

## More Than Just a Game: Cricket in England and the West Indies

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### Abstract

*This paper charts the history of cricket from the Victorian era in England, through the periods of imperialism, and independence, in the West Indies, and following it through into the present era of commercialisation. In so doing it attempts to illustrate how cricket, throughout its history, has been a game that has been driven by forces that lay, to borrow from cricketer and intellectual C. L. R. James, beyond its boundaries. That is to say, cricket has been driven by political forces that have embedded in the game various symbols and meanings that are dependent upon one's relation to the game itself. Furthermore, by relating the case of cricket to other similar examples, it hopes to demonstrate how this politicization of sport is not unique to cricket.*

When, on June 29, 1950, the West Indies cricket team defeated England for the first time in a test match, few could have understood the greater significance that accompanied the falling of the final wicket. That first victory, and the subsequent series win that summer, became great sources of pride for people throughout the West Indies as they joined together to celebrate victory against their imperial ruler. Over the next few decades, as West Indian cricket went through its golden age, the sport came to have great cultural importance for the accompanying movements for independence. Its impact was as great as, if not greater, than literature and other forms of high culture. This relationship between cricket and nationalism is an example of how sport has become a form of political and cultural expression, not just in the West Indies, but all over the world.

In his classic 1963 book, *Beyond a Boundary*, cricketer, writer, and intellectual, C.L.R. James gives his account of how cricket in the Caribbean evolved from an imperial game to a form of Caribbean cultural expression every bit as important as opera, dance, and literature. As James points out however, the game of cricket could never be just a game. From its rise to prominence in England during the Victorian era, through the spread of the game by imperial elites, to the West Indian drive for independence, and up to the present era of commercialisation, cricket has always been a game that is affected by forces that lay beyond its boundaries. It is by examining these forces, and how they have been played out in the real world, that one can see how cricket is related to several issues in contemporary political science. Cricket has become a form of political and cultural expression precisely because people have used it in such a way. Therefore, by examining how different people have used cricket, one can see the real political and cultural motives that lay behind their actions. The experiences that are shown within cricket can also be seen manifesting themselves in other sports, in other nations: the link between sport and politics is not unique to

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cricket in England and the West Indies.

The first thing that must be understood about cricket is the way in which Victorian social values came to be tied with it, despite the fact that it is not a Victorian institution. The version of the game that the Victorians played had taken shape and solidified during the Hanoverian era, and despite their tendency to modernize other forms of leisure during the same period, the Victorians were very reluctant to change any of the traditional laws or implements of cricket. This is because it was during this period that the English came to revere cricket as a great national symbol.<sup>1</sup> Cricket, it must be understood however, was much more than just a national symbol for the Victorians. Rather, it also became closely tied to religion and morality, as it was believed to represent the ideals of good health, self-sacrifice, discipline, and loyalty to the crown. It was thought that these values could be instilled in people by having them play the game. As a result, all sectors of Victorian society came to revere cricket and everyone in the nation was encouraged to play. The links that cricket had developed between itself and positive social values led people to view cricket, along with the crown, as a durable institution of social harmony. Because cricket was also viewed as an exclusively English creation, and thus untarnished by outside influences, it also became viewed as a symbol of English cultural supremacy.<sup>2</sup>

Looking at this, one can see that the Victorians had merely associated this older game with the positive values that they saw as being representative of their own society. Despite this, and even though the game has gone through significant changes since then, cricket has remained inextricably linked with Victorian social values.<sup>3</sup> This is what Eric Hobsbawm means when he speaks of an invented tradition as an attempt to have the values of a suitable historical past continue by aligning certain current practices with these acceptable values.<sup>4</sup> In this case, the Victorians -- and English society since that era -- have assigned to cricket the values of a period that remains a great source of pride. The game of cricket was not a new invention, but the values that came to be associated with it were. It was this great pride and sense of cultural supremacy that led the English to use cricket as a tool of imperialism. A sense of responsibility had led the Victorians to believe that it was their duty to civilize people that were not as advanced as themselves.<sup>5</sup>

This notion was spread throughout the colonies during this era via not only the individual colonialists but also the entire imperial structure. Everyone, from early plantation bosses in the Caribbean to the more formal leaders of the imperial structure, took cricket with them when they left England because they viewed it as having a much greater purpose than providing a mere form of recreation or entertainment.<sup>6</sup> The greater purpose that imperial rulers

<sup>1</sup> Keith A P. Sandiford, "Cricket and Victorian Society," *Journal of Social History* 17 (1983): 303-317.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> John Simons, "The 'Englishness' of English Cricket," *Journal of Popular Culture* 29 (1995): 41-50.

