that the very term for working life refers to ‘activity’, rather than merely ‘work’.

France, as most European countries, has engaged with the concept of ‘active ageing’ developed in the 1990s to mitigate growing burdens on public services of ageing populations. By the late 2000s active ageing effectively dominated policy agendas at local, national and international levels.<sup>70</sup> Most restrictively interpreted, this concept focuses on continued employment. Although ‘active ageing’ policies may promote exercise and diet to foster health in older citizens, support for sport for these age-groups has tended to be more the focus of initiatives – related to ‘active ageing’ – devoted to ‘*successful ageing*’. In France, ‘*vieillessement actif*’ and ‘*bien vieillir*’ have been the – implicit – societal backdrop to public debate over Marchand. ‘*Bien vieillir*’ was the subject of a national action program (2003) and national plan (2007-09),<sup>71</sup> and, building on research by the state health agency Inserm<sup>72</sup>, emphasized benefits of – moderate – physical activity for seniors.

The development of discourses in France around active and productive old age is not new. Cécile Collinet, Pierre-Olaf Schut and Jérémy Pierre explain how the Laroque Report of 1962<sup>73</sup> initially contributed to 'defining a new way of growing older'. Popularizing the term 'third age' ('*troisième âge*'), Laroque's analysis spread 'a new active image' of the old. France from the early 2000s – and in some ways since the mid-1990s – has encouraged greater involvement of 'third age' citizens in employment.<sup>74</sup> Initiatives have aimed to counter patterns of early retirement giving France the lowest employment rates for workers over 50. French politics has struggled increasingly with ageing demography, employment and pensions reform, dignity/equality for older citizens and active/healthy ageing through sport. In December 2015 the socialist government of Manuel Valls implemented a law adapting society to France’s ageing population which fostered interest in sport and exercise.<sup>75</sup>

Involvement of French ‘seniors’ in sport has been investigated in many sociological studies, in general highlighting rising participation – variously defined – by older individuals of pre- and post-retirement ages.<sup>76</sup> These surveys stress how early retirement ages and improving health of older people have increased uptake of exercise/sport by ‘third age’ (and ‘fourth age’) individuals, despite new needs for these citizens to (also) continue in work. But – and here Marchand appears doubly a statistical ‘outlier’ – suggestions that 21<sup>st</sup> century ‘seniors’ will engage in sport *en masse* are shown to be exaggerated.<sup>77</sup>

That Marchand has remained physically active at 105+ is a significant achievement. However, both purely ‘sporting’ (*qua* individual) and ‘neoliberal’ (*qua* ‘exemple’) celebrations of his athleticism potentially deflect attention from serious social issues such as poor state support for older citizens, access to leisure facilities and demands placed on people to lengthen their working lives.

The Valls government's law of December 2015 on adapting society to ageing came into effect during 2016-17 and elicited much comment.<sup>78</sup> The right-wing think-tank IFRAP found the law encouragingly, but *insufficiently* neoliberal: ‘there is a slight move towards liberalization, to the extent that the Welfare state is to be partly replaced by more individualistic perspectives [...] Helping people to age well will come less from inefficient overall state provision and more from individuals, their behaviour and personal responsibility’. In particular IFRAP highlighted the law's injunction that ‘Everyone should embrace their own ageing and its consequences’,<sup>79</sup> and noted the legislation's stress on sport as a means of maintaining autonomy in old age.<sup>80</sup>

Praise for Marchand’s success can also be read as *nostalgia* for an era when France was perceived to be stronger and more active, as well as neoliberal discursive recruitment. Such longing for the past and celebration of energy and performance reflects France being ‘tired’ and looking backwards whilst its international geopolitical importance is believed to

