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Amateurism and Identity in England: How being ‘competitive’ became *the* point of distinction between northern and southern cricket.

It would appear that Darwin was onto something when he paraphrased Herbert Spencer’s “survival of the fittest”,^[i] to summarise his theory of evolution via competition. The competitive instincts in humans do not get any stronger or vital in the context of competing for food, and ultimately the species survival. The human race’s ability to comprehend and thus compete better than any other species has ensured our place at the top of the food chain.

What has changed since our days as hunter gatherers is that humanity has developed societies in which the contexts for being competitive have changed and indeed multiplied. Since the introduction of innovations such as crop rotation, the industrial revolution and our present day ‘consumer’ society, the need to compete for food has declined, and humans via ancient sports, crusades and wars found alternative ways to compete, in what Elias and Dunning called the ‘quest for excitement’.^[ii] To compete is, it would appear, an inherent human trait, so why during the industrial revolution, did certain sections of the British population deliberately choose to attempt the eradication of overt competition from sports. Sports that had previously been utilised for the explicit generation of competition, pleasure and excitement.

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For now this question will remain. However, I am choosing to use cricket as the case study because cricket, more than any other sport, developed an ‘uncompetitive’ dialogue or narrative, within influential elements of the sports participants and chroniclers. And this narrative appears to have influenced the global ethos of the sport. What I aim to demonstrate in the course of this discussion, is that a process of distinction has occurred within the sport, based upon the ideology of amateurism. A process resulting in two distinct regional cricket identities for the North and the South, which are exemplified by a display at the Bradman Museum in Australia, which states:

“From the 1880s onwards English cricket experienced a subtle change, with the blending of the *professionals* from the *industrial north* and the *amateurs* from the *genteel south*”.^[iii]

It will be argued that these ‘stereotypical’ regional identities are (individually and in relation to each other) *both* false.

This is to be achieved by examining the style and representation of cricket in each region, how specific class-based concepts such as the amateur/professional distinction, and amateurism itself, lead to what many cricket historians have called the “false doctrine”^[iv] of the amateur ethos. Prior to this is a brief philosophical discussion of both ‘competitiveness’, and how the context it was used came to represent a very specific and stereotyped brand of northern cricket; and ‘amateurism’, which influenced the reportage

of northern and southern cricket in this regard.

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The philosophy of the term ‘competitive’

To play sport it, would be fair to say, is to be competitive. What occurred within the different cricket discourses was the abstraction of the word and its meaning, dependent on which players or type of cricket was being described, and by whom. I propose that this abstraction by the ‘elite’ within cricket, has warped the term from its meaning as ordinary language, and transformed it into a philosophical signifier. An analysis of the term ‘competitive’ as both a word with a given meaning and as a ‘thing’ to be valued as a human quality in instrumental or intrinsic terms, reveals a causal factor behind the invention of the amateur narrative.

As an instrumental value, being ‘competitive’ assists an agent or team of agents to achieve a desirable ‘goal’ such as Victory. In this context Plato,[v] saw these things (or human values) as ‘good’, if being ‘competitive’ aided in the achievement of something worthy, such as victory. Good sport for Plato in this regard is sport or play directed towards the fulfilment of the self in the form of the “reasonable being”. [vi] ‘Bad’ sport or play however, is played for material gain and “the fact that this [commercial basis] became the main reason for sport represents – from [Plato’s] philosophical point of view – a step back”. [vii] A philosophy clearly reflected in the orthodoxy of amateurism.

Sport (in its natural humanistic form, which appeals to the “emotional soul” [viii]) is inherently competitive. However, being ‘good’ in sport, as it is in life, is a subjective matter, and being ‘competitive’ is also a problematic and contested term. In this regard, is ‘competitiveness’ a ‘good’ value only if it brings a desired, or worthy, result? Of course the histories of sports are littered with incidents where ‘competitiveness’ has been deemed/or has led to cheating, or what certain cricket circles prefer to call, ‘not cricket’. Mike Marqusee summed up this philosophical, methodological and socio-historical quandary when he asked: “Just how difficult is it in practice to distinguish between unstinting competitive zeal (approved by all) and boorish aggressiveness (condemned by all)” [ix]

Marqusee’s question gets under the skin of the matter regarding ‘fair play’, and the ‘spirit’ of the sport, yet beneath this albeit integral aspect of the overall problem lies the heart of the matter. This is where the abstraction of the term, by the amateur social ‘elites’ becomes crucial. Should competitiveness be regarded as a value in itself and *not* as a means for achieving or attaining outcomes such as victory; to be ‘competitive’ has no intrinsic value. Under these circumstances so-called amateur (in the Victorian and Edwardian sense) cricket, and amateur sport more generally, has, arguably, no purpose and sport then becomes what many would regard as a pointless exercise! Participating agents are then – it would appear – required to revert to more aesthetic concerns, and it is this, that we witness in the amateur-based (or biased) narratives of the sport, exemplified by authors attempts to aestheticize cricket.

