

Empiricist Versus Sociological History: Some Comments on the ‘Civilizing Process’ [1]

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This paper makes a further contribution to the debate in this journal between Tony Collins and disciples of the theory of the ‘civilizing process’, but this time with reference solely to cricket, a sport ignored by Graham Curry, Eric Dunning and Kenneth Sheard in their reply to Collins.[2] Moreover, whereas Collins focuses his criticisms on the historical method and the associated problems of hindsight, progress and perspective, this paper will concentrate on the use of historical evidence.

Cricket is a sport in which one player [the bowler] hurls a hard missile [the ball] at speeds in excess of 120 kph at another player [the batter] less than 20 metres away armed only with a stick [the bat] to defend himself. It is a dangerous sport which in the early 1990s ranked fifth in terms of injuries sustained while playing.[3] Yet the phrase ‘it’s not cricket’ is still part of the English language as a call against unfair play.

This apparent paradox between violence and sporting conduct has become the subject of a debate among sociologists as part of a wider discussion of Norbert Elias’s civilisation hypothesis.[4] Briefly this argues that in Western Europe since the Middle Ages there has been an observable decline in people’s propensity from obtaining pleasure from participating in or witnessing acts of physical violence. The ‘threshold of repugnance’ was lowered partly because the state became more effective in curbing violence.[5] This was reflected in sport where, with the assistance of the sports

authorities (in effect the state for a particular sport), violence was reduced. Indeed, Eric Dunning and Keith Sheard, two followers of Elias, have emphasised the lower level of violence as a conspicuous difference between traditional folk games and modern sport.[6]

In 1992, in a contribution to a book critiquing the civilising hypothesis as applied to sport, Ruud Stovkis, a Dutch sociologist, argued that too much attention had been paid to overtly violent sports particularly folk football to the disregard of cricket, in his opinion a non-violent, non-contact sport.[7] A decade later, Dominic Malcolm, at that time from the Centre for Research into Sport and Society at Leicester University, a group strongly associated with supporting the hypothesis of Elias, attacked the views of the Dutchman.[8] A response and counter-response came in 2005 with an added contribution from a group at University College Chester.[9] Malcolm has also contributed a chapter on cricket in one of the books featured in the review article by Collins in this journal.[10]

The essence of Stovkis's argument is that figurational sociologists, and the Leicester School in particular, have not examined a representative sample of sports. In his opinion they have focussed too much on violent contact sports such as folk football, cudgelling and pugilism and paid insufficient attention to non-contact sports like golf, bowling, tennis, archery, horseracing, all other racing sports, and *cricket* which, by the implication of avoiding body contact, are less violent. It is thus important for Elias's hypothesis that it is demonstrated that cricket was more violent in the past than in modern times.

In his response Malcolm suggests that Stovkis, a ‘non cricket-playing foreigner’ has no real knowledge of cricket and does not appreciate that it is a sport in which ‘the basic equipment, the bat and the ball, may ... within the game’s rules, quite legitimately be used as weapons’.[11] He demonstrates ‘the *relatively* violent tenor’ of early cricket among both spectators and players.[12] He does this by the provision of a list of fatalities associated with cricket games, citing the first written use of the phrase ‘cricket ball’ in the context of causing injury, noting the reputation of one fast bowler, David Harris of Hambledon, who injured many of his opponents, and quoting from a poem of 1815 in which most of the losing side finished in hospital. Finally he examines how the desire to control violence led to changes in the early rules of cricket. In doing so he shows the previous potentiality for injury and dispute when, for example, batsmen used to be able to charge at fielders or hit the ball twice to prevent them taking a catch, run outs were made by physically placing the ball into a ‘popping hole’ before the batsman reached it, and the wicketkeeper could take the ball in front of the stumps to effect a dismissal. Furthermore there was no demarcation between the playing and spectator areas and pitches were neither rolled nor covered against inclement weather.

Stovkis accepts that ‘Malcolm is completely convincing in his description of the violence of early cricket and the role violence played in the codification of the rules of this game’.[13] Such a statement is worrying to the historian as unfortunately, in his attempt to undermine Stovkis, Malcolm makes two major errors.

