

From marginality to mainstream: reflections on MMA (Mixed Martial Arts) and contemporary capitalist societies

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Abstract

Our main goal in this paper is to discuss the deep relationship between the main characteristics of contemporary capitalist societies and one of the sports/shows that reaches a bigger number of people not only through the Brazilian media, but also through the international one: MMA, Mixed Martial Arts. Way beyond the most readily identifiable aspects – violence and aggressiveness – this sport/show is paradigmatic, because it embodies a huge amount of politics, economics and cultural aspects that are highly valued in the contemporary development stage of capitalist societies, characterized mainly by the expansion of the flow of information and goods globally, driven especially by the new communication technologies.

Keywords

Sports, Communication, MMA, Globalization.

1 Introduction

Games have always been a part of human history. No matter how much we want to deny this fact, it is difficult not to find some sort of human grouping that has not developed them. Be it by playing central roles in the development and maintenance of a given community, such as ritualistic games, or even if lacking high reasons or “noble” causes behind them, as exemplified by less pretentious games, games in their most varied manifestations have been, perhaps, one of the most steady and uninterrupted activities throughout history.

As pointed out by Johan Huizinga (2000), games are a significant activity, that is, when one plays, “there is something at play”, something that transcends the immediate necessities of life. Ultimately, if we ignore the symbolic load attributed to the act of playing (if it were possible), games are totally disposable; their existence in no way changes the physical world; they are a non-productive activity that generates no wealth and does not change the state of affairs.

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However, based on Huizinga's arguments, this lack of connection between games and life's productive sphere precisely shows that we are much more than mere biologic machines, since we are capable of creating "parallel" worlds and of having pleasure from the act of playing. Games are never imposed: the only force that maintains them is the wish to play (except when the game becomes an essential cultural social cohesion element, like the ritualistic games abundantly found in the most varied human groupings).

Even though its characteristics are promptly recognizable by any observer, there is no consensus about the essence of games: they are activities that run parallel to the current life of a given society, that is, when games reflect the main characteristics of the societies that play them or, conversely, when it is through games that the desires and hopes that societies deny to most of its members are fulfilled. Are games the answers to a context; are games levers to a given social configuration; are games liberation mechanisms for a tension that cannot otherwise find an outlet within the social structures?

We raise these questions (actually, we are only repeating them, since they are the core of most studies addressing the interpretation of the ludic element in culture) not with the purpose of providing answers to them, but to further emphasize the importance of studies aiming at understanding the close relationship between games and societies. We raise these questions as

a way of furthering our examination of the theme of this paper; that is, the discussion of some of the features of one of the most paradigmatic games in contemporary societies: MMA, the increasingly well-known acronym for Mixed Martial Arts.

2 The Agonist Element in Culture

We believe that MMA is a game (actually, an institutionalized sport) that can tell us a lot about the guiding principles of contemporary capitalist societies.

If we start this text by highlighting the parallel that can be established between the game and present life, recognizing this relatively autonomous structure does not mean that the game is not immersed in a wider and more appropriate context for its flourishing. From Huizinga (2000) to Elias and Dunning (1992), going through Caillois (1990), although they start from very different premises, they are unanimous when they emphasize the close connection that exists between the playful components and the driving forces of society.

We must, then, highlight the main features that distinguish MMA from other contemporary sports and games, as well as those that remain unchanged. Maybe, MMA's most evident characteristic, the most overt one, is explicit violence (for many people who practice the game, the term violence is substituted by the term aggressiveness, since they understand violence as

something that cannot be controlled, pure release of energy, something that is not fitting to the sport that is governed by rules and whose participants are in full agreement when they enter into the confrontation). The violence, or aggressiveness, of the combats – where blood is an element that is as present as sweat – while being the most controversial aspect of the activity it is also its most attractive and seductive aspect.

However, the confrontation element, the dispute, the agonist spirit, is not exclusive to MMA. Actually, basically all sports (understood as a ludic category with other elements that differentiate it from other categories, such as fun games and non-competitive games) have *agon* as their main connection. Ultimately, all sports are more or less metaphoric representations of a belligerent confrontation, where the parts involved in the struggle that conforms to pre-established rules within pre-determined limits, take advantage of everything available in their arsenal to beat the opponent.