<sup>4</sup> Eric Hobsbawm, "Introduction: Inventing Traditions," in *The Invention of Traditions*. eds. Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 1-14.

<sup>5</sup> Sandiford.

<sup>6</sup> For the more formal leaders see: Sandiford; Brian Stoddart, "Sport, Cultural Imperialism, and Colonial Response in the British Empire," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 30 (1988): 649-673; Wendy Varney, "Howzat! Cricket From Empire to Globalization," *Peace Review* 11, no. 4 (1999): 557-563. For the

and laymen alike saw for cricket was its ability to transmit and establish certain cultural values in the colonies. While this was not the only way in which imperial rulers forced their values on colonial societies,<sup>7</sup> sport, and cricket in particular, was viewed as one of the best ways of accomplishing this goal.<sup>8</sup> It was believed that sport would have two distinct results when it was imposed on the colonial population. First, it would act as a sort of civilizing agent that would impart on the colonists the values and correct social behaviour they lacked (meaning those of the model Victorian society). Second, it would also be able to form a sort of common cultural bond that would connect the whole empire together.<sup>9</sup>

In this respect, one can see a link here between the English use of cricket in the West Indies, and the American cultural experience at home and overseas. At home, educators of the progressive era in the United States attempted to assimilate the children of European immigrants, just as the English did with its colonists. While overseas, in places such as the Philippines, they regarded it as their duty to civilize those who they believed were inferior, just as the English did. In both cases, sport was used as an important tool to accomplish these goals. The American use of sport in this way derived from the fact that the Americans of the progressive era, and of other times, much like the English of the Victorian era, believed that sport could play an important role in the transfer of social values.<sup>10</sup>

These notions of sport being used as an imperial tool have strong resonance with a couple of the themes that Edward Said covers in his book, *Culture and Imperialism*. First, and most importantly, the attempt on the part of the imperial ruler to use sport as a way of having colonial societies adopt their social and cultural values is an example of what Said terms cultural imperialism. Cultural imperialism is differentiated from classical imperialism (that is to say imperialism based upon a geographic area) because of its relation to values and ideas that leads to more insidious and long lasting effects. The sense of cultural supremacy meanwhile can be viewed as being an example of the sort of arrogance that Said believes is required on the part of the imperial ruler to maintain control over people in distant lands. Said also argues that this is driven by a belief on the part of the imperial ruler that it is their duty to subjugate the people whom they see as being inferior to themselves. These points appear to perfectly mirror the feelings of both the English and Americans in their different, yet similar, experiences.<sup>11</sup>

Despite the motives underlying the transplantation of cricket in the West Indies, the game was very well received in the islands by the colonists. The game was so well received in fact, that the colonial population voluntarily accepted it even without formal prompting from the

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early bosses see: Brian Stoddart, "Caribbean Cricket: The Role of Sport in Emerging small-nation Politics," *International Journal*, 43, no.4 (1998): 618-642.

<sup>7</sup> It is important to state here that in this discussion, when one refers to "colonists," "colonial populations," "colonial societies," or "West Indians," one is in not referring to the entire West Indian population, but rather the people of non-English descent.

<sup>8</sup> Richard Holt, *Sport and the British* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), 202-203, 212. See also: C. Searle, "Race Before Wicket: Cricket, Empire and the White Rose," *Race and Class* 31, no.3 (1990): 31-48.

<sup>9</sup> Holt, 202-203, 212; Stoddart (1988).

<sup>10</sup> Gerald R. Gems, "Sports, War and Ideological Imperialism," *Peace Review* 11, no.4 (1999): 573-578.

<sup>11</sup> For the points made about Said, see: Edward W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York, Knopf, 1993), especially chapter 1.

