

# Cricket and colonialism: Towards a political theory of sport

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## Abstract

The goal of this paper is to reconceptualise the relationship between politics and sporting practice with the aim of gesturing towards broad themes that a political theory of sport could explore. Many philosophical theories of sport, including the dominant mutualist view, are internalist: they suggest that there is some distinctive logic internal to sports that must feature in the best explanation of our sporting practices. Yet, in attempting to articulate this distinctive internal logic, mutualists quarantine sport from its wider context to understand sporting practice on its own terms. This methodological decision, I argue, invites the unwarranted assumption that sporting practice and politics constitute two separate domains bearing little to no relation to one another. Consequently, mutualism provides us with an impoverished understanding of sporting practice – especially in colonial contexts. Against this view, I use CLR James’ writings to show how the internal norms and rules of cricket simultaneously perpetuate an oppressive social structure and articulate the beginnings of an emancipatory political project. This, in turn, has the potential to connect debates within the philosophy of sport to questions around resistance and oppression.

## Keywords

CLR James, colonialism, imperialism, political oppression and resistance, philosophy of sport

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In a letter to Owen Fiss, John Rawls (1981) suggested that baseball was ‘the best of all games’. Recalling a conversation he had with the philosopher Harry Kalven, Rawls (1981) highlighted several features of baseball that justified this pronouncement, for instance, that baseball ‘does not give unusual preference or advantage to special physical types’ and that ‘time never runs out’, which means ‘there is always time for the losing side to make a comeback’. In short, for them, ‘the rules of the game are in equilibrium ... the physical layout of the game is perfectly adjusted to the human skills *it is meant to display and to call into graceful exercise*’ (Rawls, 1981, my emphasis). Compare these remarks with the following passage from CLR James (2019: 124–125) about cricket in Trinidad during British colonial rule:

I do not know of any West Indians in the West Indies to whom the success of a cricketer meant so much in so personal a way ... I know that to tens of thousands of coloured Trinidadians the unquestioned glory of [Wilton] St Hill’s batting conveyed the sensation that here was one of us, performing *in excelsis* in a sphere where competition was open. It was a demonstration that atoned for a pervading humiliation, and nourished pride and hope.

Notice that, while they are talking about different sports, Rawls and Kalven’s remarks operate at a higher level of abstraction to James’ reflections on cricket. That is, Rawls and Kalven take baseball out of the wider socio-political context in which it is played, and understand it as occupying its own special domain with a separate and irreducible internal logic. Thus, their defence of baseball as the ‘best of all games’ rests on a claim about how its internal rules are ‘perfectly designed’ to make certain human feats of skill possible. They illustrate this by contrasting baseball with basketball, whose rules undergo constant modifications to prevent physically stronger players from dominating the game with their strength (Rawls, 1981). Whether or not one agrees, the point is simply that both the rule changes in basketball *and* the supposed ‘perfection’ of baseball are influenced by the same distinctive logic – namely that sports are *designed* to allow for certain human skills to be displayed by its participants. In short, we can say that Rawls and Kalven are gesturing towards an internal and irreducible sporting logic that ought to play a role in how we understand sports. Now, to my mind, James shares this view on sports: He extols the batting of Wilton St Hill as something glorious, beautiful and excellent, as if St Hill perfectly demonstrates the kinds of human skill cricket was designed to enable. Yet, contra Rawls and Kalven, James ties this to an explicitly *political* point. Where they focus on excellence in abstraction, James sees the excellence of St. Hill’s batting as *part of* an anti-racial and anti-colonial struggle to demonstrate the equality of non-white colonial subjects to their white colonial rulers. Indeed, it is precisely because sporting practice constitutes a separate domain, one where, as James put it, ‘competition was open’, that this very demonstration of equality is possible.

Drawing on James’ reflections on cricket, the goal of this paper is to reconceptualise the relationship between politics and sporting practice with the aim of gesturing towards broad themes that a political theory of sport could explore. I take inspiration from recent attempts to broaden the field of political theory, which have examined the political questions that

arise in areas that have hitherto been marginal to the discipline.<sup>1</sup> I want to suggest that the dominant philosophical view of sports – Robert Simon’s mutualist view – is unable to conceptualise the political dimensions of sporting practice because it makes a *problematic abstraction*. Much like Rawls and Kalven’s analysis of baseball, mutualism is an *internalist* theory of sport: It suggests that there is some distinctive feature or logic *internal to* sports that *must feature* in the best explanation of sporting practice (Simon, 2015a: 22–23). Yet, in articulating this distinctive internal logic, mutualists quarantine sport from its wider context to understand sporting practice *on its own terms*. This abstraction invites the unwarranted assumption that sporting practice and politics constitute two separate domains bearing *little to no relation* to one another. As such, while related, my line of argument in this paper departs from the view of some philosophers of sport who argue that mutualism is *too abstract* to adequately resolve normative disputes within sporting practice (e.g., Morgan, 2012, 2020). This is because they are concerned with the normative grounding a theory of sport should have, whereas my view is that mutualism provides us with an impoverished understanding of the relationship between politics and sport, which inhibits its ability to fully satisfy the desiderata of theories of sport.

