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American Rodeo on the Borderline between Sport and Bullfighting, or Diffusion as a System of Transformations



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I ABSTRACT

Based on the example of the genesis and diffusion of the rodeo in the United States, this article shows the complexity of the processes of influence and reinterpretation within a modern world in which the European imperialist powers that first initiated sport performances have simultaneously opposed and penetrated each other. The author is thus able to radically criticize the evolutionist – diffusionist theory of sport that Norbert Elias put forward as an indisputable paradigm, in which England was presented as “the center of civilization.”

Keywords: Rodeo. Show. Torero. Clown. Sport

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The historical sociology of sport is probably one of the fields in which the diffusionist and evolutionist schema of progress, global acculturation, and globalization of Western standards has been most strongly established. This inevitable teleology is at the heart of Norbert Elias’ “civilizing” process: it sees the institution of sport, which appeared and developed in England in the second half of the eighteenth century, as an instrument to control the violence and emotions of primitive *homo ludens*, which find their typical expression in folk games. According to this author, the codification of competition is supposed to “civilize” the ethics with which sports are practiced. As Norbert Elias wrote:

What does deserve some discussion in this context is the question of why the civilizing of game-contests and the restraint on violence to others through social rules which require a good deal of individual self-control, developed first in England. The relatively quick reception of English models of sport by other countries seems to indicate that a need for more firmly regulated, less violent, yet pleasurable, competitive physical exertions

requiring a good deal of sublimatory skill, existed in other countries too. This need was evidently met by the relatively quick and easy adoption by other societies of some, though by no means all, of the various types of English sport and, in some cases, their further development there in accordance with some social conditions (Elias and Dunning 1986, 24)

However, recent research has put this paradigm into perspective, the functionalist justification of which could have been stated by Malinowski himself. It tends to show the decisive importance of correlations between the formal properties of various sports with Anglo-Saxon roots and the structural characteristics of societies around the world that adopt or reject them, or transform some of their folk games according to the sports system model (Appadurai 1995; Darbon 2008). These new perspectives are, fortunately, reigniting the debate through anthropological approaches that take into account regional cultural specificities that have influenced the adoption of the sport model. They do not, however, entirely cast doubt on the classical theory

that upholds the dogma of the preeminence of the British model. Now, this supposedly insurmountable preconception seems to be open to question: does it mean that sport is English by definition – that is, by essence – or merely by historic precedence?

■ The Genesis and Diffusion of Sport in Modern Performance

I would like to show here that although England's important role in the formalization of the sports system cannot be denied, Elias' focus on this source, which he views as the "original hearth," in the very sense understood by the British hyperdiffusionists of the late nineteenth century, does not acknowledge the fact that the sports system was developing in contact with concurrent cultural worlds. In this case, while sport was forming in England in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, another related form of competitive athletic game, bullfighting, was being codified in Spain. Bullfighting also spread in an imperialistic manner within the Iberian sphere of influence, and it unfolded in a vast system of transformations that are manifested in the diverse Pan-American forms of the *corrida* and *rodeo* (Maudet 2010).

Far from being, as its detractors claimed, an archaic remnant belonging to a backward country, bullfighting appears as a pure product of modernity (Saumade 1994 and 1998). Its development is based on the rearing of breeds of fighting bulls, born through genetic selection, which started in the late seventeenth century in Spain, in other words, from advances in scientific agronomy. At the same time in England, the productivity of bovine herds was being developed with similar methods. Only the objective varied: in England it was about obtaining maximum quantities of milk and meat, while in Spain it was about promoting an aggressive behavior – a *bravura* – that was standardized by the norms of performance. Also at the same time in England (mid-eighteenth century), Philip Astley invented the modern circus, another genre of mass entertainment in which the actors' physical agility enforced the brio of the pedigree horses being show-cased.