Roger Caillois (1990) argues that the passage from the mask and the vertigo (mimicry and ilinx), as central sources of social cohesion, to the duo luck and dispute (alea and agon) was the main distinguishing element of the passage of the so-called “primitive” societies to civilization. The agonist aspect of games, as they start gaining more space, is both cause and consequence of a higher degree of specialization of the activities, of more complex ways of life, of greater regulation of the ways of life and the way

we direct the work developed in these societies with the purpose of intervening in the world, of shaping it according to their interests.

Throughout his book, Huizinga emphasizes how the notion of game – in many Indo-European languages there was no single word to designate game as a category, but there were more than one, sometimes three or four words to point out a specific aspect of some activity – was greatly based on competition. Consistent with these separations, as was the case in ancient Greek and Latin, the activities of a competitive nature were often treated as a separate category, a form of designation that although did not exclude the ludic, playful, and bravado aspects, signified to a great extent, civilization per se.

Among the ludic manifestations of competitive nature, modern sports are certainly the ones that highlight and embody the agonist essence the most. The appearance of the modern sport is tributary to the various political, economic, and cultural movements that gave a new meaning to ancient games, stripping them of their transcendent character and bringing them down to the realm of secularization. The dissemination of sports as playful activity, widely practiced in contemporary capitalist societies, is infused with the values of these very societies: it is motivated by the breaking of records, reaching the goal, and superseding them; it establishes a fruitful relationship with science, which by seeking to improve body movements, sees competition and

the search for equal conditions (even if only on an ideological plan) as basic requirements for the game to take place, while punishing disrespect for the rules it demands a minimally courteous and respectful conduct towards the adversary, rewards effort and merit, training and dedication, and so on. (BRACHT, 2003).

However, if we can largely attribute to sports a huge approximation with the structure of contemporary societies, we must contemplate the current phase of capitalist development, not only concerning its political and economic aspects, but, most of all, regarding the changes that this new context imposes on the cultural patterns of the individuals involved in this new context, driven mainly by the development of the new communication media.

3 Media, Sports, and Society

As soon as sports evolved toward their current configuration, and as sports associations started to proliferate in the beginning of the 18th century, not only in England but all over Europe, the means of communication available at the time soon started to pay attention to this new kind of news. According to Daniel Bech and Louis Bosshart, the first articles about sports appeared in the beginning of the 18th century. One of the first registers of this kind is an article dating of 1733, published in the Boston Gazette, described a boxing fight between athletes John Faulcomer and Bob Russel. This kind of reporting was found with

some frequency in the local news section. Still, according to the authors:

The first newspaper with a special sports section was the *Morning Herald* in England (1817), followed by other English and American papers: *The Globe* (England, 1818), *The American Farmer* (USA, 1819), and *Bell's Life* (England, 1824, published on Sundays). *The Times*, the conservative London paper, introduced its sports section in 1829. All these sports sections contained local news, as telegraph transmission was not yet available.¹ (BECH; BOSSHART, 2003, p. 6).

The most sports with higher visibility and most capillarity at the time were boxing, cycling, horse racing, baseball, and football. A similar process could be observed in the Brazilian territory, where notes about horse racing events and their results were frequently published in newspapers in Rio de Janeiro, since the beginning of the 19th century (MELO, 2012).

It is not our intention in this paper to report on the history of sports news, but instead to try to understand the role played by the mass media in the proliferation of modern sports. Maybe it is impossible to determine who was responsible for the development of these two activities: sports and sports journalism, as suggested by Victor de Mello in his historic investigation, or if sports developed owing to the media, or if the development of sports media resulted from a longing for and interest on the part of the public for this kind of information.

Finally, the sports media progressively broadcast sports news, because it steadily became a socially valued practice, and the practice also

became increasingly valued because it was progressively broadcast by the press. Not only cause or only consequence: both cause and consequence. (MELO, 2012, p. 121)

By accepting this symbiosis between the development of a press specializing in covering sports events and the development of sports, we reach a fundamental point in our analysis, which assumes that contemporary sports can no longer be understood in dissociation from the communication media. This symbiosis goes beyond the simple broadcasting of sports events, eventually interfering in the very configuration of the games.