To that end, I argue that we can use James’ writings on cricket to articulate an internalist account of sport that is nevertheless sensitive to the ways the internal norms of sporting practice are inevitably politicised to suit a variety of ends. Specifically, James suggests that the internal norms and rules of cricket *simultaneously* perpetuate an oppressive social structure *and* articulate the beginnings of an emancipatory political project. This, in turn, has the potential to connect debates within the philosophy of sport to questions around resistance and oppression. To make my case, I start by showing the limitations of prevailing theories of sport. I present the three desiderata that theories of sport must fulfil, which I term the descriptive task, the evaluative task and the normative task, before showing how proponents of mutualism see it as satisfying all three desiderata. I argue, however, that this is mistaken because it ignores the political dimensions to sporting practice. Through my engagement with James, I raise two challenges to the mutualist position. First, mutualism fails to satisfy the evaluative task because it cannot explain *why* the colonisers and the colonised value cricket for different reasons. Second, on the normative task, mutualism lacks the conceptual resources to either critique the ways cricket’s internal norms and principles reinforce colonial oppression in the colonies or vindicate the emancipatory potential of the sport. What is required, then, is a more grounded account of sport that can bring together the internal and external dimensions to sporting practice, which I hope can be satisfied through the development of a political theory of sport. In my concluding section, I discuss what this could look like, by stressing the importance of a fourth desiderata that theories of sport should fulfil – namely one that centres the importance of politics in shaping, and being shaped by, sporting practice.

## **Mutualism and internalist theories of sport**

As noted previously, mutualism – like most prevailing theories of sport – subscribes to a version of internalism, which minimally holds that ‘some internal features of sport are necessary to understanding and evaluating it’ (Simon, 2015a: 23). Externalists, by

contrast, attempt to explain all features of sport – including the internal rules of a given sport – in terms of factors external to the practice itself. Thus, on these views, sport is analysed in terms of, for example, the function it holds in society, such as a vehicle for individuals to harmlessly release their aggression (Simon, 2015b: 84). Similarly, many externalists draw on a Marxist framework to theorise sport as a reflection of the productive logic of capitalism. On these Marxist views, ‘the logic of major spectator sports does not merely *mirror* the social order in which they occur, but more importantly, *causes this order to be maintained intact*’ (McMurtry, 1977: 11). That is, sports are not seen as independent of the wider social order but a reflection of it; their internal logic is thus determined by the relationship between sports and the dominant mode of production. So, given the dominance of capitalism, sports on these views ‘facilitate techniques of movement which can be applied to the productive process’ (Rigauer, 1981: 11).

Although they may seem compelling, externalist accounts of sport are often too reductive and fail to explain *why* sports have the function that they do, or why spectators demonstrate such passion and cohesion for the athletes and teams they support (Morgan, 1994; Simon, 2015b: 84–85). Hence, to adequately understand sporting practice, some attention needs to be paid to its internal and irreducible features. Naturally, accounts of internalism vary in what they take to be the distinctive features central to understanding sports. However, the literature on sport identifies three desiderata that any theory of sport must address. We can therefore judge the efficacy of a theory by how well it fulfils the following tasks:

- The definitional task: How well does it identify the essential features of sport? How effectively do these essential features differentiate sports from other similar social practices, such as games or performances?
- The evaluative task: How well does it identify and explain the features of sport that people find appealing or exciting, as both participants and spectators?
- The normative task: How well does it ‘explain the value (or disvalue ...) of sport’? How well does it provide the necessary conceptual resources to morally evaluate sporting practices, including ethical questions that arise in sporting contexts (e.g., cheating, doping etc.)?<sup>2</sup>

I have suggested that there is a consensus that mutualism best satisfies these three desiderata.<sup>3</sup> To see this, and to better understand mutualism’s central commitments, it is worth briefly examining one of its forerunners: Bernard Suits’ influential conception of a game as ‘the voluntary attempt to overcome unnecessary obstacles’ (1978: 41). All games, for Suits, have a set of rules that place restrictions on the kinds of actions we can perform when attempting to achieve the goal of the game. Take golf for instance: The goal is to place a ball in a hole, yet we can only do so using a set of cumbersome clubs that make it difficult to achieve the goal. Thus, if we were to simply carry the ball and place it in the hole, we would not be playing golf. The key point is that games *through their rules* provide obstacles that players must overcome and, in doing so, players demonstrate feats of skill that are intrinsically valuable *because they involve completing difficult tasks*. That is, the idea of obstacles in Suits’ definition implies that games set tasks for us that are difficult to complete – like trying to hit a golf ball into a hole using

clubs – which is intrinsically valuable because completing difficult tasks is ‘a precondition for the further widely accepted good of *achievement*’ (Yorke, 2018: 178; see also Hurka, 2006: 221; Suits, 1978: 38–41). Framed this way, the central value of games has similarities to Rawls’ Aristotelian Principle, which holds that humans ‘enjoy the exercise of their realised capacities (their innate or trained abilities), and this enjoyment increases the more the capacity is realised, or the greater its complexity’ (Rawls, 1999: 374).

Therefore, sports (since they are a kind of game) allow humans to demonstrate these higher-level faculties because they are constituted by rules whose sole purpose is to create challenges for its participants, thereby requiring players to develop skills to achieve the goal of the game effectively (Simon, 2015a: 24; Suits, 1978: 38–41). Yet, the moral force of sports comes from its voluntary character. In short, it is not sufficient to accept constraints on our behaviour when playing games: We must accept these restrictions *for the sake of the rules and the activities they make possible* (Suits, 1978: 38–39). Put differently, hitting a forehand in tennis, dribbling in football and putting in golf are all actions that are made possible by the restrictions imposed on us by rules we accept. Further, performing these tasks consistently and successfully is difficult. However, if we were simply playing a game for some instrumental benefit, such as fame or wealth, then – *on Suits’ account* – we are not truly playing a game, since we would do something else if we discovered some easier means to achieve these instrumental ends. This is not to say that we cannot have these other motivations to play sport; rather, accepting the restrictions in our actions *for the sake of the game* is necessary but not sufficient to play (Lopez Frias, 2017: 146–147; Suits, 1978: 144–145). It is here that we can find an additional good of playing sports; as Thomas Hurka puts it, if achieving difficult tasks is intrinsically good, then ‘the positive attitude of loving it for the property that makes it good ... is also, and separately, intrinsically good’ (2006: 227–228).