Reconsidered in the contemporary context of these recreational displays, sport is not reduced to an equitable competition and a financial result. It is also – and perhaps first and foremost – a show, in

other words a production that aims to create an aesthetic and dramatic effect. In this sense, the sports model is inscribed in a structure of modernity that goes far beyond the original Anglo-Saxon source. It is about a commercialized performance that shows all the worth of leisure, of *entertainment*, of which the form par excellence, born in the United States, is the result of a confluence of global influences – British, of course, but also African, Jewish, German, Italian, French, Hispanic, and so on. Therefore, rather than a pure product of English genius, I would prefer to see the sports system as the transformation of this performance model that is a result of Western modernity, whose global spread, thanks to the media, constitutes the most complete diffusion model that humanity has ever known. Appearing in England, in the very era when in western Europe and the eastern United States commercialized theatrical and musical performances were developing, as well as international fairs, exhibitions of curiosities and phenomena that came from folklore – savage men, forces of nature, *corridas* in Spanish *ferias* – sport highlighted the hegemony of the bourgeois class through widespread performances that exalted the power of *homo faber* in his battle to transcend the natural condition.¹

Far from resulting from a *sui generis* process of invention, sport is the product of an imperialist society that maintained perpetual contact with otherness in its various manifestations – the indigenous otherness of the colonies and the otherness of competing imperialist powers: France, the Netherlands, Portugal, and especially Spain, which was the main rival among the overseas countries. In England's case, this otherness, whose exoticism was at the source of the most fascinating folklore, along with the Crystal Palace exhibitions and the novels of Rudyard Kipling, found expression through literature, performance, and nineteenth-century bourgeois fashions. This was a British civilization that, far from remaining stuck in its own original landscape and traditions, shaped itself through contact. Thus, its major creative processes were necessarily influenced by the cosmopolitanism that the imperialist movements had engendered. Through its historical origin, sport was therefore influenced at the outset by the effects of intercultural contact and external influences, the consideration of which seems indispensable in order to give it its full anthropological dimension and to understand the processes of diffusion that characterize it by breaking irrevocably with an evolutionist perspective.

■ Rodeo, or the Synthesis of Sport, Bullfighting, and Folklore in the American West

Spreading from Mexico to all of western North America (Le Compte 1985; Saumade 2008), the rodeo is the epitome of an athletic game born of a folklore that has transformed into a competitive, commercialized, and professional performance. However, as it spread throughout the entire American continent, its identity underwent numerous reconfigurations and even derisive interpretations that regularly returned it to its original state of folklore. This dialectic between “sportization” and “folklorization” has therefore not been overthrown by modernity as Elias’ *doxa* might have us believe; it even seems to be integral to the sports system in which it is the main dynamic factor of reproduction. Rodeo – like bullfighting in general – offers a striking example because the mediation between the animal and pastoral society that it evokes through Western mythology keeps the athletic performance in constant contact with a folklore. However, although this specificity distinguishes rodeo from more “classical” sports (where folklore exists more in the bleachers, through supporters), this difference also leaves an opportunity for the typical historical and sociological perspectives on the sports system to be enriched by an anthropological dimension.

The rodeo show was shaped in the early twentieth century by a combination of Hispano-Mexican techniques of extensive breeding and arena games (which involved roping, controlling, and riding “wild” bulls and horses) on the one hand, and the Buffalo Bill circus show, the renowned Wild West Show, on the other (Fredriksson 1993; Kasson 2000; Stoeltje 1989). Along with the Barnum circus, the Wild West Show was probably the main U.S. mass entertainment that was exported to Europe (the first European tour of the Wild West Show took place in 1887 [Kasson 2000, 65 sq.]), foreshadowing the worldwide triumph of a Hollywood cinema in which the figure of the cowboy would occupy the role of the conqueror and pioneer of civilization. In this imperialist complex, the rodeo, despite its Hispano-Mexican origins, glorified the virtue of the U.S. patriot who could confront and dominate the most frightening elements of the virgin nature of the frontier expanses, of which the Plains Indians and the Mexican *vaqueros* were the archetypes in the nineteenth century. As such, in the 1940s, U.S.

authorities promoted rodeo to the rank of educational sport in colleges and universities, like baseball and football. It was viewed as an initiation to heroism, and its commercialization served as support for the war effort (Fredriksson 1993, 65 sq.). Its Hispanic origin was then superficially toned down, and it appeared, along with the Western genre of cinema, as the representation of Anglo-American folklore par excellence.