First it is never clear what he means by the term 'violence'. He rejects the narrow definition of violence as 'assaultive behaviour that is designed to, and does, injure another person or persons physically'. Instead he opts to examine violence 'in the round' and not distinguish between player and spectator violence or between violence 'within' cricket and that simply associated 'with' the game. He writes of *violence and disorder*, of rule changes designed to reduce the risk of *injury*, of a physical environment that had *potential for injury* to players, that a fielder pursuing a ball into a *hostile* crowd would have to play a 'frenzied game of hide and seek before recovering it', and the general *unruly* character of cricket. In the end we are left none the wiser as to what he means by violence.[14]

Perhaps more serious for sports historians is his use and abuse of evidence. Although Malcolm lays great emphasis on his work being 'an empirically based case study of a single sport', his employment of evidence can be criticised for factual error, over reliance on secondary sources and the corollary of limited use of contemporary primary sources, misinterpretation of the evidence, and arguing by limited (in both senses) examples.[15]

Turf historians could point out his error in stating that cricket escaped the sort of restriction imposed by Parliament on horseracing in 1750. There was no legislation relating to horseracing in that year. Perhaps he is thinking of 1740 when restrictions were imposed on the minimum level of prize-money that could be offered by a race committee. But these restrictions were eased in 1745 and Parliament did not intervene again in racing, apart from taxation matters, till 1879 when it put down speculative, ill-regulated metropolitan racing.[16]

He makes no attempt to undertake historical research of his own and all his contemporary references are taken from the work of others without any checking of the data that they used. He quotes the *Leeds Mercury* of 1775 and the *Coventry Mercury* and *Birmingham Gazette* of 1788 but from books published respectively in 1989, 1978 and 1992. He does use *The Times* of 1887 but only to cite a correspondent writing of 'the early days' of cricket. Equally culpably he accepts the word of more modern writers such as Sir Pelham Walker who wrote in 1946 that 'he had heard' of an incident at Lord's in 1866 and cites the views of John Ford, a 'popular' cricket historian that gambling led to 'constant' disputes between players and the sweeping statement that 'when there was not some sort of commotion it seemed to be thought unusual'. To be fair he also consults the serious studies of reputable cricket historians such as Broadribb and Underdown, though not Bowen or Birley, both of which were available to him.[17] He also argues from some court case material that violence in cricket was common enough to be tolerated by the legal authorities.[18] He cites the contrast of a death sentence for sheep stealing and a year in gaol for bigamy with only a nine-month sentence for manslaughter during a cricket match. Again because he relied on a secondary source no details of the trials were available and thus there could be other interpretations.

Comparative levels of violence in pre-modern and modern cricket can only be effectively ascertained by statistical means. Malcolm makes no real attempt to do this, though he does provide some quantified material in his list of 29 cricket-associated fatalities 'from the earliest records' to 1897 which he argues shows 'the relative acceptability of such accidents'. [19] These all come from the same source, a

collection of *Curiosities of Cricket* by an 'Old Cricketer' and no attempt is made to check their validity or veracity, admittedly not an easy task when no specific dates are attached to the material. Here Malcolm's interpretation of evidence can be questioned. Assuming that his data cover a century and a half, it is not a high death rate, particularly when those fatalities not directly due to the nature of the game are removed from the total. Two deaths from heart disease, two from over exertion, one from snake bite, another by being crushed between railway trucks while recovering the ball, and one from falling over a cliff whilst following the ball are not in the same category as those from being hit by the ball, collisions with other players or falling on a stump. No attempt is made to calculate deaths in more modern cricket.