This Suitsian insight, that sports require the completion of difficult tasks, is the foundation of Simon’s mutualist view. That said, he departs from Suits’ definition by suggesting that sports are made up of more than just a set of rules: they are also made up of informal conventions and, crucially, *internal sporting principles*. These principles are presupposed by sporting practice and ‘must be accepted if our sporting practice is to ... make the *best sense*’ (Simon, 2000: 6). Drawing on Ronald Dworkin’s legal interpretivism, Simon suggests that these principles can guide the way referees, umpires and sporting bodies implement, enforce and tweak the rules of a given sport. To illustrate, consider the following example from baseball. In an 1887 match between Louisville and Brooklyn, Reddy Mack, a Louisville player, had just crossed home plate when he turned and interfered with the Brooklyn fielder nearby – thus preventing him from tagging the next Louisville runner who subsequently crossed home plate and scored (Russell, 1999: 28). At the time, this was considered a legal move as the rules of baseball merely precluded *base runners* from interfering with any fielder from the opposing team: since Mack had crossed home plate at the time of the interference, he was no longer a base runner (Russell, 1999: 28). The umpire, rather than allow the subsequent Louisville runner to score, called the runner who followed Mack out and disallowed the run (Russell, 1999: 28). Crucially, he did so *at his own discretion*. The point is that, in exercising his discretion, the umpire drew on

an implicit underlying principle *internal to* baseball in particular (and potentially to sport in general) to justify the rule change (Russell, 1999: 28; Simon, 2000: 7).

Given its emphasis on rules, Suits' account falls short in cases like Mack's, since there was no formal rule forbidding Mack's attempt to interfere with the fielder. As such, it is not fully clear what Suits would say when faced with this situation. For Simon, in contrast, the presence of internal sporting principles provides an avenue to justify the umpire's decision. The mutualist position holds that sporting competition is a 'mutual quest for excellence' (Simon, 2015a: 28). On this view, sporting contests are best understood, not as a zero-sum game where participants play to win, but as an opportunity for humans to adopt higher-level physical and mental capacities as they strive to win (Simon, 2015a: 27, 2015b: 91–93). Thus, the purpose of sport (i.e., what we presuppose for sport to make 'the best sense') is to bring about demonstrations of excellence by humans, which is intrinsically good. Further, as this principle is presupposed by sporting practice, it must feature in the internal motivations of sports players – otherwise they have fundamentally misunderstood the activity they are participating in. Again, like with Suits, this is not to say that the demonstration of excellence is the *only* motivation or presupposition sports players can have. They can be motivated by wealth or fame, as long as they are *also* committed to the demonstration of excellence in sporting activity. Indeed, if an athlete were not motivated by playing as well as they possibly could, it seems plausible to say that they do not understand the meaning of sporting practice.

In this way, we can see that the intuitions Rawls and Kalven drew on in their analysis of baseball resonate strongly with the mutualist position. Indeed, mutualism invokes and clarifies the internal logic of sport that they reference and uses it to satisfy the above three desiderata. Regarding the descriptive task, mutualism suggests that what differentiates sports from games is that the internal rules of the former are designed to ensure players demonstrate excellence whereas the same is not necessarily true of the latter, where the rules are designed to realise other values amongst participants, for instance fun or laughter. Turning to the evaluative task, participants and spectators find sports appealing because they allow for the demonstration of these excellences. We can invoke the logic of the Aristotelian Principle here: players value sport because it allows them to 'exercise their realised capacities', which is a source of enjoyment. Equally, we can imagine that spectators relish the ability to see athletes demonstrate feats of sporting brilliance, thereby explaining why they value sport. Finally, with respect to the normative task, mutualism helps to morally evaluate ethical issues that arise in sporting contexts. Consider the Mack example once again; as the rules of baseball are not set up to promote excellence in wrestling, the umpire can invoke this principle to justify their decision to rule Mack's interference with the fielder as illegal. The same applies to other considerations, such as cheating or doping in sport: Insofar as they go against the commitment for sport to demonstrate excellences, they are unethical or immoral. Having presented its central tenets, I now turn to outline my two challenges against the mutualist position.

## The imperial game: Cricket and British colonialism

On the opening page of his memoirs on life and cricket, CLR James (2019, preface) provocatively asks, '*what do they know of cricket who only cricket know?*'. For him, this is

the central question of the book, which seeks to reflect on the influence of cricket not only on his own life but also on the origins and development of the anti-colonial West Indian independence movement. As I interpret him, James is challenging attempts to analyse cricket by *removing* it from the social context in which it is played, as if this had no bearing on understanding the sport itself. For James, then, isolating sporting practice in this way is to fundamentally *misunderstand* it and limits the kinds of insights that can be made about sport. We can thus see James as raising a methodological challenge to the mutualist position: In attempting to uncover what is distinctive about sporting practices, mutualism *abstracts* sporting practice from the context in which it is played. I follow Onora O'Neill (2002: 40) in understanding abstraction as '*bracketing*, but not *denying*, predicates that are true' of a particular case. To see this, we can draw an illuminating comparison with idealisation, which ascribes 'predicates ... that are false of the case in hand' when reasoning, as economists for example tend to do when assuming that all human agents are perfectly rational in their actions (O'Neill, 2002: 40–41). This assumption of perfect rationality can never be realised, since it prescribes 'cognitive and volitional capacities human beings lack'; in short, it prescribes something false and thus is an idealisation about the capacities of human agents (O'Neill, 1987: 55–56). Abstraction, by contrast, omits features of the world that are particular to a given place to understand the more general features of the case in question.