Sadly, in certain cricket contexts the ideal of ‘amateurism’ could not live up to the high-

minded goals that it set itself. Cricket's amateur apologists, minimised and indeed denied the existence of 'bad' extrinsic motivation or rewards, and an amateur myth of 'playing for plays sake' and cricket as 'more-than-a-game' developed. Sadly this was far from the reality, for while the games commercial interests undermined the ideal to a point, it was 'shamateurism' that proved to be the largest fly in the amateur ointment.

By downplaying, or outright ignoring the monetary aspect of the sport, the amateur apologists managed to maintain a belief in, and credibility for, amateurism.

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From the blueprint created by Beauclerk in the 18th century, amateurism had the perfect shamateur in W. G. Grace. The 'Doctor's' success and Empire-wide fame, not only allowed a blind-eye to be turned toward his shamateurism, but it also allowed him to preach the ideology of the amateur ideal without co-ordinated criticism. In 1895, Grace felt able to state publicly that he feared the game would become "professionalised". He continued:

Then there is another thing that I'm afraid of. That is, that cricket will be made too much of a business, like football ... Should such a condition of affairs occur – well, betting and all other kindred evils will follow in its wake, and instead of the game being *followed up for love* it will simply be a matter of £ s. d. [x]

The irony will surely not be lost on the modern reader, but with such a universally admired advocate for its ideology, amateurism persisted and its values flourished in wider consciousnesses. Within Grace's quote we witness the ambiguities of the amateur ideal. Grace talks of playing for the *intrinsic* 'love' of cricket, and how 'professionalism' will promote 'betting and other kindred [*extrinsic*] evils'. The Amateur narrative advocated a rally against both professionalism and commercialism, in an attempt to maintain its own intrinsic 'purity'. As will be demonstrated these ideological tenets also directed the discourse of cricket regionally, with wide ranging repercussions.

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Regional representations of cricket

Richard Holt has described Herbert Sutcliffe of Yorkshire and Jack Hobbs of Surrey opening the batting for England thus:

"They were a pair whose virtues of northern *grit* and southern *grace* seemed to combine the perceived characteristic regional virtues of the English perfectly".[xi]

What were the factors that combined to form these regionalised cricket 'virtues', and how did they persist in the regional, national, and indeed international consciousness, as witnessed in the Bradman display?

The central source for both the different narratives and the extent that they permeated the local consciousness is the regional press. It was the work of Old Ebor, J. M. Kilburn, and Sir Neville Cardus, who presented regionalised portrayals of county cricketers to a predominantly northern public. Kilburn wrote:

Cricketers are products of their environment and grow as they do grow because of the impulse of their setting ... To contemplate Arthur Mitchell in the acquisition of an *unsmiling, purposeful* century is to appreciate the *hard, unyielding* Yorkshire hills.[xii]

The South also produced a dialogue, which attributed certain characteristics to players; such as the *Wisden* contributor Gordon Ross's description of the "bloody minded"[xiii] Surrey professional Jim Laker. Ross describes the Yorkshire (Bradford) born spinner thus:

In the man himself there lies the *casual* air of a southerner; no visible hatred of a batsman as *bred*, shall we say, in a Trueman.[xiv]

These journalists and authors created a uniformed point of distinction between northern and southern cricket by emphasising a player's professional or amateur status – an indicator of 'class' in itself - or the apparently 'class-based' playing characteristics of each in their writing – in spite of the many conflicting realities.[xv] Cardus wrote:

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"What's *bred* in the bone will come out at cricket – if only men will trust to their own impulses and not seek to find formula, a dependable way of *getting things done efficiently*. A true batsman should in most of his strokes tell the truth about himself. An innings by Lord Aberdare comes straight out of Debrett's. And an innings by Richard Tyldesley comes straight out of Westhoughton." [xvi]

