

Squaring the Circle: Removing Violence from the Equation in a Quest for Excitement

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Introduction

To excite the audience, professional wrestling has evolved from legitimate wrestling contests to staged matches. This transition involved a gloomy period of fraudulent match fixing, but by the 1920s and onwards the combination of showmanship and wrestling slowly developed into a choreographed wrestling performance more in line with theater than sports competitions (Lindeman). Many academics with interests in body culture have viewed this transformation from “true” to “fake” wrestling as a downfall. In ancient Greece, sport was associated with positive values such as health and the creation of moral character (Reid 3-17), whereas popular entertainment in the form of theatrical plays was criticized by Plato for its corrupting influence on youth and society at large (Plato 202-4). Today staged wrestling matches have been criticized for promoting stereotypes, fascism, and bigotry; while sport by and large retains its positive image as promoter of fair play and sportsmanship. Such criticism overlooks the civilizing effect involved in allowing politically incorrect themes to appear in a storyline surrounding the fight between two protagonists in a ring with one main purpose—to entertain and excite the audience. To expand on this defense of professional wrestling, it is necessary to introduce the notion of a “civilizing process” as conceived by the German-British sociologist Norbert Elias.

The Civilizing Process

In Elias’ groundbreaking book *The Civilizing Process*, he traces the development of etiquette and bodily habits from early-medieval times through the renaissance up until modernity. This development is then linked to the centralization of the

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state with increased political, military, and administrative power transferred from the nobles to the king due to military development that eventually made the nobles obsolete as an important military force. As soon as guns and cannons replaced swords and lances, kings no longer depended on the readiness of their noble alliances to enter the battlefield in heavy armor, thus shifting the power balance in their favor. Consequently, kings gained monopoly over the use of violent force as well as the control over taxation. The court society saw a shift in power balance and had a profound influence on the aristocracy, who suddenly no longer needed a readiness to act swiftly, forcefully, and violently if needed. Instead, an ability to behave and speak elegantly and develop intricate plans to forward personal interest at court was called for; all of which demanded a controlled levelheaded mind. Slowly the norms regarding sex, bodily functions (i.e. eating, sleeping, defecating, how to blow one's nose, etc.), table manners, aggressive behavior and violent displays changed from more or less unrestrained to highly controlled.

This transformation first relied on an outwardly imposed social pressure for people to conform to new standards. Over time, the need for external pressure was replaced by internalized self-restraint with regards to sexuality, aggression, and self-control over emotive volatility. The result was the development of conscience, or what Freud called the "super-ego," as a necessary regulator of behavior at court, and later, due to a trickle-down effect, in broader society. This process of emotional repression did not relieve individuals of the capacity for strong feelings and the need for excitement (Elias "Essay on Sport" 163). Such feelings and needs still existed even though their public display had become socially unacceptable and, consequently, rare. Although self-restraint can prevent people from acting in accordance with intense feelings, thereby allowing them to get along smoothly in everyday life, it also creates a psychic tension, which from time to time needs release: "One of the crucial problems confronting societies in the course of a civilizing process was—and remains—that of finding a new balance between pleasure and restraint" (Elias "Essay on Sport" 165).

This conceptualization seems to follow Freud when he claims that the development of an increased self-awareness and self-control have created psychic tensions, which must be released or redirected somehow in order not to cause personal as well as societal problems. The unintentional creation of modern sport proved to be part of the solution.

Civilized Excitement

Elias is the only highly influential sociologist who has ascribed a significant role to sport in his sociology. Not only did he write about sport, he also believed that sport had a crucial role to play in developing civilized societies. In the anthology *The Quest for Excitement: Sport and Leisure in the Civilizing Process* (1986) co-edited by Eric Dunning, he highlights sport as a particularly well-suited solution to the above-mentioned problem of resolving built-up psychic tension. He writes: “Within its specific setting sport, like other leisure pursuits, can evoke through its design a special kind of tension, a pleasurable excitement thus allowing feelings to flow more freely. It can help to loosen, perhaps to free, stress-tensions.” (Elias “Introduction” 48) Sport, says Elias, can thus bring about a “liberating, cathartic effect.” (Elias “Introduction” 49)