It is important to stress that I am not critiquing abstraction as such; I share O'Neill's view that abstraction is both unavoidable and important when we want to generalise. This is because we *bracket* what we take to be particular to specific cases, and thereby better understand the general form of the phenomenon we are interested in. Indeed, we see this with mutualism, which attempts to articulate sports *on their own terms* independent from the particularities that differentiate how they are played in specific local settings. The problem that I see James as diagnosing, then, is not with *abstraction* per se, but rather with *how we abstract*. In short, his point is that abstracting political struggle from sport is to 'bracket central and salient elements' of sporting practice, leading to the 'unjustified assumption that features not mentioned were missing, or allows or even encourages others to assume that they were missing' (O'Neill, 1987: 40–41, note 7). That is, mutualism – by isolating sport from politics – makes a *problematic abstraction*, which invites the assumption that these activities constitute separate domains that bear *little to no relation* to one another, thereby leading to an impoverishment in our understanding of sporting practice. This is especially true, as we will see, in colonial societies, where the mutualist logic is inevitably *politicised* to both legitimate and perpetuate oppressive social structures while simultaneously functioning as an opportunity to actively resist them. Crucially, however, this does not collapse back into a reductive externalism that understands cricket as merely reflecting the power imbalances of colonialism. In short, we can read James as observing that – while 'the formal, written laws or rules of [cricket] are identical' – cricket nevertheless 'takes on different meanings in various imperial and colonial contexts' (MacLean, 2010: 100).

To see this, we need only examine the history and development of cricket. Frequently referred to as the 'imperial game', the values and ethos of cricket became intertwined with the colonial 'civilising mission'. Although this may seem odd at first glance, the

connections start to become clear by paying attention to its internal norms and conventions. Cricket is an ‘honour sport’. Thus, playing the game well requires *more* than demonstrating impressive feats of skill: It also requires participants to demonstrate good sportsmanship by, for instance, keeping a ‘stiff upper lip’ when confronted by ‘ill fortune’, or by showcasing pluck in the face of adversity (James, 2019: 33). Put differently, as an honour sport, cricket is set up for the display of excellences in the skills of batting, bowling and fielding *as well as* in the way individual players carry themselves on the playing field. In short, then, being an excellent cricketer was just as much about one’s *ability* on the field as it was about one’s *behaviour*. We might say that the values internal to cricket are strongly linked to what William Morgan calls the amateur sport ethic, a normative paradigm internal to sporting practice that placed greater value on the way an athlete conducted themselves than on the result of a sporting contest. For Morgan, this points towards the limitations of the mutualist thesis: As he sees it, the amateur paradigm has been superseded by a more professional one, in which winning is prioritised – giving rise to a normative dispute over the correct purpose of sport. Tactical fouls, for instance, would be condemned under an amateur ethic but praised under a professional ethic. Further, mutualism’s language of excellence does not help to resolve this intractable dispute since the notion of excellence would be interpreted in different ways under each paradigm.

While I find Morgan’s critique of mutualism compelling, my argument here in no way rests on accepting his view that mutualism cannot resolve the divide between the amateur and professional ethic. I am using the term ‘honour sport’ in a descriptive manner to suggest that this is how cricket was played at the time. There are reasons to think that the importance of athlete behaviour is still prevalent in present-day cricket matches, with players and commentators alike condemning practices like ‘Mankading’ which are thought to be *too strategic* and go against the ethos of the game.<sup>4</sup> Thus, the idea of excellence in cricket must be understood in terms of both the skills an athlete displays and the way they conduct themselves on the cricket field. Indeed, perhaps because of the intrinsic connection between cricket and good behaviour, leading educators began to see the pedagogical value of sports like cricket in educating the next generation of Britain’s colonial elite. The headmasters of several prestigious public-schools in the late Victorian era began to incorporate sports like rugby, football and – especially – cricket into the school curriculum, explicitly because they saw these sports as embodying the necessary values to maintain and foster the British Empire (Mangan, 1998: 18–19; Stoddart, 1988: 658). These educators proselytised the value of cricket in instilling a sense of morality, chivalry, duty and other values amongst its participants, which – from their perspective – explained Britain’s colonial successes. Consider for example these remarks from J.E.C. Welldon, Headmaster of Harrow School, in his address at the Royal Colonial Institute:

The pluck, the energy, the perseverance, the good temper, the self-control, the discipline, the co-operation the esprit de corps, which merit success in cricket or football, are the very qualities which win the day in peace or war ... In the history of the British Empire it is written that England has owed her sovereignty to her sports. (quoted in Mangan, 1998: 35–36)



Thus, in the minds of educators like Welldon, the rules and principles embodied within cricket had a twofold role to play in preserving the British Empire. On the one hand, they were perceived as a necessary part of the education system for those individuals intending to hold colonial office. On the other, they were seen as a way to bring Enlightenment to the indigenous populations in the colonies, and thereby realise the ambitions of the civilising mission. To see this, we need only compare Welldon's remarks with James' reflections on his time at a prestigious British school in Trinidad, where all the teachers were 'Oxford and Cambridge men' hired to teach Trinidadian schoolboys from various racial and social backgrounds to follow the 'public-school code' (James, 2019: 32). As James (2019: 32–33) recalls:

[I]nside the classrooms the code had little success. Sneaking was taboo, but we lied and cheated without any sense of shame ... But as soon as we stepped on to the cricket or football field, more particularly the cricket field, all was changed ... we learned to obey the umpire's decision without question, however irrational it was ... On the playing field we did what ought to be done.