Malcolm initially argued that the imposition of rules aimed at lessening the level of violence and injury in the sport was deliberate policy, 'a conscious and explicit attempt' by eighteenth-century aristocrats, though he later backtracked on this and accepted that there is little evidence of such intentionality at this stage of development of the sport.[20] He also states that 'the 1755 set of rules ... marks the beginning of the MCC's influence over the game'. The actuality is slightly more complicated than he infers, especially considering his confusing remark, only six lines further on than the statement cited above, that 'Members of White's Club were central in forming the MCC ... in 1787'.[21]

Cricket had been played for a century under generally understood but unwritten rules before they were clarified in the articles of agreement for a match in 1727 between teams organised by the Second Duke of Richmond and Mr. Alan Broderick, heir to Viscount Middleton.[22] Such articles were common to most stake-money contests during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries and in essence were 'play or pay'

contracts between the contending parties which set out the particular terms of the intended contest such as times, places, stakes and the means of settling disputes.[23] The 16 points within the 1727 agreement were skeletal about the sport - dealing with umpires, choice of pitch and the method of scoring runs - but had more detail on wagers and the means of arbitration, reflecting that cricket was often a high-stake sport when played away from the village green. A published version of the rules in 1744 by the 'Cricket Club' which played at the Artillery Ground in London showed that the game had taken on many of its permanent features such as the length of the pitch, the size of the wickets, and the forms of dismissal.[24] These general rules were supplemented by specific articles of agreement which defined the terms of individual matches. The rules of 1755, referred to by Malcolm, had been revised by the Star and Garter Club, generally reckoned not to be a coherent organisation but simply a group of people who enjoyed cricket and met at the inn after which the club was named.[25] These rules were essentially the same as 1744. Later revisions in 1774 and 1784 by 'a committee of noblemen and gentlemen of Kent, Hampshire, Surrey, Sussex, Middlesex and London' continued to have a special section relating to bets.[26] It is clear that by 1774, and possibly even in the earlier version, that these rules of cricket (or laws as they were symbolically labelled) were intended to be more universally applied than at one specific venue.

The role of supreme authority for the laws of the cricket was taken by the MCC which emerged in 1787 out of White's Conduit Club, a meeting place for aristocratic players and supporters of the game.[27] It issued its first set of cricket rules in 1788 and, although this was primarily for use in its own matches, others opted to adopt the rules and began to refer disagreement and enquiries to the London-based organisation. Such

was the MCC's pre-eminence that in July 1791 several of its members who were watching a rural match between Hampshire and 'England' were called on to resolve a disagreement over a catch: power had clearly been accepted on all sides.[28] In 1800 notes on the MCC rules were published in the north of England which suggests that they were being applied in northern matches. By 1835 when a new code was instituted the MCC had become recognised as the sole authority for drawing up cricket's laws and for all subsequent alterations.[29]

Historians could have contributed significantly to the debate, not only by offering better evidence but also by broadening the discussion to include the lessening of the link between gambling and cricket and the development of the concept of masculinity in the cricket-playing English public schools. Malcolm does appreciate that many early matches were played for large stakes but he does not explain why the link was severed. This came through the influence of the 'fair play' lobby who believed that gambling had no place in sport. To them gamblers, like professionals, had an instrumental attitude in which any means to ensure victory in a sport or bet was justified. This ran contrary to the fair play view that, while winning was the point of competitive sport, the manner in which it was sought was even more important. The amateur ethos that began to dominate British sport thus cleansed a large part of British sport, including cricket, of its Georgian gambling associations.[30] If betting on cricket disappeared then so did one of the motivations for violent play, player dispute and spectator disorder.

In contrast cricket may have retained some of its hardness, at least in the public schools where the notion of manliness took root. This involved a combination of courage, duty and selflessness. The spirit of manliness on the cricket field which then spilled over into martial imperialism was epitomised in *Vitai Lampada*, Sir Henry Newbolt's often-quoted poem in which the schoolboy who courageously played on 'a bumping pitch and a blinding light' later rallied the regiment with his cry of 'play up and play the game'.^[31]

It should also be noted that all Malcolm's material relates to a period when bowling was still underarm. Whatever the dangers of David Harris on the rural pastures of Hambledon, they surely must pale in comparison with modern overarm bowling which bounces the ball on the pitch from a greater height. Even Dunning accepts that modern cricket had one tactic very different from that of the eighteenth-century variety in that the ball could be 'deliberately aimed directly at the heads of opposing players, ostensibly in the hope of intimidating them and increasing the chances that they will play a false stroke'.^[32] Moreover could not the expansion in the types and character of protective equipment in modern cricket be used as evidence that the game is now potentially more dangerous?