be in decline – catastrophism and declinism – and when its ability to preserve its identity and social model is threatened. The opposition between *fatigue* and activity has often emerged in France within discourses surrounding iconic politicians in recent decades. Quite apart from ongoing cover-up of his prostate cancer, Mitterrand's ageing body was a site of debate about health, vigor (sexual and otherwise) and 'activity'. More recently, Sarkozy positioned himself as a man of dynamism in opposition to the ageing Chirac: campaign rallies featured the song 'High Energy', and he was often seen jogging. That the physical activity of walking can convey political dynamism is implied in Macron's 'La République en marche' *movement*, whose followers are 'marcheurs'. And Macron, as the youngest-ever French president, has sparked debates about age and virility (particularly referencing his much older first lady). Examination of discourses surrounding movement and political personnel shows the complex associations between physicality and old age. Marchand's example of activity and health, in a neo-liberal Macronian republic where key signifiers about exercise, ageing and productivity seamlessly mobilise presidents and CGT-supporting retiree cyclists shows how the debate over age and 'activity' (work/retirement) is core in France's contemporary project of modernization.

This age of national fatigue and self-doubt has coincided with neoliberal commercialization of sport, and Marchand can usefully be situated by his involvement in the rising commercial sector of amateur riding in France known as 'cyclosporives'. Over recent decades, the organization of mass-participation competitive rides for confirmed cyclists throughout France has become a significant element of the leisure-sport industry'.<sup>81</sup> Marchand's 2017 record was facilitated by organizers of the well-known Ardéchoise *cyclosporive* (he accomplished his record wearing the Ardéchoise colors). This annually brings some 12-15,000 cyclists to the Ardèche, and has been frequently ridden by Marchand. Gard and Dionigi underline how Masters' sporting competitions (and - for us - by extension



French cyclosporives) 'have become a place where the market can use the 'sport for all' and 'active and healthy ageing' dogma to exploit and regulate financially comfortable middle-aged and older adults who have a desire for sport performance, travel, consumption and socialising'.<sup>82</sup> This is a new feature of the neoliberally commercialized French sport-leisure sector, where, nevertheless, pockets of 'resistance' and 'ambiguity' can exist. Although *cyclosporives* may participate in 'exploitation and regulation' of older adults, Marchand and the Ardéchoise seem to represent a counter-example. Significantly, the Ardéchoise - organized by the Ardéchoise Cyclo Promotion *loi 1901* association and not a commercial venture - has since 1992 been not-for-profit, and fosters sporting sociability rather than monetary gain. The event's logistics rely on volunteers, and financial objectives target regional economic benefits brought by thousands of tourists. The Ardéchoise and its non-profit ethos with Marchand as an - impecunious - figurehead demonstrate a certain resistance/reluctance towards neoliberal practices.<sup>83</sup>

## **6. Conclusion: Robert Marchand and Macron's France**

In early 2021, weakened by restrictions on his lifestyle imposed by the Covid crisis, Marchand was admitted to an old people's home. Though he no longer sets a 'physical' (sporting) example, Marchand's life experience has made him - implicitly - a source of 'conscience' for France, a role also fostered by his interventions in politics in dialogue with president Macron: in April 2020 he suggested Macron should not describe measures against Covid as 'war',<sup>84</sup> and in November he enjoined the president to support amateur sport (and thus health) under France's Covid lockdowns.<sup>85</sup> Rejoining the discussion about Marchand's 'meaning', journalist Pierre Carrey commented on this new dimension to his exemplarity.<sup>86</sup>

However, in terms of his 2017 record, his sporting example still resonates. The critical theory of sport's emphasis on the negative role of 'spectacle' is reflected in both Carrey and Marchand's perspectives on his striking sporting effort. Carrey hopes the veteran cyclist will ride his bike for many years to come, 'but without filming',<sup>87</sup> and Marchand admits that 'the thing that weighs heavily is being viewed as a circus act'.<sup>88</sup> The spectacular nature of Marchand's exploit and image link directly to the exemplarity that is attached to him by the neoliberal value system. Many studies suggest that the role as 'health exemplars'<sup>89</sup> or 'stereotype busters'<sup>90</sup> of older athletes can – in public policies encouraging active ageing – actually be perceived ambivalently.<sup>91</sup> Although such athletic achievement can inspire and motivate, it may demotivate and stigmatize the majority who fail to 'perform'. Neoliberal policies and discourses shifting responsibility for health in old age onto citizens themselves, and athletes presented as emblematic – thereby fostering a bio-medical model of successful ageing – may create an environment where neoliberal governmentality can diminish state health care provision and support for the aged.<sup>92</sup> Reaction to Marchand's record reflects this divergence of views. Broadly speaking, the left in French society, politics, culture and sport interpreted Marchand as an individual whose exploits reflect well on himself, but do not necessarily serve as an example for others or for public policy. And, generally, the right views Marchand as proof that physical individual effort and moral self-responsibility teaches citizens to depend less on the state. In contemporary France, riven by the stresses of a neoliberal 'modernization', these issues resonate strongly. Marchand himself arguably also embodies these tensions and contradictions through his spectacular lived experience as an 'exemplary' older athlete. Firstly, although his solitary training and communist-affiliated club riding are traditionally non-commercialized and 'associative', Marchand has also participated in various events making up the new political economy of French cycling, in the form of commercial *cyclosporives* much less 'associative' than the