■ The Expression of American Nationalism and Return of the Border Marginalities

However, the first paradox with regard to this shared land is that since it became a sports event, rodeo has been popular among the victims of Anglo-American colonization – the Native Americans from the reservations of the western states, the Great Plains, the prairies, the deserts, the foothills of the Sierra Nevada, and the Rocky Mountains – as well as among African Americans, the major forgotten group of Western mythology. The traditions of these two major marginalized groups in North American societies contributed to the birth of the cowboy culture (Iverson 1994; Dyck 1996; Mellis 2003; Durham 1955; Katz 1973). Nowadays, many champions of Native American and African American origin take part in community competitions that include some elements of identity differentiation in terms of both the protocol and the techniques that are used. For example, in the rodeos of the large Navajo or Sioux-Ogala reservations, the “suicide race” – a horse race in the wild – is reminiscent of the Indians’ attachment to their traditional equestrian culture. As for the “Black Cowboys,” the events that are unique to them give women a larger share of the initiatives than in classical rodeos, while the shows’ musical components substitute soul rhythms for white country. The communitarian structure of these rodeos does not necessarily prevent Native American and African American cowboys from also competing with their white counterparts in major national rodeos.

Moreover, Mexican practitioners, who are still more numerous due to increased immigration over recent decades, divide their activities between rodeo and the Mexican styles known as *charreada* and *jaripeo*. *Jaripeo* is related to the bull riding that closes the classical rodeo, but it is also quite different. In the North American technique, the bull rider, who is wearing

rowel spurs, must stay on the bull for eight seconds while holding with one hand onto a strap that has previously been tied around the raging animal's flank. In contrast, in *jaripeo*, the man, who is wearing hooked spurs that he digs into the animal's flanks, must hold on for as long as possible, usually letting go with his hands in an act of bravado that is made easier by the presence of the spurs (Saumade 2008). Naturally, *jaripeo* professionals gain glory in this process, which enables Mexican riders to "do better" than their U.S. counterparts (even if the Mexican riders themselves, who are fully aware of the difficulty of bull riding, refrain from bragging about their practice). In addition, according to experts, the pain that the bull feels in enduring the hooked spurs reveals and classifies the bull's "bravery," in the manner of spearing in bullfights. The Mexican technique is in this instance closer to its Hispanic roots: it involves the desire to subdue and reduce nature's force, while bull riding permits this full force in order to better glorify the daring of the man who has pitted himself against it.

The infiltration onto U.S. soil of the Mexican *jaripeo*, which is more conspicuously violent for the animals than American bull riding, poses legal problems in that the legislation in the states concerned prohibits the animals from being harmed. Thus, as things currently stand, the popular practice of *jaripeo* is restricted to small towns or outlying neighborhoods of the Los Angeles metro area that are predominantly Mexican. So, in this almost secret way, which plainly escapes the attention of animal-protection organizations, the practice is tacitly tolerated by the authorities as long as the contestants are using spurs that are less sharp than in Mexico and thus do not damage the animals. On the other hand, *charreada*, an arena sport and official national Mexican sport that is practiced by riders from the nation's wealthy classes, including the elite (Saumade 2008), has found a true mission territory in the west of the United States. When they perform on U.S. soil, where they are based, *charros* teams are required to avoid certain actions that are seen as traumatizing for the animals. The sequences that are prohibited according to legal regulations, which vary from state to state, are the *coleo* (chasing on horseback and throwing a bull-calf on its side) and the end of the *mangana*, which involves overturning a filly that has been let out to gallop (horse tripping), and in which the *charro*, who is either standing or riding his horse, has roped the filly's forelegs. The elimination of these parts of the performance, which are considered vital

in Mexico because they symbolically demonstrate the competitors' virility, seem humiliating in the eyes of the *charros* emigrants. They are also accompanied by conflicts with animal-protection groups who are not satisfied with the partial prohibitions that affect the *charreada*; here, expressions of incompatibility relating to identity, even a certain racism, show up on the surface and stir up old frontier disputes (Nájera Ramírez 1996; Ramírez Barreto 2009, 137-153; Saumade 2010).