Apart from an oblique critique of the professionals and their 'industrial' 'efficiency', Cardus compares Lord Aberdare's batting, which achieved the modest average of 28.96 for Middlesex, to Debrett's, the "modern authority on all matters of etiquette, social occasions, people of distinction and *fine style*". [xvii] Sadly Cardus chooses to juxtapose Aberdare's apparently "tasteful" 'style' with the batting of Richard Tyldesley. The Lancashire professional's batting (average 15.65) is likened to the industrial town of his birth. One may not initially see a problem in this analogy, except that Tyldesley (who was elected *Wisden* cricketer of the year in 1925), was a *bowler*. The latter description of Tyldesley's "comically crossbat" shots, which, none-the-less, helped him to achieve a century for Lancashire in 1922, does not cast a flattering light on either the man, his social status or the locality of his birth. As to the genuine nature of 'a true batsman', Cardus leaves us none-the-wiser.

In this revealing passage Cardus then states that, "the game has infinite variety, played by men free to be themselves". Even by glossing over the amateur/professional distinction, what Cardus implies between the lines is a collection of men apparently unable to escape their upbringing and therefore 'class'. This is odd as Cardus himself managed an incredulous display of social mobility, and no little talent as a cricket writer and music critic rose to become associated with the cricket establishment and, late in his life, a Knight of the Realm. Cardus, as has Ross, invokes both the amateur ideology and dubious social anthropology in his writing, suggesting that 'what is *bred* in the bone', be it southern amateur 'genius' or a 'casual' style, the northern industrialized professionalism

of 'getting things done efficiently' or the 'hatred' of batsmen are inescapable.

It should be noted at this point, that these differing narratives of the English County Championship aside, it may be correct – as a general observation – to state that the only difference between these two cricket regions was the Yorkshire specific policy of selecting Yorkshire born players alone. However, there were indeed very real physical and ideological differences between northern and southern cricket elsewhere.

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'Friendly' Club and 'competitive' League cricket

The sources of the distinct regionalised narratives under discussion lie not in the County Championship, but between the Club cricket played across the South, and what *Wisden* described as “the menace of the...Lancashire and Yorkshire leagues”.[xviii] Cups and leagues have been played across the North since the 1880s, but in the South, town or village sides played a 'friendly' version of the game, where 'playing for points' did not grab a major foothold until as late as 1968! In light of these distinct differences in regional cricket, is it any wonder that two differing narratives emerged?

Well again, if based solely on the cricket played, *perhaps*, yes. On closer inspection, the two 'codes' had plenty in common. Leagues in the Midlands and the North were operated as predominantly “amateur combinations”,[xix] with strict qualifying criteria, and very limited numbers of professionals (strictly one per side from 1900 in the *Lancashire League*[xx]). Despite accusations of 'commercialism' from certain sections in the South, northern leagues and cups were not strictly operated for 'profit', but frequently as charity fundraisers, and it appears that individual clubs' were run on a 'playing success first' basis. What this again suggests, is that these narratives are hinged upon the ideology of amateurism, and the values of those who controlled or influenced cricket in each region.[xxi]

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Conclusion

The promoters of amateurism in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries “attempt to aestheticize sport, and to regulate it in the interests of a self-professed moral universalism ... spun a web of historical illusions”.[xxii] Those advocating amateurism, were being at worst dishonest and at best naive in applying this ethos to the Test Match, ECC and even the elite club levels of cricket, for these were amongst the most skilled and competitive sporting arenas of the period. Leagues in the North were of course 'competitive', but not to the rabid extent that *Wisden* or even the northern media themselves led the readers to believe. Learie Constantine, the West Indian international who played league cricket in Lancashire, felt obliged to note in 1970 that: “It has taken players in the south of England a long time to realize that the northern matches were not a series of 'dog fights'”.[xxiii]

Both regional 'codes' were 'competitive' realms of cricket, but to uncritically read the narratives of each would be to deny this similarity. Each narrative has only served to express difference, widen cultural gaps, enhance stereotype over nuanced and more accurate identities, and perpetuate perceived class differences in tastes and behaviour.

By using 'competitiveness' as the major point of distinction, those who nurtured or accepted these opposing cricket narratives managed to *avoid* using class directly to highlight regional difference.