Actually, the communication media, as sources of mediation between the realities, allow games to evolve way beyond the realm of competition, the arena, thus exponentially amplifying sports facts. The huge attention given to players, competition backstage, sports managers, stadiums and spectators, shows that in general sports should not be understood as games isolated from the reality where they are immersed. Actually, a circle of close dependence between these two spheres is created, since the media are the only tools available to raise any game to a level of meaning that extrapolates the physical barriers of the locus of competitions.

The tearing down of territorial barriers made possible by the communication media actually created new identification and socialization possibilities leveraged in such a way that they modified the very structure of sports shows in general. If in the beginning,

the sports clubs fulfilled a social amalgamation function restricted to small groups geared to the specific interests of a given social class or group of aficionados; thanks to the communication media, this socialization that was formerly more segmented is now taken to other levels.

The network of fans has widened. The championships push aside any parochialism and acquire worldwide importance. Sports idols are becoming celebrities, whose lives and actions inside and outside the sports arenas become products of interest to a huge amount of people, thus becoming role models or examples of a much-desired social position.

If we were to acknowledge that this identification process is not at all new to the field of games – the recognition attributed to the competitors of the ancient Greek Olympic games or even the adoration incited by several Roman gladiators are just a few of the more widely known examples – since the winner of a game is very similar to the mythological hero, as described by Campbell (1990), we should also acknowledge that the media have created new forms of identification with this hero, amplifying by means of a series of devices and resources the exploitation of his persona.

This is Morin's contribution (1997) in *Mass Culture of the 20th Century*, where he attempts to understand how iconic figures, not only in sports, but also in the mediatic world, are promoted and

consumed by a legion of followers. This search for identification with celebrities, according to Morin, should be understood by the dual character of these people who, on one hand, accomplish deeds that are unattainable by most of the population and, on the other, reveal their humanity in a series of actions that does not allow them to definitively live in an extraterrestrial space.

An Olympus of celebrities dominates mass culture, but communicates through mass culture with the current humanity. The Olympians, owing to their dual nature, both divine and human, move permanently between a world of projection and a world of identification. Concentrated in this dual nature is a virulent projection-identification complex. They accomplish the feats that the mortals cannot accomplish, but call on mortals to fulfill the imagination. For this, the Olympians are energetic condensers of mass culture. Their second nature, through which they can communicate with their divine nature, also entices them to participate in each other's lives. By combining daily life and Olympian life, the Olympians become cultural models, in the ethnographic meaning of the term, that is, role models. They are model heroes. They embody the myths of self-realization of private life (MORIN, 1997, p. 107).

Sports, like movies or TV, provide these projection-identification models by alternately revealing a lifestyle that cannot be lived by all and what makes them equal to the rest of us.

Still on this subject, it would be interesting to go back to what we have already discussed about Roger Caillois's theory that points to the fall of the mask and the vertigo and the dissemination of merit and luck as the main features of complex societies. However, despite not keeping its central

role, mimicry still finds a vital space where to develop a kind of compensatory space for the demands of the agon-alea duo. It is the delegation mechanism, basically the same projection-identification process defined by Morin that allows "ordinary" individuals to somehow survive, even if for brief moments or even in as caricatures of the lives enjoyed by their idols.

A larval and benign mimetism provides a harmless compensation to a resigned and hopeless crowd devoid of a firm commitment to ascending to the universe of luxury and glory that fascinates them. The mimicry emerges diffuse and adulterated. Devoid of a mask, it no longer leads to possession and hypothesis, but to the vainest of illusions that emerges from the fascination of a dark room or a sunny stadium, at the moment when all eyes are fixed on the gestures of a luminous hero. It is indefinitely reflected by advertising, the press, and the radio. It identifies from afar thousands of paralyzed victims with their favorite aces. It makes them live vicariously a full and sumptuous life, whose circumstance and dramas are described daily. Although the mask is used only on special occasions, or hardly ever, mimicry, now infinitely exposed for all eyes to see, provides the basis or counterpoint to new norms that govern society (CAILLOIS, 1999, p. 149).

In this sense, the means of communication not only enable greater dissemination of the game itself, of a given sport or show, but give rise to a truly new world that allows the inclusion and psychological identification of individuals with some ideal models that will soon be greatly exploited in every sense, commercially and ideologically.