To these ideological tensions regarding the arena sport in the United States must be added the case of the *touradas* (Portuguese bullfighting), which are devoid of bloodshed (bloodless bullfighting) and organized in California by people of Azorean ancestry who live in the San Joaquin Valley and in some areas east of the Los Angeles metro area. Despite pressure from animal-protection activists, since 1957 Californian law has recognized the right of this community to organize its bullfights in the context of religious holidays festivals; the funding of the performance is supported by breeders of Spanish fighting bulls (a breed used for the *touradas* in Portugal). These breeders are based in the foothills and on the badlands of the Coastal Range, land that is not suitable for agriculture. We will see how this U.S. reproduction of the European bullfighting tradition contributes to the relatively new dynamics of the rodeo show.

■ From Bullfighting to the Circus and from the Circus to Bullfighting: The Clown as a Mediator of Contact and the Feedback Effects of Diffusion

Although the contemporary rodeo show is a transformation of bullfighting, its parallel in origin, Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show, shows three elements that are connected to the Anglo-Saxon circus culture. Firstly, the parade is a type of carnivalesque procession through the streets where different groups, churches, and corporations from the city where the rodeo is taking place put themselves on display.² Secondly, there are parades, on the track and set to music, with spirited cowgirls led by the previous year's Rodeo Queen and a regional or national queen (such as Miss Rodeo California or Miss Rodeo America). This equestrian ballet, in which the girls carry the U.S. flag and advertising banners decorated with the logos of the show's sponsors, culminates with a professional singer singing

the American national anthem. Finally, the third element that originates from the circus tradition is the clown, who, during interludes in the show, alternates between animal training games, comedic routines aimed at children, and salacious or scatological jokes, irreverences that are sometimes daring regarding the world of the western and the established order that the rodeo celebrates with great pomp. Until the 1990s, this clown was also responsible for helping each bull rider by staying in front of the animal, and as soon as the animal threw the man, rushing to divert its attention from the body that had been thrown to the ground. Nowadays, the clown is exclusively an entertainer while two bullfighters (“toreros”), experts who are usually former bull riders, take on the purely bullfighting role. However, these two men’s costumes, which include colorful rags, and their face make-up, are reminiscent of their recent connections with clowning. At the same

time, at the moment of bull riding, the clown engages in playacting on the track while staying on the inside of or next to a barrel, maintaining a defiant attitude toward the raging animal that is reminiscent of his recent bullfighting origins.

Far from being anecdotal, the oddly duplicated role of the clown occupies a fundamental place: it offers the key to the show and its ritual dimension. Although the folklorist and ethnomusicologist Beverly Stoeltje (1985) has already effectively demonstrated this importance, the complex status of the clown-bullfighter should be emphasized here, which is at the crossroads between sport, bullfighting, and the circus, in other words, at the point where the Anglo-Saxon and Hispanic cultures meet and influence each other on American soil under the auspices of indigenous civilization. The rodeo clown obviously comes from circus, carnivalesque folklore and Shakespearean jesters.



A bull rider is thrown off as two bullfighters hurry to help him (Springville, CA). Photo by the author. A typical bullfighter technique (Springville, CA). Photo by the author.



Mexican *jaripeo*, in which the rider, kept in place by hooked spurs, releases his hands, while the clown distracts the bull with a cape (Valle de San Fernando, CA). Photo by the author.

These last aspects are derived from European traditions, to which Spain is no stranger. In addition, the ritual antic clowning traditions of the North American and Mexican Indians are well known, and they very likely continued in the rodeo, for even before this character was consistently brought into the U.S. arenas in the 1930s, Indians could be seen playing similar roles.³

During the same period, bull riding, which was part of the Mexican *charros* tours in the Wild West Show in the late nineteenth century (Le Compte 1985, 36) but did not appear in the first major rodeo competitions of the 1920s, was added to the show. The novelty had as a corollary the use of heavy and dangerous long-horn bulls and, little by little, of bulls resulting from the crossing of various breeds, including brahma bulls (Stoeltje 1989, 253). The livestock specialization led to the creation of breeds that were selected for the arena, as in Andalusia two centuries earlier for corridas. This bullfighting development had significant consequences

because today bull riding is the main attraction in the spectators' eyes and, along with the Professional Bull Rider championship, which is broadcast worldwide via satellite television, is the most prestigious rodeo event. Consequently, the clown's arrival in the arena, as paradoxical as it may seem, was part of the "sportification" and, if one wishes to create an even more barbaric neologism, the "bullfightification" of the rodeo. In effect, the progression toward a specialization intensified by tasks, which is one of the cornerstones of the sports system, here caused a surprising return to the bullfighting origins, as the designation of the rodeo clown as a bullfighter demonstrates.⁴