The rules of sport create a space within which tension arise, as a pleasurable excitement builds up and a release of tension is brought about in the end. In other words, it creates and legitimates strong emotional outbursts in a controlled environment. Sport mimics the excitement of a Darwinian battle for survival at safe distance to the brutality of nature, and thus plays a crucial role in the civilizing process. If sport should function this way it is important, Elias argues, that the dynamics of sport is “equilibrated so as to avoid, on the one hand, the frequent recurrence of precipitate victories and, on the other, the frequent recurrence of stalemates. The former cut short the pleasurable tension-excitement; they do not give it time to rise to an enjoyable optimum. The other draws out the tension beyond its optimum and lets it get stale without any climax and the ‘cathartic’ release from tension which follows” (“Essay on Sport” 168-9).

It is very likely that humans simply need battle excitement either as participants or as spectators as “complementary correctives for the unexciting tensions produced by the recurrent routines of social life” (Elias “Introduction” 59). Battle excitement can be experienced in all contact sports with oppositional groups involved but it is most directly displayed in martial arts. Various forms of battle-contests have been staged for different reasons through human history, but according to Elias, it was not until modernity that such contests took on the form of sport. Olympic contests in antiquity for example served religious and military purposes and “the customary rules of ‘heavy’ athletic events, such as boxing and wrestling, admitted a far higher degree of physical violence than that admitted by the rules of the corresponding types of sport-contest” (Elias “Genesis of Sport”

132). A development can be traced in which modern sports with an emphasis on rules and the prevention of serious harm have replaced more de-regulated violent and dangerous leisure forms known in pre-modern times. This process was a necessary consequence of “heightened sensibility with regard to acts of violence” (Elias “Genesis of Sport” 133). The argument suggests that such as the folk games of the late Middle Ages and boxing slowly became civilized by being “subjected to a tighter set of rules” that restricted the forms through which violence could be expressed (Elias “Introduction” 21). Elias also used fox hunting as an example of this development. Fox hunting originally had its climax in the killing of the fox by the hunters, but because of the mentioned increased sensitivity towards violence, a change took place that still allowed fox-hunters to kill the fox, but instead of killing the fox themselves, the killing was done by proxy and emphasis changed from the pleasure of the final killing to the excitement of the hunt itself (Elias “Essay on Sport”).

The De-brutalization of Sport and the Catharsis Thesis

Elias’ thoughts of the role of sport in the civilizing process fits very well with sport’s early development at the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century—the same period that saw the emergence of modern professional wrestling. In England, sport was linked to educational goals based on lofty gentleman ideals. Bishop Ethelbert Talbot represented this period’s sports ethos well when he, in celebration of the 1908 Olympics, let these words resound in the St. Paul’s Cathedral: “In these Olympiads the important thing is not winning, but taking part” (De Coubertin 587). In reality, according to the Danish sport researcher Verner Møller: “Sport is the cultivation of the will to win taken to the threshold of evil” (Møller *Ethics of Doping* 15). Doping scandals, rule breaking, foul play, and sometimes even a reward system with the aim of rewarding players who injure opponents (the so-called bounty scandal in American football) points to a winning-is-all philosophy rather than an emphasis on mere participation. Møller observes that the very choreography surrounding sporting events contradicts Talbot’s idealism: “At the end of each Olympic competition the winner is celebrated, whereas not much attention is paid to the ‘also-rans.’ [...] The winner’s ceremony shows the same as it is only the three best-placed athletes

or teams that are invited on the podium and once again the winner is the center of attention” (Møller “Being a Poor Sport” 21).