Ardéchoise. Secondly, his modest views on his abilities demonstrate a mindset focused on his individuality as an older athlete, rather than any exemplarity or wider sociopolitical significance, and he thus resists recuperation of his achievements as iconic active ageing and as an emblematic work ethic.

Gard and Dionigi underline that 'the life of the idea of sport as a policy instrument reminds us that sport is an endlessly flexible discursive resource capable of meaning almost anything to anyone'.<sup>93</sup> The links between cycling and conceptualizations of work have been discussed earlier, in terms of the competing social philosophies of sport during the inter-war years. As Christopher Thompson points out, the Tour de France has consistently provided 'a public forum for a debate about the nature of progress',<sup>94</sup> and Paul Virilio has suggested that 'sport is the propaganda of progress'.<sup>95</sup> It appears that the Hour record - albeit 'slow' - set by Marchand in 2017 continues this tradition. Cycling, as a sport harnessing man to machine, exemplifies how physical activity can variously be equated with 'work', whether the 'effort' is that of elite young professional athletes in the Tour de France, or amateur centenarian track cyclists breaking sporting records and busting sociocultural stereotypes.

A final perspective on Marchand's performance is how it links to recent philosophical debates on the nature of records launched by Sigmund Loland with concepts such as the record *qua* 'external axiom of sport' and the 'record sport dilemma'.<sup>96</sup> Loland has suggested that those sports particularly that adhere to the *citius, altius, fortius* credo of Olympianism and its implication that enough is never enough – the 'external axiom' – create 'an impossible quest for unlimited growth in limited systems', or the 'dilemma' of such sports. Loland's 'ecosophical' approach to records builds on the notion that each new faster, higher or stronger record 'uses up' previous performances in what is ultimately a – variously – 'non-sustainable' sports system. Rather than participating in such a sterile, arid and mechanistic exhaustion of ever-diminishing margins of upwardly incremental record setting, it may well

be that the future of record ‘performance’ will be found less in these traditional record practices of elite athletes, than in the extension not of absolute records themselves, but the age and health of those who accomplish them.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Clément Guillou, “Cyclisme : Robert Marchand, 105 ans et un record dont tout le monde parle,” *Le Monde*, 4 January 2017,

[https://www.lemonde.fr/cyclisme/article/2017/01/04/cyclisme-robert-marchand-105-ans-et-un-record-dont-tout-le-monde-parle\\_5057631\\_1616656.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/cyclisme/article/2017/01/04/cyclisme-robert-marchand-105-ans-et-un-record-dont-tout-le-monde-parle_5057631_1616656.html).

<sup>2</sup> Benjamin Meffre, “Audiences : Près de 400.000 téléspectateurs pour ‘l’exploit’ de Robert Marchand,” 5 January 2017, <https://www.ozap.com/actu/audiences-pres-de-400-000-telespectateurs-pour-l-exploit-de-robert-marchand/516285>

<sup>3</sup> Charles Masquelier, "Theorising French neoliberalism: The technocratic elite, decentralised collective bargaining and France’s ‘passive neoliberal revolution’," *European Journal of Social Theory* 2020, 1–21,

<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/1368431020915855#>

<sup>4</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, "The essence of neoliberalism," *Le Monde diplomatique*, December 1998. <https://mondediplo.com/1998/12/08bourdieu>

<sup>5</sup> Thierry Guilbert, *L'« évidence » du discours néolibéral. Analyse dans la presse écrite*, (Paris: Editions du Croquant, 2011).

