

Essay Question: When the field of sport was constituted in the late 19th century, it was characterised by a set of ideas and discourses that are still to be found in contemporary representations and accounts of sport and sporting events. Explain and exemplify this statement.

In late nineteenth-century Britain, headmasters of various public schools were recognizing the importance of physical activity and the role it could play in developing strong, young men with healthy morals. Boys were encouraged to transfer their playful, violent and wasteful actions into an arena of life with its own rules, limits, and character building qualities. This essay will examine two videos, a sequence from the 2001 film *Lagaan* and “Football is Fair Play” (Fair Play), to argue that the range of beliefs and discourses that were inaugurated in late nineteenth-century Britain are still effective in modern sport. Fair play, discipline, and teamwork are illustrated in both videos, and although the early stages of Fair Play contradict these notions, there is a clear transition to the values that were initiated in British public schools.

Schirato et al. define discourse as “language in action” and explain that the process involves using certain words and phrases related to a specific field or institution (39). In this case the field is sport and the discourses outlined above coincide with its beginnings. During the late eighteenth century and early nineteenth century, the educators at British public schools did not approve of their students taking part in physical games. According to Holt, boys would enjoy testing their strength in unorganized combat and brutal games of football (78). Regardless of whether these games occurred in the school grounds or on the streets, they would often lead to injury (Holt 78).

School headmasters soon decided to put an end to this violent culture in what Schirato describes as the “civilizing process” (51). Figures such as Thomas Arnold, headmaster of Rugby School in the 1830s, argued that creating moral young men was of more importance than academic success (McDevitt 10). Many headmasters began to recognize that discipline could be taught through organized physical activity. Discipline refers to a process whereby people would behave in line with what the state and its various institutions considered to be normal, healthy and productive (Schirato et al. 191). By participating in codified sport with its own rules, boys could become disciplined and exemplify the values of teamwork and fair play which were “synonymous” with British national character (Schirato 51).

This is not the case early on in Fair Play. Schirato et al. point out that discourse provides “categories of subjectivity” and divides people into typologies where they then “accept and comply” with

authority (40). The player-referee relationship in football embodies this idea because players are expected to respect the referee and his decisions, even in disagreement. However the footballers in Fair Play lack respect because they argue with referees after a decision has been made. Hence, they are ill-disciplined individuals, not abiding by the power relations that discourse sets up. They are wrongly acknowledging their position and the extent to which they can influence outcomes within the field of sport.

The way that players conduct themselves on the football pitch relates to Pierre Bourdieu's concept of habitus. According to Schirato et al., habitus is "history naturalised ... the values and dispositions gained from our cultural history are part of who we are ... and how we do things" (193). The games of ancient Rome involved gladiatorial battles in the Colosseum and chariot races with riots and bribery (Guttmann 28; Mandell 81). These activities are related to what Arnold describes as the "antithesis" of sport where players adopt a "win at all costs" attitude in wanting to "take out" the opposition (23). Fair Play contains many examples from Italian football matches, where players intentionally slide-tackle, elbow, and spit at their opposition. Put simply, actions in contemporary Italian football can be traced back to ancient Rome. Those values have become engrained in Italian culture and are expressed on the football field through seemingly natural actions of foul play. Foreign players entering into Italian football leagues can potentially learn these dispositions because of their immersion into that culture.

Nevertheless, forty seconds into Fair Play the following message appears: "Questo non e' calcio" (This is not football). The tone of the video changes and we are now shown how football should be played. Players pleasantly shake hands with the opposition team and a montage of friendly exchanges between players and referees reinforces the respect the players have for their superiors. A mutual acknowledgment of ability occurs when Michel Platini embraces the opposition goalkeeper after having his header saved. Rivalry is put aside when, after Juventus' Gianluigi Buffon saves a free kick, players from Inter Milan tap him on the head. It is fitting that the video concludes with the message "Questo e' calcio" (This is football). We have just been told that this is how football ought to be played while also shown the positive qualities that football can offer and bring out of people.