The marks of this beautiful marriage – whose divorce is unthinkable for the couple – can be

seen in the publicity inside and outside the sports arena, in the products derived from the game (toys, mascots, electronic games that reproduce the game, etc.) and even in the change of schedule of sports broadcasts to better suit the schedule of the important communication channels (BOURDIEU, 1997; MÜLLER, 1996).

The Mixed Martial Arts are born from this marriage between the media and the sports and were conceived from the very start to become a part of it. If we recall the creation process of the Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC) – currently the world’s main MMA championship – from the choice of fighters to the conception of the octagonal ring, we will remember that initially its purpose was more to create a mediatic product than a sports competition. It is clear that we should not exclude the desire of some people to actually develop the fights and turn them into “sports”, as stated by Rorion Gracie¹ when discussing his main goal concerning UFC – disseminating Brazilian jiu-jitsu all over the world. However, if it were not for all the mediatic apparatus set up around the event, which became more elaborated over time, especially after the show was bought by Zuffa, we would hardly see MMA with the permeability that it enjoys today.

Along these lines, in addition to this clearer symbiosis of mutual dependence between the two

spheres – sports and media – we must think about the role played by the media in general to build a society that, by and large, we can call globalized.

4 MMA, the Sport of Globalized Capitalism

It could be said here, without getting too attached to terminology, but instead to the characteristics of the phenomenon, that we are taking great strides toward the creation of a global communicative virtuality (understood here in the sense of possibility). This means that, even if we try to deny it, we are increasingly and constantly getting in contact with information and communication technologies that allow us to recognize that it is possible for new ways of being, which had never been thought of before, to exist. We are living in a time that allows greater contact among cultures. A possibility that might, or not, become effective thanks to a number of fine adjustments made to the conditions of material production, access to tools, mastery and acknowledgement of the new technological-communicational dynamic in place, imposition by institutions, and even subjective and deep-set wishes of individuals and communities.

As reminded by Armand Mattelart (1994, 2002), these transformations underwent by the means of communication until they became what they

¹ Son of Hélio Gracie, considered along with his brother, Carlos Gracie, one of the people responsible for systematizing the Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu techniques, was one of the founders, in 1993, of UFC – Ultimate Fighting Championship, currently considered the most important MMA championship in the planet.

are today were part of a process strongly linked to the prevailing rationalization and progress ideas forged in the Enlightenment and carried out by the national states and corporations. The mass communication media and later the segmented means of communication (if we can see them in that light) have in their origin the will to expand, an expansion that has the notion of flow as its major support. Information and capital flow capable of going around the globe simultaneously, conveying an image of totality and a relative control.

We agree with Mattelart in regard to the globalization of economy, the structures of the system and the forces that drive the expansion of communication; however, it is imperative to try to understand what are the uses, the practices and conducts of individuals and groups that are triggered by the contact with this new status quo.

The interpretative and ideological lines that branch out of this realization – globalization of the possibility of communication– are many, sometimes leading toward delight, toward euphoria in the face of a new world of possibilities, at times tending to underline the increase of inequalities and the dissolution of old ways of life, of previously well-defined and established cultures, emphasizing the downside of globalizing capitalism.

Here we assume that the globalization process is not whole and homogeneous, but instead, multifaceted. On one hand we have the expansion

of the flows of information and capitals, increase in production and circulation of goods at global level and, on the other, an increase in the concentration of power in large worldwide conglomerates that increase the global production distribution disparity (HOBBSAWM, 2000).

Putting aside the more evident economic aspects and moving toward an understanding of the meaning and identity of individuals and communities that are suffused by globalization, as reminded by Stuart Hall (2005), the broadening of individual and collective sensitive borders, in general lines, allows us to identify two basic movements: tradition and translation. The former would be equivalent to a search for the roots, for an identity that precedes society's current configuration, rummaging through a glorious past – mostly a past that is more like a fantasy than a feasible one – a communal anchoring in the world. The second movement, translation, would be grounded on the attempt to recognize the until then “alien” element and try to integrate it to the dynamics of the community, somehow trying to maintain its particularities without, however, preventing it from being “contaminated” by the different.