<sup>6</sup> Eric Michel, "Coronavirus : Robert Marchand, 108 ans, plus fort que toutes les crises," *Le Parisien*, 11 April 2020. <https://www.leparisien.fr/sports/cyclisme/coronavirus-robert-marchand-108-ans-plus-fort-que-toutes-les-crises-11-04-2020-8297913.php>

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<sup>7</sup> Eric Théron, “Albi. Gran Fondo : Robert Marchand de rêves,” 28 August 2017, <https://www.ladepeche.fr/article/2017/08/28/2634828-gran-fondo-robert-marchand-de-reves.html>

<sup>8</sup> Jean-François Fournel, “Cyclisme, la retraite à 106 ans de Robert Marchand,” 10 January 2018, <https://www.la-croix.com/Sport/Cyclisme-retraite-106-ans-Robert-Marchand-2018-01-10-1200904806>.

<sup>9</sup> Laurent Mouloud, “L’Homme du jour. Robert Marchand,” *L’Humanité*, 28 October 2018, <https://www.humanite.fr/lhomme-du-jour-robert-marchand-662783>.

<sup>10</sup> The UCI and French Cycling Federation have withdrawn their medical authorisations for Marchand to undertake any further competition or record attempts.

<sup>11</sup> Marchand's autobiography describes his working life, sport and records: Robert Marchand, *108 ans, c'est un peu long l'éternité !* (Saint-Martin: Editions de Phénicie, 2020).

<sup>12</sup> Hugh Dauncey, *French Cycling: A Social and Cultural History* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2012), 102-28.

<sup>13</sup> Christopher Thompson, “The Tour in the Inter-War Years: Political Ideology, Athletic Excess and Industrial Modernity,” in *The Tour de France 1903-2003: A Century of Sporting Structures, Meanings and Values*, eds. Hugh Dauncey and Geoff Hare (London: Frank Cass, 2003), 79-102.

<sup>14</sup> Anon, “Un col au nom de Robert Marchand,” *Le Dauphiné libéré*, 7 January 2011, <https://www.ledauphine.com/drome/2011/01/07/1-ardechoise-un-col-au-nom-de-robert-marchand>.

<sup>15</sup> Romuald Lepers, Paul J. Stapley, and Thomas Cattagni, “Centenarian athletes: Examples of ultimate human performance?,” *Age and Ageing* 45 (2016): 729–33, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ageing/afw111>.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 729.

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<sup>17</sup> Rylee A. Dionigi, and Michael Gard, "Sport for all ages? Weighing the evidence," in *Sport & Physical Activity Across the Lifespan: Critical Perspective*, eds Rylee A. Dionigi and Michael Gard (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 1.

<sup>18</sup> Patrick Louis, "Robert, Marchand de Bonheur, d'espoir et d'éternité à 102 ans," *La Dépêche.fr*, 3 February 2014. <https://www.ladepeche.fr/article/2014/02/03/1809198-robert-marchand-de-bonheur-d-espoir-et-d-eternite.html>

<sup>19</sup> Sarah Thierry, "Robert Marchand décoré de l'ordre national du Mérite," *Actu.fr*, [https://actu.fr/societe/robert-marchand-decore-de-lordre-du-merite\\_8400231.html](https://actu.fr/societe/robert-marchand-decore-de-lordre-du-merite_8400231.html)

<sup>20</sup> See: <https://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/jorf/id/JORFTEXT000030594793>

<sup>21</sup> See: <https://www.legiondhonneur.fr/fr/page/lordre-national-du-merite/85>

<sup>22</sup> Susan Brownell, "Thinking dangerously" in *Henning Eichberg, Body Cultures*, eds John Bale and Chris Philo (London: Routledge, 1998), 22-46.

<sup>23</sup> Henning Eichberg, "Recording and quantifying is not natural," *Stadion*, 4 (1) (1997), 253-6; Allen Guttman, *From ritual to record* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1978); Richard Mandell, "The invention of the sports record," *Stadion*, 3 (2) (1976), 250-64.