The Hispanic influence was even more obvious here as, in the first periods when they presided, the clown-bullfighters, following the example of the serious toreros, used a cape to distract the bulls (Stoeltje 1989). This is still done in Mexico in *jaripeos*, where clowns, who are simply called *payasos* and not "toreros,"

have appeared under U.S. influence. In addition, even before the clown was present in the rodeo, from the beginning of the twentieth century in Spain, in the south of France, and in Mexico, there already existed a parodic variant of bullfighting, the comedic bull shows targeted at children, which pitted torero clowns against bull calves. Originally, the most popular role in this genre of shows was that of the “*Charlot torero*,” a bullfighting version of Charlie Chaplin’s screen character that eventually gave the show its generic name: the *charlotada* in Spain. The success of this application of an archetype of leading Hollywood cinema to the sports arena, in which could be seen the mirror image of the cowboy – the harmless vagabond who is humiliated by society and who is an unknowing seducer through the compassion that he inspires in the sweet Christian maiden, and so on – paved the way for the rodeo clown. At the same time, the *charlotada* was formalizing in the arena the dialectical structure of bullfighting, which inevitably oscillates between tragedy and farce, as is indicated by the innumerable parodic forms, in addition to the serious arena shows, that can be seen in the popular bull festivals from the Iberian Peninsula to Latin America.

As Stoeltje states (1989, 164), the rodeo clown is indeed the comic counterpart of the cowboy, a sort of trickster who comes to disrupt the established order. At the most dramatic moment of the performance, when he comes to the aid of the bull rider, he stresses the equestrian-bullfighting absurdity that jeopardizes the sacred values of the nation of the western. Bull riding, which dangerously transforms the proud cowboy into a contorted puppet that is at the mercy of the animal’s “savage” power, inverses the reassuring equestrian arrangement of the patriotic opening stampedes (Stoeltje 1989). It is the most formidable event, requiring the participants to pray before facing it, in the manner of the matadors. Here, good technical mastery is necessary, but according to the bull riders themselves, ill luck can be fatal for the greatest champions, who are always at the mercy of a bad fall or a blow from a horn or a hoof. This is why all the riders who were interviewed recognize their indebtedness to the bullfighter: in the end, it is his intervention that allows the rider to escape the animal’s rage in time.

The cowboy is therefore saved by the “torero clown,” and this is how the vitalist elation that opened the show to the sounds of the patriotic anthem is threatened by the danger of death and by characters who evoke a tragicomic return of the Hispano-Mexican culture of



Mexican jaripeo, in which the rider, kept in place by hooked spurs, releases his hands, while the clown distracts the bull with a cape (Valle de San Fernando, CA).

the corrida, which had been supplanted by the conquest of the West and by Anglo-Saxon hegemony on the frontier. In addition, despite the tension and popular passion bull riding arouses, in the theater of the rodeo it is not followed by any closing protocol: there is neither a triumphal procession of the victors, as in corridas and athletic performances, nor an ending parade as in the circus. There is nothing. The actors put away their belongings in the shadows, behind the main stands, and the spectators silently leave. The absence of ceremony, which is at the very heart of the baroque society of show business, leaves a gaping hole, a shouting silence.

That is not all. The ambiguity of the rodeo clown, who upholds with pizzazz the rodeo’s ritual dimension within a modern social event – acting simultaneously as trickster and officiant on the borders of death – , has directed the internal specialization process towards that of a sports show. American professionalism requiring it, bullfighters have earned such a status and perfected their dodging technique to such a point that some of them henceforth compete in freestyle bullfighting, a new performance genre that is popular with U.S. audiences. In the arena, one by one the bullfighters face a riderless bull before which each of them has seven seconds to carry out tricks and jumps that are

strikingly reminiscent of the kinds of games seen in the Camargue and Landes races as well as those of the *recortadores* of northern Spain (Saumade 1998; Maudet 2010). The livestock entered comes from breeding farms belonging to Mexicans living in the United States or, in California, to cattle ranchers of Portuguese ancestry in the San Joaquin Valley, who produce the livestock for the bloodless bullfights discussed above. Some breeders are experimenting with a new type of product that, according to informants, yields a very good result in freestyle bullfighting: it is a bull that comes from crossing *brava* cows and rodeo bulls, which themselves come from crossing brahma and beef breeds (Angus, Charolais, Simmental, Herford, etc.).