Sports in general, but more specifically MMA, when included in this new context, enable the widespread acknowledgement of this tension, since the values presented on the rink often tend toward an appeal to the traditional (it is worth remembering, for instance, that the fighters

are identified by their nationality, some even go in carrying the flags of their countries) but sometimes tend toward hybridization (going back to the fighters' nationality, many don't give interviews in their native languages, but in English, the language that is currently seen as the beacon of global communication).

In this tension between different cultures and ways of live, when the strictest cultural barriers and sense of community founded in the physical proximity are remodeled and stop being the sole possibilities, it is natural for us to expect that somehow the people and the communities that are prevented from recognizing this bigger, "global" dimension will try to attach symbolism to this movement in many ways.

MMA, somehow manages to fit efficiently into the culture as a sport capable of symbolizing and establishing a dialog with these new forthcoming values. Even if globalization – or any other similar term capable of accounting for this increase in information flow and of putting into perspective the previously well-established physical and psychological barriers – is not a complete, equalitarian, and spontaneous process, but instead, the fruit of a project devised by the Enlightenment society to interconnect the whole world, and by the liberalization of the information and capitals flows, the individuals affected by this process need mechanisms and ways of recognizing this new scenario and act within it. In an analogous way to the modern

sports formation process observed by Elias and Dunning (1992), which symbolized the "parlamentarization" of the elite's recreational activities, MMA, somehow, also symbolizes this new contemporary capitalist societies' context.

Even if never fully ideologically feasible, globalization sells the idea of equalitarian distribution and occupation of both productive and ludic activities. The seduction power of the globalization discourse, of the fall of hurdles and barriers, is the selling the idea that individuals are capable of limitless action, the idea that they can act and move about freely in the world, taking immediate advantage of the "pleasures" that every corner of the world has to offer. While it is true that a very small portion of the world's population actually enjoys this positive side of it, it has the means to, and most or all, permission to move around freely around the world, while those who are not part of this global elite go on living their resigned life conforming to the whims of this same elite that manages, strategically, the use of natural and human resources on a global scale.

We go on insisting that, even though the possibilities provided by globalization cannot be enjoyed by all, at least on the ideological level, people live within this spirit. The media helps to maintain this illusion of endless possibility, of individual competence, of free exchange of information, and individual entrepreneurial know-how.

With the end of warfare and ideologies that directly or indirectly dominated the world during the period

between the Second World War and the meltdown of the Soviet Union, the polarization between the two blocks, capitalism and communism, is now sold as multicultural, as plural.

The prevailing ideology is that there are no more worlds and attitudes to be shaped, hearts and minds do be conquered, but only the idea of living life to the fullest as an individual capable of maintaining a dialogue with this new scenario and of moving about thoroughly among different cultures and terrains, continuously taking advantage of the possibilities the interconnection facilitated by communication and goods may offer. So, thinking about MMA as a sport must be, first and foremost, thinking about the ways of this globalized society – even if on the ideological level.

Before bearing fruits, however, MMA needed its seed to find a fertile soil in which to flourish. In order to attain the status that it enjoys today, MMA had to look for a “neutral” territory in which to build its foundations – in this case, the Brazilian territory – having found in BJJ (Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu) its main asset and its main founding “history”.

That martial art improved by the Gracies was extremely seductive in the eyes of this new society that aims at attributing value to hybridization: it was exotic, it was a martial art dormant in the rest of the world; an extremely effective martial art preserved by few, born

in the East and preserved in the West, but most of all, it was a winner art that overthrew the pirouettes and spinning back kicks of the plastic martial arts widely exploited by the movies and video games, subjugating them.

Brazilian Jiu-jitsu was a variety to be extolled as a possible cultural mixture that worked and was able to outshine tradition.

The anthropophagic role played by BJJ was critical for the acceptance of the mixed martial arts on a global level. MMA – mostly UFC – markets itself not as a fight that comes from the East, like judo or karate, for instance, that bear a symbolic weight, a “common sense” about what Eastern martial arts (based on discipline, respect, personal development, etc.) are, or even like boxing – a fight that before the advent of MMA was the one that best represented the “weight” of Western values – but instead as a fight engendered under new hues, imbued with a symbolic weight that, if not neutral, was the closest thing to a crossbred idea, hybrid by excellence, permeable, absorbing, and creative.