Reading these perspectives alongside one another, two things are immediately striking. First, despite the sheer difference in social positions, one being a white headmaster at one of the most elite schools in Britain and the other a black Trinidadian schoolboy, both recognise that success on the cricket field required behaving *in a certain way*. That is, the values Welldon lists as embodied in cricket, like 'pluck', 'perseverance' and 'discipline', are the same embodied in the public-school code James recalls being thoroughly subjected to during his schooldays in Trinidad. Second, the language in both accounts resonates strongly with the mutualist view of sports as a 'mutual quest for excellence'. The point here is that the values Welldon, James and others saw in cricket are not the external benefits that come from playing the sport: They are fundamentally a part of the game such that, by not demonstrating them in their conduct, participants were not playing the game right. We can even make the further point that demonstrating the public-school games ethic was necessary to bring about the excellences cricket was set up to promote. This is not to say that cricket is inherently colonial, as if the internal rules and norms of the sport were designed with the explicit aim of furthering the civilising mission. Instead, the point is that the excellences the internal logic of cricket were designed to bring about in both skill and behaviour lent themselves to the colonial project such that the two became fundamentally interlinked and inseparable from one another. Ignoring this connection, then, is to miss something central about how cricket was understood, appreciated and engaged with in the context of colonialism.

This embodies the heart of James' challenge to mutualism. By bracketing politics from sport, mutualism creates the impression that politics has no bearing on the questions of what we appreciate about sport *and* of how we morally evaluate sporting practices. While this may seem true in certain cases, like the Reddy Mack example considered above, it forecloses an examination of instances where the language of mutualism is used to either legitimate an oppressive set of social circumstances or provide an avenue for political resistance. After all, James' school experience of cricket was not a

noble effort to improve the character of young boys: It was a colonial enterprise predicated on the assumed racial inferiority of the native West Indian population. Cricket was thus explicitly understood in terms of a specific pedagogical purpose – namely to ‘civilise’ the indigenous population. Yet, adhering to the public-school code need not entail a passive submission to the colonial order; rather, it can provide the resources to subvert it. Reflecting on his experience in later life, James (2019: 88) seems to endorse this interpretation of his writings, stating that:

The British tradition soaked deep into me was that when you entered the sporting arena you left behind you the sordid compromises of everyday existence. Yet for us to do that we would have had to divest ourselves of our skins. From the moment I had to decide which club I would join the contrast between the ideal and the real fascinated me and tore at my insides. Nor could the local population see it otherwise. The class and racial rivalries were too intense. They could be fought out without violence or much lost except pride and honour. Thus the cricket field was a stage on which selected individuals played representative roles which were charged with social significance.

These competing dimensions resonate throughout this passage and show the complexities of cricket in a colonial context, which is largely missed on a mutualist account. We can see these across two dimensions, corresponding to two of the three desiderata theories of sport ought to meet. Starting with the evaluative task, a mutualist analysis might say that – because it abstracts sport from politics – while the colonisers and the colonised appreciate or engage in sport for different reasons, they both nevertheless share their appreciation of cricket *for the sake of the excellences the activity makes possible*. That is, like Suits, mutualists think, to properly participate in sporting practice as both a spectator and player, individuals need to appreciate or understand the activity *on its own terms*. This is how I interpret Simon’s claim that we need to presuppose the mutualist principle of sport as a ‘mutual quest for excellence’ so that sporting practice ‘makes the *best sense*’. Therefore, mutualists might argue that even though colonisers might appreciate cricket for its purported ability to fulfil the ‘civilising mission’ and the colonised might see cricket as providing an avenue to resist colonial domination, they both still value cricket for its own sake: namely the excellences the sport can bring about.

Framed this way, mutualism suggests that these secondary reasons to appreciate cricket are external to the practice, as if they purely belong to the politics of colonial societies. What this misses, however, is that the very idea of sporting excellence becomes politicised such that two groups interpret and understand *the same feat of excellence* in different ways. Put differently, I read James as suggesting that sporting principles and values become intertwined with political considerations such that the former cannot be adequately understood without reference to the latter. In this case, for an indigenous member of the colonies to appreciate cricket for the excellences it allows participants to display would be – as James eloquently puts it – to ‘divest ourselves of our skins’ since it fails to track what that excellence represents: The assertion that there is no fundamental difference between white European colonisers and the non-white indigenous colonised members of Trinidadian society. Equally, the excellences cricket is meant to

display become refracted through the colonial lens, thereby turning skilful displays of batting, bowling or sportsmanship into evidence for the British colonisers that the ‘civilising mission’ is working (e.g., Stoddart, 1988: 654). Crucially, however, this does not lead to an externalist perspective, since sporting practice is not reflecting broader operations of power. Instead, the internal logic of sport is becoming politicised to suit two radically different agendas. We can see the same dynamic elsewhere: Consider Kumar Shri Ranjitsinhji, known as Ranji, who was arguably cricket’s first ‘global superstar’. Whilst at a school in India, which was modelled after the English public schools, he discovered an aptitude for cricket. After leaving India in 1888, Ranji studied at Cambridge, where he continued demonstrating his excellence on the cricket pitch – becoming the first Indian to be awarded the prestigious ‘Cambridge Blue’ and would even go on to represent England in a test cricket match in 1896 (Kidambi, 2019: 68–69).

Yet, Ranji occupied a dual role in the British psyche. On the one hand, he was seen as emblematic of the success of Britain’s ‘civilising mission’: After all, here was a native Indian showcasing his talent at a sport and outdoing many white English batsmen. His achievements were thus framed as the success of the colonial education system in instilling the values *internal to* cricket to its subjects in the colonies, thereby justifying Britain’s continued colonial occupation and painting the empire as ‘liberal, meritocratic, generous and inclusive’ (Sen, 2017: 29; see also Stoddart, 1988: 655). On the other, Ranji was importantly *different*. As a non-white batsman playing a very white sport, his mannerisms and his abilities were refracted through a colonial lens and thus encapsulated an Orientalist logic (e.g., Said, 2003). Despite adopting familiar cultural behaviours of English life, Ranji was nevertheless treated as an exotic figure, who sparked dazzlement and wonder amongst white English audiences (Sen, 2017: 44–45). As the historian Prashant Kidambi argues ‘many British observers regarded the enchanting Indian’s batting exploits as yet another marvellous possession thrown up by their vast and varied empire’ (Kidambi, 2019: 69). Thus, Ranji illuminated the contradiction central to colonial practice: While being praised as an honorary Englishman for his skill with the bat, he was nevertheless *othered* as this object of exotic mystery and wonder.