And so the cycle goes on: from Charlot to torero, from cowboy to clown, from clown to torero, from torero to sportsman . . . from T-bone steak to *toro bravo*, the emblematic figures of Hispano- and Anglo-American imperialism have combined, intertwined, and impregnated each other through a phenomenon that is at once sport, bullfighting, performance, and folklore. And in this intermixing, where the idea of a

linear and continuous diffusion is lost, the paths of history are inverted. Rodeo participates in the renewal of Amerindian and Afro-American cultures. It is allowing Mexican traditions that contradict Anglo-Saxon ethics regarding animals to nonetheless express themselves on the fringes. However, even more surprisingly, among the rodeo's "clown-toreros," two categories emerge. The first is made up of those who wish to restrict themselves to their role of protector of the bull rider and thus insist on being called *cowboy protectors* and not *bullfighters*; some of them avoid wearing the clown's regalia and makeup; they wear a protective casing, including a bulletproof-like vest that makes them look like bodyguards. The second category comprises the new "toreros," who compete in freestyle bullfighting competitions and who tend to specialize to the point that they no longer serve as cowboy protectors but carry on a true bullfighting career on their own account. Members of this group generally stay true to the clown regalia, here connected to the bullfighter's role, even if they no longer set out to make the audience laugh.



Freestyle bullfighting (Salinas, California). Photo by the author.

Although the southwestern United States is nowadays marked by a steady increase in the Mexican population, this return of the rodeo to Spanish bullfighting may have created vocations for immigrants coming from the neighboring country – one of the world's most important in terms of the number of corridas and spectators who attend them. However, in freestyle bullfighting, there are virtually only white actors of northern European origin, proving that ideas of diffusion do not follow a simple linear causality. In this case, the frontier contact caused a phenomenon of transformational reciprocity: the Mexican *jarriepo* Americanized by adopting the Anglo-American (or North Amerindian) clown, while the U.S. rodeo Hispanicized by transforming clowns who became serious into true Anglo-Saxon toreros. For this second category, could the practice of an “extreme sport” such as freestyle bullfighting be the vehicle for a defensive communitarian regrouping within the rodeo milieu, which has not been able to conceal for long the fact that its origins – and therefore those of the national symbol of the cowboy – were far from being purely Anglo-Saxon? It would not be the least of the paradoxes that this renewed bullfighting has become an exclusive folklore of the last American “rednecks” (as they are scornfully called among cultivated bourgeois) at a time when they are willingly expressing the feeling of panic that is overtaking them as they see themselves being “overrun” on the frontier by the peoples whom their ancestors had overrun.

The example of the American rodeo thus challenges the purist categories of the classical sociology of sport, as well as the evolutionist model of the diffusion of a “civilizing” sports institution from the hearth of Victorian England. It proves that a sport is organized not in a rigid and homogeneous grid that would result in a linear evolution and unidirectional diffusion, but in a process that is permanently in a state of constructing itself, a system of transformations where different cultural influences interact and are the fruits of historic confrontations and rivalries between the groups that assign an identity value to the sport. Such a political dimension is expressed in the effects of ritualization and mythological creation that characterize athletic practice from the moment it turns into performance. We have seen how the original American rodeo, derived from the Wild West Show, bore the evolutionist myth of the diffusion of Anglo-Saxon civilization on the territorial margins of the United States. However, we have also seen that the re-creations

that have characterized performance since then, on the initiative of the indigenous, Afro-American, and Mexican communities – victims of the conquest of the West – drive the transformational dynamic of the structure, thus placing value, on the demographic and political fronts, on the current decline of Anglo-Saxon hegemony in the southern border areas.