The importance of victory in modern day elite sport has resulted in staggering injury rates, most notably in American football (Waddington). Even though cushioned boxing gloves have been introduced in boxing, they actually increase the risk of serious brain damage because they protect hands from fracture thus allowing boxers to hit harder and more frequently than otherwise possible (Association). Confronted with objections to the idea of an overall de-brutalization of sport such as these, Elias would undoubtedly point our attention towards the brutality of one of the most prestigious and popular contest at the ancient Olympic Games: wrestling. Indeed, records show that “Leontiskos of Messana, who twice in the first half of the fifth century won the Olympic crown for wrestling, obtained his victories not by throwing his opponents but by breaking their fingers” (Elias “Genesis of Sport” 136). There is ample evidence to suggest that the pankration, or ground wrestling, was a brutal affair, and up until the end of the 20th century no official sport existed with a similar display of violent combat. When the Olympic games were revived in 1896, pankration was the only one of the classical disciplines not reinstated due to its brutality.

However, in 1993 the sport Ultimate Fighting was created in the United States, with inspiration from primarily the Japanese discipline Shooto, promoted by the mixed martial arts promotion company Pancrase Inc., who called its champions “King of Pancrase” with a deliberate reference to its Greek predecessor in antiquity (Grant). This form of full-contact combat sport that eventually came to be known as MMA (mixed martial arts) initially had rules similar to pankration, but for promoters to conduct events legally in the US, and to be accepted as a legitimate sport, a set of unified rules was adopted (Commissions). Rules introducing obligatory four-ounce gloves, weight classes, and five rounds of five-minute duration were implemented to increase the likelihood of exciting and fair fights. Rules clearly preventing throat strikes, kicking, kneeing, or stomping the head of a grounded opponent and striking the spine were instated with a health-preserving rationale. Still, such rules have not prevented MMA fights from being highly violent with occasional massive bleeding (taking place while the fight is allowed to continue), bone breaking, large joint dislocation, and, of course, brutal knockouts. In a recent MMA fight, the former Danish wrestler and Olympic silver medalist, Marc O. Madsen, performs what is called “a standing guillotine” in which his opponent is lifted

from the floor by his neck and thereafter thrown unconscious to the floor, accompanied by enthralled shouting from the audience and the commentators.¹ True, modern day MMA is undoubtedly more regulated than its ancient cousin pankration, but its mere existence and increasing popularity indicates that Elias overestimated the power of civilization over an apparent human lust for violence.

As shown above, Elias' idea of an overall slowly-developed de-brutalization of sport is not altogether unproblematic. At first sight their catharsis thesis seems to have more in its favor. Do not televised MMA and boxing fights allow the kind of excitement that relieves tension and thereby protects society from such violence in public? Is sport in general not a prime example of controlled de-control?

Reason exists to be skeptical towards a positive answer to both these questions. In his research, sociologist David Phillips examined the impact of mass media violence on U.S. homicides by looking at homicide rates after 18 heavyweight-boxing championships. Most of the earlier studies of the connection between mass media and aggression were conducted in laboratories and has shown that media violence can trigger aggression. Real life, however, is not played out in a laboratory. Phillips wanted to test whether the connection also holds true in the real world. His study presents the first systematic evidence of such a connection showing that after such championship fights between 1973 and 1978, homicides significantly increased, with the largest peak by far appearing on the third day after the fight (Phillips). The findings were controlled for secular trends, seasonal, and other extraneous variables. Since the increases were greater after heavily publicized prize fights, his findings supported his hypothesis that the homicides were triggered by the fighters modeling aggression. This finding mirrors laboratory experiments, which found that people were more likely to imitate an aggressor if they perceived themselves like the aggressor and their victim like the one on screen.

Phillips mentions six criteria for stories most likely to prompt aggression as one of the reasons he chose heavyweight prize fights as a research site. These criteria are derived from George Comstock's literature review on media effects. For Comstock, a violent story is more likely to trigger aggression if the violence

¹ For the full match, see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IKZHPMxlSUU>

was rewarded; the violence was rewarded, exciting, real, and justified; and if the violent perpetrator was not criticized and was framed as not intending to cause injury (Comstock). Evidently heavyweight prize fights as well as high profile MMA fights display “stories” that live up to all six of the characteristics. Not only is violence presented as rewarding, exiting, real, justified and so on, it is also, which is arguably more important, perceived by the audience as such. Thus, ample evidence exists to suggest that the catharsis thesis is problematic when it is applied to excitement created by real life combats exposed by mass media. No matter the etiquette intended to civilize the violence, it seems as if exiting high-profile battles fought within the confinements of sportive rules work in the exact opposite direction of what Elias expected.