The point, then, is that a mutualist analysis obscures this interplay between the civilising logic of colonialism and the sporting logic of cricket. In saying that we value cricket for its ability to create opportunities to demonstrate feats of pluck and discipline, a mutualist explanation for Ranji’s popularity would purely focus on his undisputed batting brilliance, thereby *disconnecting* his skill from the politics of colonialism. Equally, an externalist analysis would focus on his racial difference and treat his batting prowess as something secondary or unrelated. Yet, for the British public at the time, the two were fundamentally interlinked: His demonstration of excellence contributed to the perception that the British empire *really was* bringing education and enlightenment to the colonies, while simultaneously reifying the unbridgeable divide between white and non-white subjects of empire. This, in turn impoverishes our understanding of sporting practice, since it encourages – by bracketing a salient feature of the world – the presupposition that the racial identity and social role of sports players *does not matter* when explaining why sports are appreciated. In colonial contexts, however, this is patently false. For both James and Ranji, racial identity played a role in explaining why they valued

sports, or why they were valued as sporting figures. To play cricket in the colony of Trinidad was impossible without recognising the social position that one occupied on the basis of one's race. Correspondingly, explaining the British public's adoration of Ranji in terms of his athletic prowess fails to see how their praise was inflected by both racism and colonialism. Therefore, to evaluate why participants and spectators appreciate cricket *exclusively* on sporting terms is to miss out on how these sporting logics can become intertwined with political considerations such that the former cannot be adequately explained without reference to the latter.

Turning to the normative task, mutualism claims to provide the conceptual resources to morally evaluate sporting practice. That is, it can tell us why cheating or doping go against the value of sport and provide a normative framework to provide guidance in cases where the rules do not account for a specific eventuality. The basis for their claim is rooted in the mutualist sporting principle: Because cheating or doping do not constitute the right kind of excellences in sport, or because baseball is not set up to promote excellences in wrestling, these actions ought to be ruled out. But what happens when the very idea of excellence becomes politicised? In a sense, my argument parallels Morgan's critique of mutualism; as we saw earlier, he suggests that the differences between the amateur and professional ethic run so deep that they lack a shared conception of excellence. As such, the normative evaluations each paradigm makes about sport will vary drastically. Further, the language of excellence, for Morgan, is not a potential solution but instead vulnerable to the kind of intractable moral dispute he diagnoses between these sporting paradigms. I want to suggest that a similar issue is at stake in the case of cricket in colonial contexts: The politicisation of excellence means that sporting practice is subject to different kinds of evaluation across the colonial divide. Note that a key difference between my argument and Morgan's is that his focus is on *moral disputes* whereas my claim is about *politics*. In short, I argue that the apolitical and abstract nature of mutualism limits the insights it can make about sporting practice.

To see this, it is worth stressing James' insights on cricket in the colonies. His writings point to a conception of cricket that, like mutualism, sees it as having its own internal logic that is designed to bring about certain excellences, yet unlike mutualism sees these excellences as being inflected by and tied to a distinctly political project. In short, James sees cricket as a site of cultural power: 'the set of ideas, beliefs, rules and conventions concerning social behaviour' that was spread throughout the globe by various representatives of the British Empire (Stoddart, 1988: 650). Put differently, cricket embodied a particular sense of Britishness that – as reflected in the quotations by various public-school headmasters – demonstrated their purported cultural superiority and thus had to be inculcated in the colonies for the sake of the civilising mission. Again, this is not to say that cricket is inherently a colonial game or that the values internal to the game are reducible to wider politics. The point is that, as a sport, the internal logic, rules and conventions of cricket were designed to bring about excellences in behaviour that resonated strongly with the justification for the British empire. In a colonial context, then, sporting practice and politics become so intertwined that it would be a mistake to separate the two, as mutualism does by abstracting sport from politics. This leads to an impoverishment in our understanding of sport in two different ways: Either mutualism

sees the role of cricket in the education of Trinidadian schoolchildren like James as *genuinely* providing them with an avenue to demonstrate and develop excellences, which is intrinsically good. Yet, this echoes the logic of the civilising mission and treats members of the indigenous population as passive subjects who have power exerted over them.

The alternative option for mutualism is to say that, by exporting cricket to the colonies, the British corrupt sporting practice. This is because it transforms the nature of sporting activity into something else – namely the pursuit of the colonial ‘civilising mission’. That is, if the purpose of sport is to allow the demonstration of excellence, then insofar as excellences become tied to non-sporting ends, like bringing enlightenment to the colonies, it represents a corruption of the activity that sport is supposed to be. In short, by using cricket to achieve an instrumental end, the British colonisers (in this case) subvert and replace the internal aim of sporting practice. Notice however that this response is true of *any* attempt to use sport for the achievement of some external end – no matter how just or unjust that end may be. As such, if the indigenous population were to use sport to demonstrate their claim to equality, this would constitute *an equal* corruption of sporting practice since it replaces the internal aims of sport with an external political goal – thereby transforming the nature of the activity into something different. Thus, the rationale is rooted in an attempt to preserve the moral significance of sporting practice, since, if ‘the instrumental value of games becomes ever more dominant, [then] their intrinsic value becomes not only less so but in danger of being lost altogether’ (Morgan, 2020: 51; see also Dixon, 2018). While this avenue is more promising, I still take it to be unpersuasive because it continues to reify the separation of sport and politics. In the mutualist analysis, politics is an external corrupting force on sporting practice. This however seems to miss the dynamic that James is diagnosing, in which the realisation of the mutualist logic (i.e., the fact that sport can bring about excellences) *itself* has political consequences – especially in a colonial context.