Sport is thus part of a process of cross-fertilization that bestows a seminal value on the “collision of civilizations.” Far from being restricted to a simple phenomenon of unilinear rationalization, it introduces a composite structure in which physical display, performance, and folklore are closely combined, for performance produces its own mythology and its own heroes. The spectators come to pay tribute to these heroes through forms of ritualization and demonstrations of enthusiasm that may sometimes encounter the violence of ancient folklores. It seems to me that herein lies the greatest weakness of Elias’ theory of sports, reducing the meaning of hooliganism to a sort of pathological resurgence of primitive violence at the initiative of marginal components of the public stemming from the most downgraded working-class milieus, while this excessive expression of athletic passion aptly shows that far from being incompatible with sport, folklore is a subject that is constantly re-created within it.⁵

Finally, to return one last time to the bulls, the supposedly necessary evolution of athletic practice toward a mastery intensified by violence and emotions which, following Elias’ paradigm, involves the globalized diffusion of the Anglo-Saxon model of civilization, is paradoxically confirmed in the case of the controversial Spanish corrida but not at all in that of the American rodeo. In fact, as I have already shown elsewhere (Saumade 1994, 1998), during the twentieth century, the corrida evolved to eliminate the most bloody aspects as far as possible. In particular, this included the disembowelment of the picadors’ horses, which was done away with in 1930 by laying a caparison on the animals’ flanks, and even, nowadays, the actual killing can be avoided in cases when the bull is shown mercy. The latter is an exceptional occurrence that marks the pinnacle of the show, when the combined performance of the animal and matador is judged perfect by all the spectators. Thanks to the selection of the breeding ranches, this evolution assumed that the behavioral violence of the bulls would be relatively lessened and more able to be controlled. The result is an emphasis on a choreographed

aesthetic that transforms combat into art, in which some contemporary aficionados would like to find a religious meaning. Alongside this – and also from a historical perspective – the rodeo has not become less violent because of the transformation and emphasis on the bullfighting sequences, and by the concomitant development of the “American-style” business of breeding the rodeo or freestyle bullfighting bull, where all types of genetic experiments are carried out in order to obtain specimens that become more and more formidable for the men who ride or confront them. The result is that despite the clout of puritanical organizations and animal-protection lobbies (which, incidentally, are hardly concerned about the violence

done to humans in the performance), the western cowboy has become the “torero” (bullfighter), and pure and simple bullfighting has become the American sport par excellence.

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I Notes

1. It is striking that most nonspecialized theories of sport ignore, and even completely hide, the obvious fact that it is a performance. Thus, for example, Guttmann, in line with Elias, lists sport’s “formal structural characteristics” in the following order: (1) secularization, (2) equality between the participants, (3) bureaucratization, (4) specialization, (5) rationalization, (6) quantification, and (7) obsession with records. The performance aspect is therefore not seen as structuring the practice. The show might possibly be highlighted in the perspective of a vulgar Marxism as an instrument of exhaustion of the masses (Brohm 1993). The dissatisfaction taken from these considerations, by default or by excess, of the athletic performance may in part be attenuated

by the subtlety of rare localized ethnographic approaches of the performance environment of athletic games (Bromberger 1995; Darbon 1995).

2. In the Wild West Shows of the late nineteenth century, cowboys were sometimes called “carnival boys,” which shows the extent to which they were already thought of as folkloric characters among urban society (Fredriksson 1993, 11).

3. Thus, in the rodeo of the Crow Creek Reservation 1922 fair, the Indian clown George Shields was already entering the arena (Iverson 1994, 197). See also Dyck (1996).

4. In his work on the bullfighting traditions between southwestern Europe and the Americas, Maudet effectively analyzes this paradoxical connection between the rodeo clown and the Spanish torero (2010, 339 sq.).

5. At the end of their well-documented study on hooliganism, the Eliasian sociologists Eric Dunning, Patrick Murphy, and John Williams are almost embarrassed to recognize that they have exposed “relatively persistent, deeply rooted and longstanding features of the communities of specific sections of the working class” (Elias and Dunning 1986, 266), in other words, a structure of ritualized dispute that is related to a carnivalesque neofolklore through violence; and they show the extent to which this is organized in accordance with modern social realities that are represented by game-contests. It is up to them to say – but naturally the authors do not dare to take this step – that the “process of civilization” that was supposed to be diffused from the elite to the popular classes does not function as harmoniously as Elias claimed.

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