Removing Violence from the Equation in a Quest for Excitement

Let us turn our attention to professional wrestling and analyze how this entertainment form can be understood considering Elias’ theory. With respect to the catharsis thesis, no empirical evidence exists, as far as we know, to suggest that professional wrestling has the same detrimental effect on society by influencing a spectator’s propensity to act violently,² but there are several other reasons for doubting that it has that effect. First, professional wrestling does not live up to all of Comstock’s six criteria.

The violence displayed is not real and there is never any real intent to injure anyone. We base this claim on sport philosopher Michael Smith’s stipulated definition of violence. Smith defines violence as “physically assaultive behavior that is designed to, and does, injure another person or persons physically” (Smith 204). Of course, what matters is how wrestlers present the violent story and how it is perceived by the audience. In this respect pro wrestling differs from most violent stories, as it does not aim to present violence as realistically as possible. To the contrary, violence is presented in such an exaggerated manner that it is entirely impossible to mistake it for real. This lack of realness is particularly true for WWE’s “sport entertainment” version of pro wrestling.

² This lack of knowledge thereby suggests a future direction for research.

At WWE's 2017 *Hell in a Cell*, Shane McMahon and Kevin Owens met in a "Hell in a Cell" match in which the ring is surrounded by a 20-foot steel cage meant to keep wrestlers inside. Nevertheless, performers often find themselves atop the cage at some point in the match. These matches often include moments of extreme "violence" much to the delight of the audience—and this match was no different. At one point, Owens smashes through a table while trying to hurt McMahon, who manages to get away just in time. As the wrestlers later descended the cage after battling on top of it, McMahon bashes Owens' head into the cage until he falls off the side of the cage and through an announce table. McMahon proceeds to place the barely conscious Owens on another announce table and climbs the cage wall once again. Standing on top of the cage, he draws the sign of the cross on his chest and jumps off the edge in an elbow drop aimed at Owens on the table. Right before impact, Owens is pulled from the table by fellow wrestler Sami Zayn. McMahon crashes through the table and eventually loses the match (Benigno).

Throughout the match, after the extremely "violent" moments, fans cheer and chant, as is the usual response to such moments at pro wrestling events, "Holy shit! Holy shit!" The recurring "Holy shit!" chants show that the audience knows how to react to these extreme actions that follow a special kind of logic. Their memetic chants suggest that they are not truly shocked by the violence they see—they know to perform their role just as the wrestlers perform their own.

In wrestling matches the seemingly violent behavior is often done in an obvious rule-breaking manner. Such actions are thus not justified but highly criticized by the opponent, commentators, and the audience. Professional wrestling therefore fails to live up to Comstock's fourth and fifth criteria either. The "violent" perpetrator is rarely justified in their actions and is often highly criticized. It is even doubtful whether professional wrestling lives up to the first criteria, of being rewarded for their violence. Although wrestlers win/lose title belts and are celebrated or booed accordingly, the audience knows that it is all a show. The championship belts are part of a planned storyline and are not a real reward for a legitimate fight.

Pro wrestling matches are often delivered in a comical and surreal fashion with an undertone of chaos that sets it far apart from reality. From time to time characters are introduced that give the whole wrestling universe an otherworldly aura, making any aggressor or victim modeling associated with real prizefights highly unlikely. One example of this phenomenon can be observed in Bray Wyatt,

who posits an occult character with a cult leader-esque persona. His tactics often include scaring his opponents both verbally before the matches and by his mad behavior in the ring. Wyatt faced and defeated Matt Hardy on November 27, 2017, causing Hardy to have a “mental breakdown” and slowly turn into “Woken” Matt Hardy, a kind of campy inversion of Bray Wyatt with an exaggerated comical laugh, indistinguishable accent, and frequent use of archaic words. Their feud has evolved into a contest of out-weirding each other with Wyatt applying his usual tactics and Hardy countering in a comical fashion that leaves Wyatt slightly confused. Needless to say, modeling either the aggressor or victim is not an option in cases like these. Nothing about either character is like, and thus identifiable by, members of the WWE audience.