<sup>24</sup> Our emphasis. Jim Parry, "The Idea of the Record," *Sport in History*, 26.2 August (2006), 197-214, 201-2.

<sup>25</sup> Parry, "The Idea of the Record," 198-201.

<sup>26</sup> Rylee Dionigi, "Competitive Sport and Aging: the Need for Qualitative Sociological Research," *Journal of Aging and Physical Activity*, 14 (2006), 365-379, 366.

<sup>27</sup> Bevan C. Grant, "'You're never too old': beliefs about physical activity and playing sport in later life," *Ageing and Society*, 21 (2001), 777-798, 781.

<sup>28</sup> AFP, « Marchand : 'A mon âge, si vous arrêtez, vous êtes foutu' » *Le Figaro*, 5 January 2017, <<http://sport24.lefigaro.fr/cyclisme/actualites/marchand-a-mon-age-si-vous-arretez-vous-etes-foutu-840090> >

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<sup>29</sup> "Un centenaire parcourt 90km à vélo en 5 heures," *Le Figaro*, 4 September 2012.

<sup>30</sup> Strong - 'spectacular' - media interest started in 2012 with Marchand's first world Hour record. See for example: France 3 TV: Le Monde d'après, "Tous centenaires : rêve ou cauchemar?," 3 December 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nIMAEoW80J4>; BFMTV, "Grand Angle," <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pfAZTd5EogE>, 2013; Europe 1 radio, "À la rencontre de Robert Marchand, un cycliste de 106 ans," 13 December 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XTbVHVJJ3jQ>

<sup>31</sup> Marchand, *108 ans*, 98.

<sup>32</sup> Marchand, *108 ans*, 114.

<sup>33</sup> Aurélien Niel and Olivier Sirost, "Sportifs de haut niveau : du record au mythe," *Ethnologie française*, 35(3) (2005), 411-423, 415. Cf. Serge Moscovici, *La machine à faire des dieux* (Paris, Fayard, 1988).

<sup>34</sup> Eric Serres, "Robert Marchand, un papy qui fait de la résistance," *L'Humanité*, 2 January 2017.

<sup>35</sup> Jean-Julien Ezvan, "Robert Marchand, le tour d'une vie en vélo," *Le Figaro*, 31 January 2014; "La France, futur pays de centenaires," *L'Est Républicain*, 8 January 2017, 10.

<sup>36</sup> After some reluctance about engaging with a non-communist politician, Marchand accepted an invitation for 12 January 2017. See: <https://www.ffc.fr/robert-marchand-recu-a-lelysee-president-de-republique/>

<sup>37</sup> The el Khomri law reformed the *Code du travail* to render employment 'more flexible'. Presented officially as against unemployment, it was seen by many as undermining workers' rights inherited from the post-1945 French social compromise.

<sup>38</sup> In September 2017, President Macron's centre-right neoliberal government further controversially liberalized employment with the *Loi Travail 2*.

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<sup>39</sup> Anson Rabinbach, *The Human Motor: Energy, Fatigue and the Origins of Modernity* (New York: Basic Books, 1990); John Hoberman, *Mortal Engines: The Science of Performance and the Dehumanization of Sport* (New York: Free Press, 1992).

<sup>40</sup> The term was popularized by Albert Londres, reporting the 1924 Tour: Albert Londres, “Le Tour de France: les Pellissier et leur camarade Ville abandonnent,” *Le Petit Parisien*, 27 June 1924, 1-2. See Thompson, “The Tour in the Inter-War Years”.

<sup>41</sup> Thompson, “The Tour in the Inter-War Years”.

<sup>42</sup> Communiqué de la CGT. « Félicitations à Robert Marchand ». *L'Humanité*, 5 January 2017.

<sup>43</sup> Desgrange authored a ‘training manual’: *La Tête et les jambes* (Paris: L. Pochy, 1895).

<sup>44</sup> “Marchand : “À mon âge, si vous arrêtez, vous êtes foutu”, *Le Figaro*, 5 January 2017.