Simply put, a Jamesian analysis agrees with mutualism that sporting practice is designed to bring about excellences that are themselves desirable for intrinsic reasons. This is evident in his description of Wilton St Hill’s batting as ‘unquestioned glory’, or in his analysis of what the public-school code embodies when on the playing field. Where James differs from mutualism is that, for him, the demonstration of these excellences become ‘charged with social significance’ in a given context. Crucially, it is not that the purpose of sport has changed; rather, the way we interpret, understand and evaluate sport becomes interwoven with political considerations such that the former cannot be read apart from the latter. Mutualism, then, either ignores these political considerations as irrelevant, or treats them as a corruption of the true practice of sport. Yet, this results in the mutualist framework being unable to track the tensions that emerge between politics and sport, and it lacks the conceptual resources to evaluate whether the politicisation of sport can be desirable or undesirable. Indeed, it is precisely because sporting practices have their own distinctive logic that they have the ability to construct political narratives, since it provides a domain where the usual logic of domination need or may not apply. Hence, an abstract conception of sport that brackets the political context in which it is

played leads to an impoverishment in our understanding of the way sports have been utilised to either enforce or resist practices of domination.

This is especially important in the context of colonialism. If we understand cricket in the colonies as a site of cultural power and politics, then the excellences the game is designed to bring about are framed through a colonial lens in the following way: Excelling at cricket comes to be seen as embodying a particular ideal of Britishness that is tied to the success of empire. We have already seen this in the case of Ranji, whose batting excellence was seen as, in part, corresponding to the success of the British civilising mission. As such, when the indigenous population started to ‘imitate’ the settlers by playing their sports in the same way, the colonisers see this as a shrinking – but not an eradication – of the divide between them and their non-white indigenous subjects. As Malcolm MacLean argues however, in James’ writings we find that imitation can be *subversive*. In short, rather than attempting to become, or be seen as becoming, *more like the British*, native West Indians, in demonstrating the excellences of cricket, demonstrate their agency in reshaping how these excellences are understood (MacLean, 2010: 106–107). This is epitomised by the attempt to instate Frank Worrell, an excellent black batsman, as captain of the West Indian cricket team for their tour of Australia in 1960. Despite the success of numerous black players, the national team – when travelling to predominantly white countries like Australia or England – was *always* captained by a white player, thereby reinforcing the racist notion that, while they may play well, black players needed a white person to lead them (James, 2019: 308). Again, we see how values *internal to cricket* are politicised to suit a racist agenda: in this case, black men were seen as lacking the values or ability to take on the responsibilities of captaincy.

After securing his appointment as captain, in part due to James’ fierce press campaign, Worrell’s leadership throughout the Australian tour epitomised the public-school code that was so closely tied to cricket’s development. In fact, the way Worrell and his team carried themselves on the field won plaudits amongst the Australian populace such that they were rewarded with a farewell parade upon their departure. As James recalls (2019: 345):

Clearing their way with bat and ball West Indians at that moment had made a public entry into the comity of nations. Thomas Arnold, Thomas Hughes, and the Old Master himself would have recognised Frank Worrell as their boy.

In embodying the excellences of cricket, Worrell would have been recognised as ‘their boy’ by figures like Thomas Arnold, the headmaster of Rugby School, and Thomas Hughes, a novelist – both of whom extolled the virtues of sport in building character in the context of public-school education. In a sense, then, this remark seems to imply that Worrell was being seen as an honorary English subject, the product of the same kind of elite institutions that would train colonial administrators for their role in the British Empire. At the same time, James stresses that his successful leadership paved the way for the West Indies to enter the ‘comity of nations’, as if to mark the moment when an independent nation became viable. Further, that it was the *West Indies* is significant: James was a proponent of the construction of an independent Federation that united

all the Caribbean islands into a new political community that could resist colonial rule. Therefore, through imitation, there seems to be the corollary implication that the oppressive norms have been *subverted* through an act of agency – in this case, to potentially create the foundations for a new political community. While the political project may not have succeeded, that the cricket team continues to be federalised points to the latent power of sport as a social practice that can overcome intractable political division.

If our sporting practices are to make ‘the best sense’, then they need to track how the principles internal to sporting practices are actualised in specific socio-political contexts. The power of sport lies precisely in its ability to inspire athletes from various backgrounds to demonstrate their equality on the sports field. Sporting narratives showcase the importance of such practices in fostering greater unity, through for example the creation of new political subjectivities, as well as in the opportunities to heal divides that seem unbridgeable. Yet, this power has also been harnessed by various dictatorial regimes throughout history to instil a pernicious sense of national pride or justify notions of racial and ethnic superiority. Mutualism has the resources to tackle *some* of these facets; for instance, we can use the mutualist ideal to critique the undue emphasis on winning in many professional sports across the globe. This can serve as an avenue to undermine, say, the encroachment of capitalist interest into sporting practices, by showing them to go against something inherent in what sports are trying to promote: the ability for individual agents to showcase their excellences on the playing fields. However, when the idea of excellence *itself* is invoked for pernicious ends, mutualism lacks the ability to critique them, since its own logic is being co-opted to legitimise and perpetuate harmful ideas, such as notions of racial inferiority in the case of cricket. The point of the Jamesian challenge is to draw attention to these dynamics of sport and ensure that they remain central to our analytical frame. In short, we can say that James is gesturing towards the importance of a political theory of sport.

