From Horses to Humans: Species Crossovers in the Origin of Modern Sports Training

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Associated with an industrializing, urbanizing society, modern sports training originated in eighteenth century Britain, during a period of rapid social change when the rise of modernity was underpinned by the rational positivism of the Enlightenment. Much has been written about the wide-scale significant social and economic changes associated with modernity, and about the changing ideas and philosophies that stripped religico-magic explanations of causation from theories of knowledge. Less attention has been directed towards how these changes were played out by people in their day-to-day lives, in which sport came to be an increasingly important dimension. In this paper, I examine the origins of modern sports training to address the issue of the embodiment of modernity—of how the socio-cultural changes and processes of that momentous period were reproduced through people’s bodies. My focus on embodiment comes from Mauss’ observation that social characteristics are significantly communicated through non-verbal techniques of the body. And Eichberg contends that the body should be understood as a cultural product; it is a basic misunderstanding to view it as “just a biological phenomenon”. Social processes are embodied; as such, they are captured, reflected, and reproduced in what is expected of the body and the ends to which it is put.

In early modernity, Filmer notes that courtly dancing was associated with civility:

It is through the body as a substantive phenomenon and as a symbolic resource that the ethos of new interactional orders may be observed as they emerge and before they are fully articulated verbally, and hence identified by their members as institutional structures.

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Periods of social change are times of flux when issues of order come to the fore. Imposing order in changing and changed times, maintaining rule and control over collectivities, is facilitated through the creation of new forms of body discipline. Social integration in an emergent social order requires, as Filmer\(^4\) points out, an acquisition of shared knowledge that serves to constitute forms of self-restraint appropriate to the re-formed society. He continues that, for early modernity, the learning of dance embodied ideas of civility that underpinned social order and educated “each new generation of body-subjects into a condition of ‘competent bodily action’”.\(^5\)

Clearly, sports training in modernity, as with courtly dance in early modernity, was not practiced by everyone. But, in both cases, they resulted in activities conducted in front of a spectating audience: They each constituted and represented forms of bodily control that resonated with what Crossley has referred to as a wider “modality of understanding”.\(^6\) They each represented forms of body technique, appropriate to their respective times, that were habitualized in the life of the individual and in the society. As Mauss suggested, these techniques of bodily control could “more easily be assembled in the individual . . . precisely because they are assembled by and for social authority”.\(^7\)

Modern sports can be traced to the prizefighters competing at Figg’s Amphitheatre, which opened in London in 1719.\(^8\) As the eighteenth century advanced, pugilism\(^9\) spread in metropolitan and provincial Britain, followed soon after by the popular appeal of pedestrianism.\(^10\) These sports drew large crowds and, more than that, sporting proficiency became associated with national character. The 1744 publication of an epic poem recounting a match between two renowned pugilists points to the interest in these contests.\(^11\) An interest, moreover, that involved more than a mere appreciation of the fight: Daniel Mendoza, perhaps the preeminent boxer of the late eighteenth century, noted in his memoirs that Britain was the country “in which pugilism has been wrought into a regular system, and elevated even to the rank of a science”.\(^12\) Boxing, defined as fighting with the clenched fist,\(^13\) was explicitly associated with the British national character. According to an early nineteenth century writer, boxing was unknown in continental nations where, it was claimed, cowardice was rife and disputes settled by the dangerous use of stilettos by Italians, sharp knives by the Dutch, or by a choice from among a variety of weapons by the French and Germans.\(^14\) Another anonymous early nineteenth century publication explicitly situates boxing with British nationalism and aggression:

The inhabitants of every country have their peculiarities, and they are often of great public utility. Boxing, thus considered is of great service; it inspires, even in infancy, a martial spirit, which improves in our boyish days, and is matured in manhood. . . . Many have laughed at the idea that boxing is of national service, but they have