<sup>45</sup> Articles analyzed are: Festor, Gilles, '22,5km en 1h : pari réussi pour Robert Marchand, 105 ans,' *Le Figaro*, 4 January 2017, <https://sport24.lefigaro.fr/cyclisme/actualites/pari-reussi-pour-l-inusable-robert-marchand-839983>; Festor, Gilles, 'Robert Marchand : à 105 ans, des performances respiratoires d'un homme de 50 ans,' *Le Figaro*, 4 January 2017, <https://www.lefigaro.fr/le-scan-sport/2017/01/04/27001-20170104ARTFIG00041-robert-marchand-a-105-ans-des-performances-respiratoires-d-un-homme-de-50-ans.php>; and Festor, Gilles, 'À 105 ans, Robert Marchand effectue 22,547km en une heure,' *Le Figaro*, 4 January 2017, <https://www.lefigaro.fr/flash-actu/2017/01/04/97001-20170104FILWWW00243-a-105-ans-robert-marchand-etablit-le-record-de-18217heure-a-velo.php>.

<sup>46</sup> Paul Guyonnet, " ‘Je traverse la rue et je vous trouve” un travail, assure Emmanuel Macron à un jeune chômeur », *Huffpost*, 16 September 2018, [https://www.huffingtonpost.fr/2018/09/15/je-traverse-la-rue-et-je-vous-trouve-un-travail-assure-emmanuel-macron-a-un-jeune-chomeur\\_a\\_23528452/](https://www.huffingtonpost.fr/2018/09/15/je-traverse-la-rue-et-je-vous-trouve-un-travail-assure-emmanuel-macron-a-un-jeune-chomeur_a_23528452/)



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<sup>47</sup> Festor, Gilles, 'A 105 ans, Robert Marchand établit un record mondial de l'heure cycliste,' *Le Figaro*, 3 January 2017.

<sup>48</sup> Agic-Arrco is a mandatory complementary pension supporting national state pension provision.

<sup>49</sup> This references Eric Zemmour's *Le Suicide français* (Paris: Albin Michel, 2014), which sees France as a nation in decline, losing sight of past glories and values.

<sup>50</sup> 'Déclinisme' has a long history in French thinking about culture ('déclin-valeurs') and world rank ('déclin-puissance'). Recently popularized by right-wing authors Nicolas Baverez, *La France qui tombe* (Paris: Perrin, 2003) and Eric Zemmour, it is summarized by Stéphane Spoiden, "Le Discours décliniste en France," *The French Review* 84.1 (2010), 68-80.

<sup>51</sup> Press and on-line coverage was copious.

<sup>52</sup> Pierre Carrey, "Robert Marchand, 105 ans et un record à vélo : c'est bien pour lui, c'est absurde pour nous," *Libération*, 4 January 2017.

<sup>53</sup> Carrey, "Robert Marchand".

<sup>54</sup> See e.g. Robert Lewis, *The Stadium century: sport, spectatorship and mass society in modern France* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2017).

<sup>55</sup> See: Henri Vaugrand, "Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Marie Brohm: Their Schemes of Intelligibility and Issues towards a Theory of Knowledge in the Sociology of Sport," *International Review for the Sociology of Sport* 36.2 (2001): 183-201, <https://doi.org/10.1177/101269001036002004>.

<sup>56</sup> John W. Devine and Francisco J. Lopez Frias, "Philosophy of Sport," <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/sport/>

<sup>57</sup> Robert Redeker, « Halte aux "meutes sportives," » *Libération*, 24 April 2001.

<sup>58</sup> Robert Redeker, "Le spectacle sportif, arraisonnement de l'existence humaine," *Empan*, 79.3 (2010): 94-97, 95. <https://doi.org/10.3917/empa.079.0094>

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<sup>59</sup> Ted M. Butryn and Matthew A. Masucci, “It’s not about the book. A cyborg counter-narrative of Lance Armstrong,” *Journal of Sport & Social Issues* 27.2 (2003): 124-144, 125, DOI: 10.1177/0193732503252176.

