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OP-ED CONTRIBUTOR

Bowling for Democracy

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CRICKET, the quintessential English game, is nonetheless one of the most international of sports. It is a dominant game in more countries than any other sport except soccer, in lands as varied as Australia, India, Pakistan, South Africa and the Commonwealth Caribbean. But a glance at the global map of cricket poses a remarkable cultural puzzle.

Why, on the one hand, does the game flourish in lands like Pakistan and India, where a hard-fought series can transfix two nations and even lead to improved diplomatic relations? (Last month's series, in which Pakistan defeated India by 159 runs, concluded with a historic meeting between Pakistan's president and India's prime minister.) And why, on the other hand, is cricket not much played in other former British colonies like Canada - or, for that matter, in the United States, with its heritage and "special relationship" with Britain?

The puzzle only deepens when one considers that cricket was once popular in both Canada and the United States. It rivaled baseball for most of the 19th century, with as many stories in the sports pages of The New York Times until 1880. Indeed, the world's first international test match was played between Canada and the United States in 1844. So the puzzle is not so much why it was never adopted in North America, but why in the early 20th century it was subsequently rejected.

Many popular explanations are flawed. Climate has nothing to do with it; cricket emerged as a summer game, and is easily played in North America during mild weather. North American multiculturalism is hardly a factor, given the game's popularity in the multicultural societies of the Caribbean and South Africa. Ethnicity cannot be the answer: while the Scots, with their preference for curling, predominated among early Canadian immigrants, there was a far greater proportion of English in North America than in India or the Caribbean; meanwhile, the preponderance of the Irish in Australia did not prevent cricket from becoming that country's national pastime. Why is it, then, that hockey and baseball eventually trumped cricket in Canada and the United States?

The most common argument is that cricket was too long and slow for fast-paced North America; formal test matches last for five days. This explanation at least has some merit - though not in the manner usually understood.

Cricket lost ground in North America because of the egalitarian ethos of its societies. Rich Americans and Canadians had constant anxiety about their elite status, which prompted them to seek ways to differentiate themselves from the masses. One of those ways was cricket, which was cordoned off as an elites-only pastime, a sport only for those wealthy enough to belong to expensive cricket clubs committed to Victorian ideals of sportsmanship. In late 19th-century Canada, according to one historian, "the game became associated more and more with an older and more old-fashioned Anglo-Saxon elite."

This elite appropriation played into the hands of baseball entrepreneurs who actively worked to diminish cricket's popularity. A. G. Spalding, described in the Baseball Hall of Fame as the "organizational genius of baseball's pioneer days," was typical. "I have declared cricket is a genteel game," he mocked in "America's National Game," his 1911 best seller. "It is. Our British cricketer, having finished his day's labor at noon, may don his negligee shirt, his white trousers, his gorgeous hosiery and his canvas shoes, and sally forth to the field of sport, with his sweetheart on one arm and his cricket bat under the other, knowing that he may engage in his national pastime without soiling his linen or neglecting his lady."

Baseball, in contrast, was sold as a rugged, fast-paced, masculine game, befitting a rugged, fast-paced economic power. Americans of all classes swallowed the chauvinistic line. It was also great business for Spalding. By inventing elaborate baseball gear and paraphernalia, he created a market for his new sporting-goods company.

In the remaining British colonies, however, the opposite happened. In these rigidly unequal societies the colonial elites and their native allies never had any anxieties about their status, and the British actively promoted the game - first to native elites, then to the masses.

In India, the wealthy Parsis first took up the game in emulation of their British masters. Soon, royalty throughout the subcontinent adopted it. English-style grammar schools were an important source of exposure to upwardly mobile native men. In the Caribbean, grammar schools made the imperial game a core feature of their education and made competition possible between different classes and ethnic groups without disrupting the social fabric. As C. L. R. James, the famed Trinidadian intellectual and cricket enthusiast, wrote in his memoir: "I haven't the slightest doubt that the clash of race, caste and class did not retard but stimulated West Indian cricket."

Both colonizer and colonized developed a stake in the popularization of the game. To the British colonists, the "imperial game" was the perfect vehicle for civilizing the colonial masses (as it had previously, they imagined, civilized generations of upwardly mobile British schoolboys). For elite members of the colonized, it was a way to curry favor. And for the masses, who quickly mastered the game, it was a symbolically powerful and clandestine form of political liberation as they soon learned to literally beat the British and their native surrogates at their own game.

The game itself partly facilitated this process. Cricket requires no contact between players, and its strict and complex rules, dress code and officiating largely eliminate any risk of embarrassment in play with those of different ranks or castes. So did the careful allocation of positions; less glamorous roles like bowling and fielding were assigned to social inferiors while those of specialist batsmen and team captain were reserved for elites.

Much the same was true of 19th-century Australia, at the time a highly stratified colony whose masses were descended from prisoners. Cricket helped antipodean elites cultivate their Englishness, but the size and isolation of their European settlements limited the extent to which they could be truly exclusive. North American-style upper-class appropriation of the game was out of the question. Cricket became a powerful unifying force, and prowess at the game, according to one cricket historian, was "the mark of an amateur gentleman" from any class.

As in the Caribbean, cricket was also a major element in the formation of Australian nationalism. The biennial matches with England solidified the link between colony and mother country even as it fostered Australian national pride when the Australians increasingly came to whip the British at their imperial game.

WHAT broader lessons might the history of cricket have for the globalization of Western cultural practices? It shows that such practices can be promoted or discouraged from the top down; it is not necessarily a bottom-up

process, as is commonly believed. Nor does such downward dissemination require the point of a gun. The passion for cricket in places like Pakistan and India also shows that a complex Western cultural practice can be adopted in its entirety by very different cultures, even when highly identified with its country of origin.

Might the same be true of other Western cultural practices, like democracy?

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