The regional allocation of a competitive 'spirit', or a perceived lack of one, was enough to *imply* wider class distinctions. Although clearly a one-dimensional conclusion of these complex narratives of a multi-faceted sport, and intricate regional relationships, this one word has become synonymous with regionalism, class, class-cultures and of course a specific 'code' of cricket within the North of England. *Neither* regional 'ideology' accurately reflected the cricket it allegedly represented, and yet the hegemonic nature of the amateur ethos remains in the minds of southern supporters today despite semi-professional leagues, being played in the South for over forty years.[xxiv] Furthermore, this term has influenced a great deal of historical and sociological work, where the term 'competitive' has, in the northern context, become a clichéd and dangerous assumption for sociologists and historians of regional cricket. In this concern much of the previous work on amateurism, cricket and other sports in the North and South of England may require some reassessment, and new studies may need to treat overt references to 'competitiveness' with a lighter touch.

[i] Principles of Biology, 1864.

[ii] Norbert Elias and Eric Dunning. The Quest for Excitement: Sport and Leisure in the Civilizing Process. Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1986.

[iii] A more disingenuous display perhaps was viewed at the National Museum of Australia in Canberra, where the 'Bodyline' display showed footage of Bill Woodfull being hit under the heart and Bert Oldfield having his skull fractured by balls from Harold Larwood. Sadly this footage was incorporated without any reference on the information cards or commentary to the fact that both balls were delivered to conventional non-bodyline (Leg Theory) fields. I watched half-amused/half-concerned as an Australian man in his mid-thirties almost spat with disgust on witnessing the footage; no doubt, not for the first time.

[iv] A History of Cricket by H. S. Altham and E. W. Swanton. London, George Allen and Unwin Ltd, 1947, p.399.

[v] Plato, in the simplest sense, saw 'games' (the term 'sport' is a Victorian phenomena) as providing pleasure, competition and beauty.

[vi] http://www.upol.cz/fileadmin/user_upload/Veda/AUPO/AUPO_Gymnica36-2.pdf#page=67 accessed 22/4/09 at 14:12.

[vii] http://www.upol.cz/fileadmin/user_upload/Veda/AUPO/AUPO_Gymnica36-2.pdf#page=69 accessed 22/4/09 at 14:12.

[viii] http://www.upol.cz/fileadmin/user_upload/Veda/AUPO/AUPO_Gymnica36-2.pdf#page=69 accessed 22/4/09 at 14:12.

[ix] Marqusee, M. Anyone But England: An Outsider Looks at English Cricket. London: Aurum Press Ltd, 1998.

[x] Woking News, 13/09/1895.

[xi] Holt, R. "Cricket and Englishness: The Batsman as Hero", 62.

[xii] Cited in Holt, 'Heroes of the North: Sport and the Shaping of Regional Identity', 146 (italics added).

[xiii] Birley, *A Social History*, 295.

[xiv] Ross, *A History of County Cricket: Surrey*, 161 (italics added). Fred Trueman was a Yorkshire fast bowler, notorious for his pace and hostility.

[xv] Ermott Robinson reportedly said to Cardus; "Ah reckon, Mr. Cardus th'as invented me." Cited in Callaghan, J. *Yorkshires Pride: 150 Years of County Cricket*, 9. Also see Dobbs's critique of Neville Cardus in Dobbs, *Edwardians at Play*, 119–36, Birley's chapter 'The Aesthetic Fallacy' in *The Willow Wand*, 163–174 and Bateman, 'Guilty M'Lud to Fiction: Neville Cardus and the Moment of Scrutiny', *Sport in History*, 29: 2, 2009.

[xvi] Cited in Brodribb, *The English Game*, 19.

[xvii] <http://www.debretts.co.uk/> Accessed 4/5/09 at 13:42.

[xviii] Birley, *A Social History of English Cricket*, 214.

[xix] Birley, *A Social History of English Cricket*, 152.

[xx] Bennett, A. C. L. *The Weekend Cricketer*, 217.

[xxi] Bowen, R. *Cricket: A History*, p. 116. Roland Bowen has argued that this style of competitive cricket was adopted in the north as a deliberate move away from the false morality he believed was being woven into the cricketing ethos of the south..

[xxii] Gruneau, 'Amateurism' as a Sociological Problem, 580.

[xxiii] Key, *Cricket in the Leagues*, 12.

[xxiv] Stone, 'Cricket's regional identities: the development of cricket and identity in Yorkshire, 501 — 516.

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