<sup>60</sup> One version of the movement's (early) history is: Jean-Marie Brohm, "La Théorie critique du sport. De *Partisans* à *Quel Corps ?*," in Cécile Collinet, *Éducation physique et sciences*, (Paris: PUF, 2001), 135- 149.

<sup>61</sup> Halte au sport !, 2009, « Lever le tabou !,» <http://www.halteausport.free.fr> [accessed 23 November 2017]

<sup>62</sup> Lepers, Stapley, and Cattagni, “Centenarian athletes”.

<sup>63</sup> Gaëlle Deschodt, "La pudeur, un bilan," *Hypothèses* 13.1 (2010), 95-105, 105.

<sup>64</sup> This was summarised in the neoliberal financial daily *Les Échos* in 2004: Jacques Barraux and Marie-Annick Depagneux, "La face cachée de la performance : entretien avec Alain Ehrenberg," *Les Échos*, 14 June 2004. <https://www.lesechos.fr/2004/01/la-face-cachee-de-la-performance-627689>. See also: Alain Ehrenberg, *Le Culte de la performance* (Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 1991).

<sup>65</sup> Pierre Dardot and Christian Laval, *La nouvelle raison du monde. Essai sur la société néolibérale* (Paris: La Découverte, 2009), 274-75.

<sup>66</sup> Dardot and Laval, *Nouvelle raison*, 15.

<sup>67</sup> An early discussion of “healthism” contributing to privatizing responsibility for health (and illness, or, ultimately, old-age infirmity) was: Robert Crawford, “Healthism and the Medicalization of Everyday Life,” *International Journal of Health Services* 1980; 10(3): 365-88. DOI: 10.2190/3H2H-3XJN-3KAY-G9NY.

<sup>68</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Use of pleasure*, (R. Hurley, Trans). New York: Vintage, 1986, 10. Developed variously by Foucault, the idea was expanded in later Collège de France lectures as ‘biopolitics.’ See: Frédéric Gros, “Le souci de soi chez Michel Foucault: a review of *The*

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*Hermeneutics of the Subject: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1981-1982,*” *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 31.5-6, 2005, 697-708. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0191453705055496>.

<sup>69</sup> The Touraine reform (2014) increased the years of pensionable work ensuring full pension from 40 to 43 (by 2035) and in 2019-20 further proposed changes to retirement and pensions by the Macron-Philippe administration caused protest.

<sup>70</sup> Elizabeth C. J. Pike, “The active aging agenda, old folk devils and a new moral panic,” *Sociology of Sport Journal* 28.2 (2011): 209–225, <https://doi.org/10.1123/ssj.28.2.209>.

<sup>71</sup> Jean-Pierre Aquino surveys recent French government initiatives: “Le plan national 'bien vieillir',” *Gérontologie et société*, 31/125/2 (2008): 39-52, doi:10.3917/g.s.125.0039.

<sup>72</sup> Inserm, *Activité physique : contextes et effets sur la santé. Rapport* (Paris: Les éditions Inserm, 2008).

<sup>73</sup> Pierre Laroque, *Rapport Laroque. Politique de la vieillesse* (Paris: Documentation française, 1962).

<sup>74</sup> An important 2005 OECD report analyzed problems and suggested reforms: OECD, *Ageing and Employment Policies: France* (Paris: OECD, 2005). A further summary was: OECD, *Ageing and Employment Policies. France 2015: Working Better with Age* (Paris: OECD, 2014).

<sup>75</sup> See: *Loi n° 2015-1776 du 28 décembre 2015 relative à l'adaptation de la société au vieillissement* (Paris: Ministère des Affaires sociales et de la Santé, 2015).

<sup>76</sup> See e.g. Fabrice Burlot and Brice Lefèvre, “Le sport et les seniors : des pratiques spécifiques ?,” *Retraite et société*, 58.2 (2009): 133-158; Guy Truchot, “Les seniors,” in *Les pratiques sportives en France. Enquête 2000*, eds Patrick Mignon and Guy Truchot (Paris: Ministère des Sports et INSEP, 2000), 41–46.

<sup>77</sup> Burlot and Lefèvre. “Le sport et les seniors,” 156.