The audience plays an active role and has an indirect influence on character development and storylines by voicing their enthusiasm and disgust during an event. The only one of Comstock’s six criteria that pro wrestling stories truly live up to is the second; that is, the matches excite the audience, which is of course both their *raison d’être* and a precondition for being relevant for the catharsis thesis in the first place. When it comes to the ability to produce excitement, pro wrestling has an advantage that sport typically lacks.

In the chapter “Never Trust a Snake,” Henry Jenkins III uses Elias’ sociological ideas and observes that in the real world not many sporting contests reach the optimal tension-equilibrium because “actual athletic completion, unlike staged wrestling, is unrehearsed and unscripted” (Jenkins III 40). Professional wrestling matches, on the contrary, “are staged to ensure maximum emotional impact, structured around a consistent reversal of fortunes and a satisfying climax” (Jenkins III 40). Wrestling, however, also explores the emotional and moral life of its main characters as part of the storylines building up to the battles in the ring, and can therefore be viewed as a melodrama built on a masculine mythology. The excitement of a masculine melodrama, involving physical combat, is rule breaking, risk taking, and spectacular feats, as well as a display of strong emotional outbursts from the wrestlers. Such excitement makes wrestling particularly well suited as a site for male catharsis, especially with regards to the working class where the need for catharsis is arguably the greatest.

Following Elias’ view on the class-specific needs for excitement, Jenkins III places wrestling alongside boxing as a “lower-class sport” with a “particular significance for its dominantly working-class male audience” (39). Thus, one crucial difference between sports such as boxing, MMA, and pro wrestling, all of

which can deliver battle-induced excitement in abundance for athletes and spectators alike, is the fact that only pro wrestling has found a way to do it without real violence. The violence is all show, known to the audience, and rarely, if ever, life-threatening.

Professional Wrestling: Squaring the Circle

In this concluding section, we return to Elias for the importance of sport as he observes that, aside from sex, humans require “other forms of enjoyable excitement” and that the “battle excitement” found in sport provides such excitement (“Introduction” 59). As civilization advanced, he argues, and “when a fairly high level of pacification has been established, that problem has to some extent been solved by the provision of mimetic battles, battles enacted playfully in an imaginary context which can produce enjoyable battle excitement with a minimum of injuries to human beings. It is, like squaring the circle, an almost impossible task” (“Introduction” 59). Elias thought sports competitions of various kinds solved the puzzle of humans desiring violent excitement but needing to exist in a pacified civilization.

However, as we have seen, sport is not the best example of “controlled decontrol,” since excess is in the nature of sport. Pierre De Coubertin writes: “To try to make athletics conform to a system of mandatory moderation is to chase after an illusion. Athletes need the ‘freedom of excess’” (De Coubertin 581). With the rise of MMA as a relatively new and popular sport with very similar brutality to that of ancient pankration, it seems as if this need for a freedom to excess also includes brutal violence. Using Comstock’s criteria for violent stories leading to modeling behaviors, the “battle excitement” found in such contact sports appears to contradict Elias’ conceptualizations.

On the other hand, professional wrestling can be considered the ultimate example of what Elias saw as the overall trend in the civilizing process, because it has succeeded in creating an immense emotional impact on its audience by mimicking violent combat in a thrilling sport setting, often resulting in ecstatic excitement, without the use of real-life violence. Only in the scripted world of professional wrestling can psychic tensions be released and emotions be allowed to flow free in a fully controlled setting. Only here is it possible to mediate on contradiction after the other as non-violent violence is displayed as cooperative

competition. Professional wrestling is both antihegemonic and reactionary; it reinforces stereotypes and celebrates brute power but at the same time it “lends its voice to the voiceless and champions the powerless,” as Jenkins III expresses (64). Surprisingly it was not the unplanned creation of modern sport that solved the almost impossible task mentioned by Elias. The circle was squared by booted wrestlers in tights and costumes.

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