Malcolm now accepts that there were short-term 'de-civilizing spurts' in cricket including the development of roundarm (legalised in 1835) and overarm (legalised in 1864) bowling which proved more dangerous for batsmen than the previously dominant underarm variety.^[33] He argues, however, that this was not 'affective' violence but instrumental that served to achieve goals, not emotional spontaneous violence but planned intimidation designed to lead to the batter's dismissal. He claims

that this came about through ‘functional democratization’ as the lower-class professional players (who tended to be the bowlers) gained greater influence in the game relative to the higher-class amateurs whose representatives were the rule-setters in the game.[34]

As with ‘violence’ it is not clear what Malcolm means by ‘influence’ though he does refer to the ‘rising power of the professionals’.[35] Certainly they had economic power for two to three decades from the 1840s when touring teams of professional players who organised matches throughout England proved huge gate-money draws. Until the coming of the Professional Golfers Association in 1901 this was the only example of professional sportsmen actively promoting the industry in which they were employed. Their bowlers may well have got away with illegal bowling partly because it was attractive to spectators but, to enter Malcolm’s realm of historical speculation, perhaps because they had some choice in the umpires: they certainly laid down financial and other conditions.[36]

But was it simply an amateur/professional divide? Clearly not when G.T. Knight, the man pushing for a rule change to allow roundarm bowling, was himself both a member of the MCC and a roundarm bowler. Even Malcolm does not dismiss him as an ‘eccentric amateur’ the label he accepts for John Willes, a Kentish farmer, who was an earlier exponent of that type of bowling. Moreover, although Malcolm cites an 1863 match in which the umpire called professional Edgar Willsher six consecutive times for an illegal action as the trigger for rule change, another publicised incident prior to the 1865 law change came in the *all-amateur* Varsity match the season before when an Oxford bowler, T. Collins, was no-balled five times for having his arm above

shoulder height.[37] Moreover, as Malcolm admits, in a trio of experimental matches between Sussex and All England in 1827 in which roundarm bowling was permitted it was the professional *batters* who objected to the hostile deliveries of their opponents. Was the dichotomy really batters versus bowlers both on and off the field of play?

None of this is to say that Malcolm is in error, merely that more historical research is required if his case is to be built on firmer foundations than speculation based on isolated incidents. He says that roundarm bowling was practised despite its formal illegality (en route he suggests that this shows that the MCC had relatively limited authority) but we do not know from Malcolm actually how common overarm bowling was. Without detailed chronology it cannot be determined whether it was amateur or professionals who instigated the newer, more dangerous, types of bowling and thus who influenced whom as the innovation spread. Did the professionals lobby Knight to make their case or did he use their practice to bolster his own? More research is needed on the debate at the time of rule change; none of what Malcolm produces clarifies the situation.

So far this comment has focused on cricket participants but improvement in spectator behaviour is also part of the civilising process argument. However here again a failure to undertake a detailed empirical search weakens the argument. Malcolm's evidence of crowd violence in his International Review of Sports Sociology articles is based on isolated examples of the Riot Act being read at a match in Essex in 1726, a pitch invasion at a women's game in 1747 in Sussex, and reported bloodshed at Leicester in 1788. We do not know if these are typical or extreme; certainly they are insufficient to support his argument of widespread crowd disorder. Although not specifically tied in

to this debate, in an earlier publication Malcolm (1999) has examined crowd disorder at cricket matches and concluded the those of the eighteenth century were 'characterised by regular and serious disorder' whereas in the nineteenth century 'reports of disorder are both fewer and of a less serious nature'.[38] This sweeping generalisation is based on 'limited data' of 17 reported incidents between 1693 and 1802 and 9 from 1866 to 1896. The material does support the idea of crowd disorder becoming less serious but, contrary to Malcolm's assertion, actually suggests that the late nineteenth century was quantitatively the time of greatest spectator misbehaviour.