Holt argues that fair play meant "not only respecting the written rules of the game, but abiding by what was generally understood to be the spirit of the game" (98). Leading on from this, Schirato points out that participants in late nineteenth-century British sport were expected to demonstrate

that winning was not the most important aspect of competition (50). Fair Play contains one of the most acclaimed acts of sportsmanship in contemporary football. During an English Premier League match Paolo Di Canio, while the opposition goalkeeper was lying injured on the pitch, decided to pick up the football and stop play. Schirato describes this as a prime example of “sporting behaviour” where Di Canio refused to “take advantage of an injured opponent” (135). There are no rules stating that players must act this way, but Di Canio decided that this was the moral thing to do. Di Canio received praise from the opposition team because he essentially abandoned a winning mindset to reinforce the spirit of football.

The discourse of teamwork in sport was also established in the Victorian public schools. In the context of rowing, headmaster of Eton in the late nineteenth-century, Edmond Warre, adored the “sight of his crew” pulling together on the Thames (Holt 76). Holt argues that team sports, such as cricket, “created [a] powerful focus for group loyalty,” and were “perceived as [ways] of imparting the values of team spirit and cooperation” (80). Essentially, there was something special about watching people work together in unity. Team sports were seen as an ideal setting for young men to learn the importance and effectiveness of collaboration and forgetting about individual desires.

These are the core values put forward in a sequence from the film *Lagaan*. From Schirato’s observation, cricket allowed a “hybrid collection of Indians ... to overcome their differences ... to believe in themselves as a team/community” (51). In addition, Holt states that cricket “merges the individual into eleven” and a key component of the sport is the reliance on other people to perform their task (80). In this video fieldsmen take catches, the wicketkeeper makes a stumping, and bowlers take wickets. Cricket relies heavily on the integration of people and these examples illustrate this assertion.

Therefore, marginalizing people is perceived as counterproductive to teamwork. In this particular sequence one of the main characters, Kachra, is classified as an “untouchable” in the Indian caste system. In other words, Kachra’s extremely low position in Indian society means he is rejected and avoided by the other castes. However, because of his amazing ability to spin the ball, he is accepted into the team when the others realise his talent. In the cricket match against the British opposition, Kachra plays a crucial role in helping his team to victory by taking a hat-trick, that is, three consecutive wickets. He is embraced by his teammates who come from various social and cultural backgrounds. In essence, the hatred for Kachra is abandoned as the team forget their personal differences and strive towards a common goal which, in this case, is to defeat the British team.

According to Schirato, a “hero” embodies the strengths and virtues of the community (48-49). Kachra’s performance allows him to become a hero for the Indian people and a symbol for overcoming obstacles and conquering discrimination.

Schirato points out that team sports encourage involvement at a spectatorial level (44). Even though they are not actually participating in the game of cricket, the Indian crowd also depict teamwork and loyalty. After Kachra takes his hat-trick, the crowd show their enjoyment by shouting and dancing. In doing so, they recognize their position in the field of sport and the role they play in supporting a team who represent their values. Even though there is a diverse range of dress standards in the crowd, signalling their differences, they are all pledging their allegiance to a unified cause. They want to reject the British rule, support their team, and build a sense of identity.

In conclusion, a transition from violent, playful acts towards codified and consequential forms of physical activity in late nineteenth-century British public schools resulted in the initiation and appraisal of discourses such as teamwork, discipline, community building, and fair play. These ideas produced moral and healthy men who understood the importance of participation and representing a group with pride. Examples of these values are evident in contemporary fictional and factual sports events. *Lagaan* proves how team sports serve as a gateway to defeating prejudice and forging identity, while the Fair Play video, in particular footballer Paolo Di Canio, shows us how sport has the power to teach discipline and provide an opportunity to perform honourable acts that can potentially result in widespread approval.

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