Added to this, the fact that with the growing dissolution of the power of the United States and the gradual change in the way of thinking all over the world, the institutions and collective actions and increased power and freedom of individuals – a process that we will call post-modern – the insecurity that previously had a visible concrete cause, the external – or internal – enemy that is constantly lurking, now become diffuse, without

apparent social causes. The weight falls on the individual or on an increasingly more segmented group, the so-called neo-tribes (MAFFESOLI, 2005). Therefore, according to Bauman, most of the post-modern violence can be explained in this way, by the search for individual and group reaffirmation through the solidification of their image. Violence and increased impact are accepted and valued as legitimate, actually, as the only things capable of rendering the individual visible and recognized. We will broaden this position in an attempt to find parallels with the growth of MMA.

The re-collectivization of violence at the service of neo-tribal self-affirmation is just one of the results of the post-modern privatization of identity problems. The other is the tendency to mobilize forms of gradually “normalized” violence, legally allowed and culturally approved, in the process of individual self-affirmation. This is increasingly more guided by the search for flexibility and the permanent opening of options, by the feeling of being connected to the needs of others, and by the reluctance to accept an inconvenience that brings no visible value to the satisfaction of someone’s pleasure (BAUMAN, 2011a. p. 215).

If in a modern context, in a State or society with somewhat well-established purposes and “missions”, with strong institutions capable of maintain the inner cohesion, collective identification and individual action were easier; in a more post-modern context of “relativization” and weakening (not to say fall) of universally accepted social organization models and social roles distribution, it is the small interest groups and the individuals that now need to deal with the world and the others in the best possible way.

If in the classic modern societies, the social role to be fulfilled by individuals was clear – just as deviation, inability and degeneration were also clear; in modern societies, moral is more relative, at least ideologically, the “do-it-yourself”, the “be yourself”, “live to the fullest” are the slogans that substitute the old “down with dictatorship”, “the bourgeoisie stinks’ and so many others.

This new sensitivity and social restructuring, as we have already mentioned, will surely be taken into account when searching for plausible explanations to increasingly justify the interest for and acceptance of MMA fights by individuals.

Ours is the first culture in history that does not reward durability and the first capable of slicing a lifetime into a series of episodes lived with the intention of postponing its lasting consequences and of avoiding firm commitments that might turn such consequences into restrictive ones. Eternity does not matter, unless it serves instant experience. The ‘long term’ is just a short-term *Erlebnisse* package, receptive to an ongoing shuffling and without a privileged succession order. The infinite was reduced to a series of ‘here and nows’; immortality to the never-ending recycling of births and deaths (BAUMAN, 2009, p. 313).

The reflux of big totalizing narratives makes room for the emergence of new and more suitable narratives to the new contemporary capitalist societies’ context. It is not surprising that the emergence and the search for new games, for new sports, have gained so much importance. Thus, MMA may be seen as a new narrative space of liquid modernity (or Post-Modernity).

The recycling of births and deaths suggested by Bauman becomes a metaphor for the fights that take place one after the other, each one with its own narrative and an ending that culminates in the victory or the defeat of another; a full metaphor of the life-death relationship. MMA's dynamic, particularly UFC, by not having a scoring table – it does not follow, for instance, the same logic of a football championship – is in full synch with this “spirit”. One night featuring about 10 fights creates a chain of narratives, which despite being within a bigger narrative – the event night – rarely weaves deep connections among them: every fight is one narrative in its own right; every fight has a world inside it. The very choice of fighters in the card (list of fights of an event) is subjective and does not follow a rational scoring system. The event's managers and entrepreneurs are the ones who decide on the fights and follow agendas that are not always clear and tangible to all who follow the sport.

However, even though the spectator of the sport/show cannot know beforehand the fighters “chosen”, this configuration might just be an explanation and a “symptom” of this new social dynamics. Such logic requires less effort, requires less donation and participation of the “self” in the creation of a macro-narrative (going back to the football example, we can generally say that the fan must attend all the matches of a championship, since the result of the previous match usually influences the next match and very often the result of the games played by other teams also

have an influence in the final ranking), which frees him to enjoy moment to moment, a brief moment that will be rapidly substituted by another one. The adhesion-distention logic that exists in the search for the greatest enjoyment in the shorter possible period of time is the prevailing one.