Malcolm cites no instances of crowd disorder for the six decades after 1802 which, as he admits, seems peculiar in the light of recorded actions to counteract such behaviour. Hence, again as he concedes, there may be a possible problem with his source material such that 'neither the scale nor the trends of disorder are accurately portrayed in historical sources'.[39] Here Malcolm confuses primary historical source material such as contemporary newspapers with data obtained from accounts written by historians. He offers explanations for why the press might not have reported incidents of disorder but implicitly suggests that it might have been under-reported rather than totally unrecorded as he suggests that non-academic, establishment-oriented cricket historians who wanted to promote a particular image of the game. There is a simple way to determine what actually happened and that is to plough through the contemporary press. This is time-consuming but, as Adrian Harvey discovered when he did this for *Bell's Life*, can be a rewarding process for the historian.[40] In contrast to Harvey's painstaking search Malcolm's study of crowd disorder cites only one newspaper and that is a comment from the *Times* of 1929 about public school cricket in the early nineteenth century.[41] Even a diligent

reading of historians' works of cricket – which is presumably from where Malcolm derived his lists of incidents though no references – is not the same as a thorough search of primary source material.

The acceptance of Malcolm's view of cricket history has left sociologists with a 'chicken or the egg' debate on sport and the civilising process. Malcolm himself argues that pacification of society led to a desire to use rules to lessen violence in sport whereas Stovkis maintains that it was a desire to play others that led to rule standardisation which en passant considered the violence problem. Nevertheless it has been suggested that possibly the civilising of society created a situation inimical to rule change and the creation of mechanisms for their implementation.[42]

What the debate has done is open up a research area for sports historians to investigate whether the non-contact sports of today were as much non-contact in the past.[43] Malcolm cannot be allowed to get away with his quantum leap from claiming that eighteenth century cricket was a violent sport to maintaining that 'it certainly seems *reasonable* to suppose that the playing of other non-contact sports in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries would have been characterised by the *same* relatively violent tenor which characterised cricket'.[44] Sociologists should be encouraged to use empirical historical data to test their hypotheses. As one set of commentators on the Stovkis-Malcolm debate have said, 'there is a need for substantial empirical data to test otherwise hypothetical theoretical explanations'.[45] But the information utilised must have been interrogated in a rigorous manner. Sociologists have criticised historians for a lack of a theoretical base to their work. This is the reverse: sociologists with false notions of how to do history.

Notes and references

- [1] The research for this paper was assisted by a grant from the British Academy.
- [2] Tony Collins, 'History, theory and the 'civilizing process'', *Sport in History* (2005), pp. 289-306; Graham Curry, Eric Dunning & Kenneth Sheard, 'Sociological versus empiricist history: some comments on Tony Collins's "History, theory and the 'civilizing process"', *Sport in History* (2006), pp. 110-123.
- [3] Sports Council: *Injuries in sport and exercise* (London, 1991).
- [4] Norbert Elias, *The civilizing process, sociogenetic and psychogenetic investigations* (Oxford, 2000).
- [5] Figural sociologists will argue rightly that this is an oversimplification of the complex theoretical constructs of Elias, but it serves to communicate the major thrust of the 'civilization process'.
- [6] Eric Dunning & Kenneth Sheard, *Barbarians, gentlemen and players* (Oxford, 1979), pp. 33-34.
- [7] Ruud Stovkis, 'Sports and civilization: is violence the central problem?', in Eric Dunning & Christopher Rojek (eds), *Sport and leisure in the civilizing process: critique and counter-critique* (Basingstoke, 1992), pp. 121-136.
- [8] Dominic Malcolm, 'Cricket and civilizing processes: a response to Stovkis', *International Review for the Sociology of Sport* (2002), pp. 37-58.
- [9] Ruud Stovkis, 'The civilizing process applied to sports: a response to Dominic Malcolm: cricket and civilizing processes', *International Review for the Sociology of Sport* (2005), pp. 111-114; Dominic Malcolm, 'The emergence, codification and diffusion of sport: theoretical and conceptual issues', *International Review for the*

Sociology of Sport (2005), pp. 115-118; Ken Green, et. al: 'Violence, competition and the emergence and development of modern sports: reflection on the Stovkis-Malcolm debate', *International Review for the Sociology of Sport* (2005), pp. 119-123.

[10] Dominic Malcolm, 'Cricket: civilizing and de-civilizing processes in the imperial game' in Eric Dunning, Dominic Malcolm & Ivan Waddington, *Sport Histories: Figurational Studies of the Development of Modern Sports* (Abingdon, 2004), pp. 71-87.