### **Concluding remarks: Reconnecting sport with politics**

If what I have said thus far is accepted, then mutualism fails to meet the widely held desiderata that theories of sport are expected to satisfy. Although it provides an initially compelling account of sport that can adequately satisfy some of the normative problems that arise within sporting contexts, mutualism cannot fully account for the interactions that occur at the boundary of the sports field. This is because mutualism involves an abstraction that, when brought into certain real-world contexts, masks the ways sports simultaneously legitimise oppressive social practices and create the conditions to resist and subvert them. That is, mutualism makes a problematic abstraction by bracketing sport from politics, thereby inviting the assumption that they belong to separate domains. Thus, mutualism, on the one hand, fails to identify *why* sports are understood differently across the colonial divide and, on the other, lacks the conceptual resources to morally evaluate the uses or ends sports are put to. The picture that thus emerges is a theory of sport that cannot account for broad swathes of sporting life in the world we occupy. This has resonances into the present; though we may no longer live in a world with formal colonial institutions, this does not mean that politics and sports exist entirely

separate from one another. For example, to *solely* reduce the Russian state-sponsored doping programme in the Olympic Games to a violation of the mutualist principle is to ignore the entanglements between sports and geopolitics. In short, it would be to *misunderstand* sporting practice if we were to treat all the individuals involved in the doping scheme as benign apolitical actors whose wrongs are explainable exclusively in terms of the violation of sporting principles.

Instead, a discussion needs to pair these internal considerations with the external political ambitions, goals and subjectivities they make possible. It is in James' reflections on cricket, I want to suggest, that we can find the roadmap to reshaping our understanding of sporting practice as being inextricably linked with politics. Understanding the significance of Worrell's captaincy in the West Indian cricket team's tour of Australia is only possible by paying attention to the internal sporting norms and conventions that differentiate a captain's role from that of the other players, and pairing these to the prevailing political context at the time in question. Therefore, on this perspective, seeing Worrell's cricketing success as anything *but* a subversive act through the imitation of Britishness is to misunderstand this moment of sporting history. This has numerous implications for the way in which we theorise sporting practice. For one, it entails the disaggregation of the three desiderata that theories of sport are expected to meet. Put simply, rather than seeing them as the minimal standard theories of sport are expected to meet, we should instead treat them as separate questions or dimensions that theories of sport can explore. This points to one way in which we can continue to uphold mutualism and mutualist principles as a meaningful conception of sport. For instance, throughout this paper, I have accepted the mutualist answer to the descriptive question, yet I have done so by rejecting the normative and evaluative considerations that follow. I think it is right to say that sports are set up to promote excellences, but we do not need to accept the normative conclusions that follow from this, thereby providing conceptual room to analyse and critique the ways 'excellence' has been understood to promote both oppressive and emancipatory ends.

Further, disaggregating the three desiderata paves the way to explicitly highlight a hitherto overlooked dimension that theories of sport ought to explore, namely an *explanatory task* that looks at how sporting norms and principles have been realised in particular contexts. This is what I see James as implicitly doing in his writing on cricket, which combines reflections on the aesthetics of cricket with an attentive analysis to the ways cricketing norms shape, and are themselves shaped by, colonial relations of power. After all, if my analysis is accepted, then the social roles the participants of a sport occupy are of fundamental importance in making sense of the practice itself. Until now, this task has largely fallen to historians of sport, who have tracked the ways various sporting practices, and their corresponding values, have across time become intertwined with different political projects or ambitions. Making this explanatory dimension explicit, then, paves the way for treating sport as a site of cultural politics, which can open the conversation between sport historians and political theorists interested in questions of, amongst others, power, resistance and political action. After all, if as I have argued one shortcoming of mutualism is its inability to morally evaluate different forms the politicisation of sporting values can take, one task for a political theory of sport may be to articulate a kind of framework that can undertake this analysis while



being sensitive to the distinctive logic sporting practices possess. Framed this way, political theorists can identify the normative dimensions to the often more localised historical analyses of sport, and thereby provide the foundations for a less abstract theory of sport that is grounded in the way sports are played across various societies.

This also paves the way for political theorists and philosophers of sport to examine a wider array of political issues that could arise within sporting practice. The focus of my paper has largely been on domination and resistance, showing that the politicisation of sporting principles tells us something about the way dominant powers attempt to enforce their superiority. At the same time, this opens up sport as a site for subordinate groups to resist their categorisation as inferior subjects. Taken together, this can add valuable insights to debates on civil disobedience and political resistance. Additionally, treating sports as a site of politics opens the possibility for greater reflection on the question of athlete activism in sport. Indeed, outside the analytic literature in the philosophy of sport, there has been extensive examinations of the relationship between activism and sporting practice (e.g., Hartmann et al., 2022; Kaufman and Wolff, 2010). A political theory of sport can supplement these insights in the following way: By accepting that sporting practice can be politicised, it provides an analytic framework with the room to conceptualise athletes as activists. Theorists can thus examine what kinds of activism are possible within sport and what kinds of activism may be normatively desirable or undesirable. As Hartmann et al. argue ‘sport provides a crucial point of engagement, where large numbers of Americans, both in sport and outside of sport, learn about, experience and process [social] issues’ (2022: 563). Tracing the manner in which this engagement occurs, and examining the ways sport can be a vehicle for social change, are thus another potential ambition for a nascent political theory of sport.

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**Notes**

1. For an anthology examining the political theory of architecture, see Bell and Zacka (2020).
2. Though the terminology is mine, I take these criteria from Robert Simon's (2015b: 84; see also Simon et al., 2015) helpful overview of the different theories of sport found in the literature.
3. There are of course other internalist theories of sports, including formalism (e.g. Moore, 2019; Suits, 1978), deep conventionalism (Morgan, 2012, 2015), and pluralism (Kretchmar, 2015). However, with the possible exception of deep conventionalism, mutualism has emerged as the leading candidate for a theory of sport. I set aside the remaining theories, though I think they *also* uphold the separation between politics and sport and thus may be vulnerable to the criticisms I raise here.
4. For a discussion of the ethics of Mankading, see Chopra and Coady (2007: 739–741). Although Chopra and Coady ultimately provide a defence of Mankading, they recognise that the practice is controversial and subject to 'widespread disapproval' (2007: 739; see also note 29).

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