<sup>78</sup> See: <https://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/loda/id/JORFTEXT000031700731/2020-11-06/>

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<sup>79</sup> Tellingly physical, the French phrasing is: 'prendre à bras le corps' ('wrap arms around').

<sup>80</sup> Guy Delande, "Adapter la société au vieillissement ou adapter le vieillissement à la société ?," <https://www.ifrap.org/emploi-et-politiques-sociales/adapter-la-societe-au-vieillissement-ou-adapter-le-vieillissement-la>

<sup>81</sup> Dauncey, *French Cycling*, 226-29.

<sup>82</sup> Gard and Dionigi, "The world turned upside down," 740.

<sup>83</sup> Given Marchand's straitened finances, he is helped by well-wishers both 'charitable' and commercial. His 2017 record bike built to conform with UCI regulations was donated (and 'badged) by bespoke frame builder Origine Cycles. See: "Origine Cycles, l'art de faire du vélo un produit de luxe," *La Voix du Nord*, 2 October 2017, 9.

<sup>84</sup> Eric Michel, "Coronavirus : Robert Marchand, 108 ans, plus fort que toutes les crises," *Le Parisien*, 11 April 2020, <https://www.leparisien.fr/sports/cyclisme/coronavirus-robert-marchand-108-ans-plus-fort-que-toutes-les-crisis-11-04-2020-8297913.php>

<sup>85</sup> Anon, "Robert Marchand, 109 ans, écrit à Emmanuel Macron : « Ceux qui font du sport encombrant moins les urgences," *Le Dauphiné*, 27 November 2020, <https://www.ledauphine.com/insolite/2020/11/27/robert-marchand-109-ans-ecrit-a-emmanuel-macron-ceux-qui-font-du-sport-encombrant-moins-les-urgences>

<sup>86</sup> Carrey, Pierre, "Robert Marchand, un cycle dans le siècle," *Libération*, 30 December 2021. [https://www.liberation.fr/sports/2020/12/30/robert-marchand-un-cycle-dans-le-siecle\\_1810011](https://www.liberation.fr/sports/2020/12/30/robert-marchand-un-cycle-dans-le-siecle_1810011)

<sup>87</sup> Carrey, "Robert Marchand, 105 ans."

<sup>88</sup> Marchand, *108 ans*, 97.

<sup>89</sup> Penelope Lockwood, Alison L Chasteen, Carol Wong, "Age and regulatory focus determine preferences for health-related role models," *Psychology and Aging* 20 (2005): 376–389, DOI: 10.1037/0882-7974.20.3.376.

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<sup>90</sup> Sean Horton, J. Baker, J. Côté, J. and J Deakin, “Understanding seniors’ perceptions and stereotypes of aging,” *Educational Gerontology* 34 (2008): 997–1017,

<https://doi.org/10.1080/03601270802042198>.

<sup>91</sup> Sean Horton, Rylee A. Dionigi, and J. Bellamy, “Canadian women aged 75 and over: Attitudes towards health-related role models and female Masters athletes,” *The International Journal of Interdisciplinary Social and Community Studies*, 7.3 (2013): 33–47.

<sup>92</sup> Gard and Dionigi, “The world turned upside down”; Michael Gard, Rylee A. Dionigi, Sean Horton, Joseph Baker, Patricia Weir, and Claudio Dionigi, “The normalisation of sport for older people?,” *Annals of Leisure Research*, 20.3 (2017): 253–272,

DOI: 10.1080/11745398.2016.1250646.

<sup>93</sup> Gard and Dionigi, “The world turned upside down,” 741.

<sup>94</sup> Thompson, *The Tour de France*, 265.

<sup>95</sup> Paul Virilio, *Vitesse* (Paris: Editions du Furet, 2019), 1.

<sup>96</sup> Sigmund Loland, “The Record Dilemma,” paper presented at the 20<sup>th</sup> World Congress of Philosophy, Boston Massachusetts (1998),

<https://www.bu.edu/wcp/Papers/Spor/SporLola.htm> [accessed 21 December 2019]; and

“Record Sports, an Ecological Critique and a Reconstruction,” *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport* 28 (2001), 127-39. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00948705.2001.9714608>