With this we do not mean to declare the end of big narratives, but instead to demonstrate the emergence of a new social dynamics that runs parallel to the previous one. We are talking about the reign of ambiguity and, therefore, we are merely suggesting a possible approach to the phenomenon under study.

The arguments raised until now are an attempt at understanding the activity in more than its more easily understandable aspect; the issue of the fight itself, the violence, as an attempt to understand that this agonistic element says much more about the new emerging culture than the simple spilling of blood. The language of the fight, understood as the language of the body in movement is as old as humankind and so, the understanding of its premises is so easily recognizable by diverse cultures that it becomes a “wild card” per excellence for this new community that increasingly recognizes its “global capacity”.

Despite the ancestral character of the ludic activity in fighting, we cannot forget that the format that we now know as MMA has gone through a series of “filters” and restrictions

aimed at accommodating the normative values of contemporary capitalist societies.

The MMA activity has this multiple facet: on one hand, as a physical activity, it is the one that comes the closest to the ludic freedom (it is worth remembering that the agonist spirit is one of the main features of any type of game), it is the one easiest to understand by the global community and, on the other hand, its characteristics also highlight the project of the society it is a part of. A project grounded on the growth of profitability, on the linear and exponential progress, on the fast information and capitals flow, and on the intensification of consumption on all levels, both material and symbolic.

While it is an “open” activity, MMA is also widely contaminated (actually, as a sport/show it is already born under this assumption) by the American Way of Life, by the idea of the self-made man, by the idea of maximum distension of the rules (free market, for instance) and entrepreneurship, under the notion that everybody has the same conditions and therefore the best will win (Social Darwinism).

5 Final Considerations

The purpose of this paper is to draw some analytical lines that can be derived from the study of sports and games, specifically presenting some of the main characteristics we believe are the most

pressing to the understanding of the emergence and penetration MMA enjoys nowadays.

Far from the old academic stereotypes and prejudices that prevailed for a long time in regard to the study of sports, this study – like a rich production that is on the rise not only nationally but also internationally – fits in this new trend of attributing value to objects of study that were previously discounted, emphasizing the importance and the richness that the debate about the theme has to offer for a deeper and broader understanding of the relationships of man with himself and with his environment.

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Da marginalidade ao *mainstream*: reflexões sobre MMA (Artes Marciais Mistas) e as sociedades capitalistas contemporâneas

Resumo

O presente artigo tem como objetivo discutir a íntima relação entre as principais características das sociedades capitalistas contemporâneas com um dos esportes/espetáculos que ganha cada vez mais espaço não apenas na mídia brasileira como na mídia internacional: o MMA (sigla em inglês para Artes Marciais Mistas). Para muito além de seu aspecto mais prontamente identificável – o da violência, ou agressividade –, este esporte/espetáculo é bastante paradigmático, pois encarna uma série de valores políticos, econômicos e culturais amplamente valorizados na atual fase de desenvolvimento das sociedades capitalistas, caracterizada majoritariamente pela expansão dos fluxos de informação e mercadorias em nível global, impulsionados principalmente pelo desenvolvimento de novas tecnologias comunicacionais.

Palavras-chave

Esportes. Comunicação. MMA. Globalização.

De la marginalización al *mainstream*: reflexiones acerca de MMA (Artes Marciales Mistas) y las sociedades capitalistas contemporâneas

Resumen

En este artículo intentaremos discutir la íntima relación entre las principales características de las sociedades capitalistas contemporâneas e uno de los deportes/espectáculos que alcanza un gran espacio no apenas en los medios de comunicación de Brasil, sino que en los medios internacionales: el MMA (siglas en inglés para Artes Marciales Mistas). Para mucho adelante de suyo aspecto más prontamente identificable – la violencia o agresividad –, este deporte/espectáculo es bastante paradigmático, pues encarna una serie de valores políticos, económicos y culturales ampliamente valorizados en el presente fases de desarrollo de las sociedades capitalistas, caracterizadas majoritariamente por la expansión de los flujos de información y mercancías en el nivel global, impulsados principalmente por el desarrollo de novas tecnologías de comunicación.

Palabras-Clave

Deportes. Comunicación. MMA. Globalización.

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