[11] Malcolm, 'Response', p.38. To deride one's opponent simply by labelling them as unqualified to write on a topic surely is not legitimate academic criticism. Malcolm's disparagement could be taken further and lead to arguments that only Scots can write about Scottish football, only women really understand female athletes, and perhaps, to reduce the viewpoint to absurdity, that only dead people should do history!

[12] Malcolm, 'Response', p.39.

[13] Stovkis, 'Response', p.112.

[14] Malcolm, 'Response', pp. 40-50.

[15] Malcolm, 'Response', p.37.

[16] Iris Middleton, *The developing pattern of horseracing in Yorkshire 1700-1749: an analysis of the people and the places* PhD De Montfort 2000, pp. 27-39; Wray Vamplew, 'Reduced horse power: the Jockey Club and the regulation of British horseracing', *Entertainment Law* (2003), p.100.

[17] Derek Birley, *A social history of English cricket* (London, 1999); Rowland Bowen, *Cricket: a history* (London, 1970); Gerald Broadribb, *Next man in: a survey of cricket laws and customs* (London, 1985); David Underdown, *Start of play: cricket and culture in eighteenth-century England* (London, 2000).

- [18] Malcolm, 'Response' p. 44.
- [19] Malcolm, 'Response', p. 41.
- [20] Malcolm, 'Response', p. 44 and Malcolm, 'Emergence', p.116.
- [21] Malcolm, 'Response', p. 45.
- [22] Consulting Birley, *English cricket*, pp.18-19 would have revealed the identity of Brodrick whom Malcolm ('Response', p. 44) speculated was 'presumably a member of the gentry, that is, an untitled landowner'.
- [23] Dennis Brailsford, *A taste for diversions* (Cambridge, 1999), p. 22.
- [24] Birley, *English cricket*, p.27.
- [25] Bowen, *Cricket*, pp. 66-67.
- [26] Birley, *English cricket*, p.31.
- [27] Underdown, *Start of play*, p. xviii.
- [28] Underdown: *Start of play*, p. 161.
- [29] Bowen, *Cricket*, pp. 57-58; 94-97; Birley, *English Cricket*, 365; Underdown, *Start of play*, p. xviii, 161; Brodribb, *Next man in*, p. xi.
- [30] Lincoln Allison, *Amateurism* (London, 2001), pp. 3-49.
- [31] For more detailed reading see Vassil Girginov, 'Sport, society and militarism – in pursuit of the democratic soldier: J.A. Mangan's exploration of militarism', *International Journal of the History of Sport* (2003), pp. 90-117.
- [32] Eric Dunning, 'Figurational sociology and the sociology of sport: some concluding remarks' in Dunning & Rojek: *Sport and Leisure*, p. 271.
- [33] Malcolm, 'Cricket', p. 72.
- [34] For a discussion of the MCC power structure see James Bradley, 'The MCC, society and empire: a portrait of cricket's ruling body, 1860-1914', *International Journal of the History of Sport* (1990), 1-22.

- [35] Malcolm, 'Cricket', p. 75.
- [36] Ric Sissons, *The players* (Sydney, 1988), pp. 3-20; G. Derek West, *The elevens of England* (London, 1988), passim.
- [37] Malcolm, 'Cricket', pp. 74-77; Broadribb, *Next man in*, p. 130.
- [38] Dominic Malcolm, 'Cricket spectator disorder: myths and historical evidence', *Sports Historian* (1999), pp. 21, 27.
- [39] Malcolm, 'Spectator disorder', p. 26.
- [40] Adrian Harvey, *The beginnings of a commercial sporting culture in Britain 1793-1850* (Aldershot, 2004).
- [41] Malcolm, 'Spectator disorder', p. 29.
- [42] Green, 'Violence', pp. 119-123.
- [43] A start has been made with the recent publication of Tony Collins, John Martin & Wray Vamplew (eds), *Encyclopedia of traditional British rural sports* (Abingdon, 2005).
- [44] Malcolm, 'Response', p. 53.
- [45] Green, 'Violence', p. 121.