English.<sup>12</sup> The main reason for this, at the outset at least, was that the colonists wished to emulate their imperial rulers as a way of dismantling the barriers that had been set up between them.<sup>13</sup> What actually occurred was that the division between the groups remained intact while the colonists continued to be subjected to English values.<sup>14</sup> This is because playing the game meant conforming to the values that it was supposed to represent, namely an acceptance of the continuation of the Empire, and Victorian social practices.<sup>15</sup>

Even though the West Indians may have initially accepted cricket, over time they became much more resentful of its presence. The slavish emulation of whites by blacks in cricket and the continued barriers between the two groups led to great frustration and aggression on the part of West Indian cricketers. This aggression found its outlet in the form of the cricket bat, as West Indian cricketers sought to outperform whites in all areas of the game.<sup>16</sup> Cricket came to represent not only English values and ideals but also a form of political demonstration where frustration could be taken out on the ball. In this way, cricket became a struggle against English supremacy, where the West Indians successful participation in the game became an expression of their nationhood.<sup>17</sup> This striving for recognition through cricket resulted in the development of a larger number of great West Indian cricketers starting in the late 1920s.<sup>18</sup> As others came to see the West Indians as great cricketers, West Indians came to see themselves in the same light, thereby resulting in a greater national confidence.<sup>19</sup>

Where the English had used cricket as a tool of cultural domination, the West Indians responded by using it as a tool of freedom and nationalism. The confidence and growing sense of nationalism that West Indians received from their excellence at cricket in turn formed the basis of a common cultural bond throughout the Caribbean. Where West Indian society had once been divided into several sectors based upon factors such as geography, skin colour, and status, cricket came to form an integral part of a new and unified Caribbean culture. This new Caribbean culture rallied around cricket to express support for independence and a fundamental rejection of not only the practice of colonialism, but also the values that it stood for. At the same time however, this rising feeling of nationalism, because of its link with cricket, remained tied to England and the values that it represented.<sup>20</sup> The dilemma that this juxtaposition created within West Indian society is wonderfully expressed in the words of Jamaican Orlando Patterson.

Cricket is the game we love for it is the only game that we can play well, the only activity which gives us some international prestige. But it is the game that deep

<sup>12</sup> Holt, 212; Stoddart (1988).

<sup>13</sup> Stoddart (1998).

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*; Cyril L. R. James, *Beyond a Boundary* (New York, Pantheon, 1983), especially chapters 2, 3, & 4.

<sup>15</sup> Stoddart (1988).

<sup>16</sup> Maurice St. Pierre, "West Indian Cricket Part 1: A Socio-Historical Appraisal," *Caribbean Quarterly* 19, no. 2 (1973a): 7-27.

<sup>17</sup> Searle.

<sup>18</sup> St. Pierre (1973a).

<sup>19</sup> Holt, 221-222.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

down we must hate-the game of the master. Hence it becomes on the symbolic level the English culture we have been forced to love, for it is the only real one we have, but the culture we must despise for what it has done to us...<sup>21</sup>

The example of how West Indian nationalism developed out of the game that had been imposed by the "imperial leader" can be related to more contemporary examples involving sport in Canada and the United States. The victory of the Toronto Blue Jays in the World Series of baseball represented the first time that a Canadian team had beaten the Americans at their own game in such a high profile setting, in much the same way that the West Indian victory in 1950 was a watershed for West Indian sport and culture. Just as in the West Indian example of 1950, the Blue Jay victory resulted in a wave of nationalism that spread across the country, despite the lack of Canadian players actually on the team.<sup>22</sup> Both of these victories came against the "imperial" power in games that are viewed as domains of dominance by the imperial power and resulted in nationalistic pride in the "colonial" nation.

Here again one can see the some of Said's ideas playing out in the real world. The fact that the West Indian colonists accepted cricket is symptomatic of what Said believes is an integral part of imperialism, the notion that it requires the support of both sides in order for it to continue. In this understanding, the subordinate people in the imperial experience must accept their role in the system, just as the rulers must. Said also points out, however, that each side has its own set of perspective, interpretations, and emotions regarding their common history. Therefore, the meaning of this common past is dependent upon which side one stands.<sup>23</sup> This helps to explain why the English can reminisce about the glory days of empire while the West Indians challenged the empire, and celebrate its fall.

The conflict within colonial society that develops out of the split feelings about the sport is symbolic of a greater divide that tears at these societies. This type of divide, Said argues, is typical of the imperial legacy (cultural imperialism) that is left to burden the colonists when the formal bonds of empire (classical imperialism) have been removed. Despite this apparent antagonism, Said claims that all cultures are formed out of cultural hybrids such as this. This point stems from Said's belief that no culture stands alone and that the experiences of different cultures inevitably impact those they come into contact with, and thus the hybrid. For Said, the antagonism that exists is an example of the negative impact that cultural imperialism has, as it results in attempts to keep cultures separate that lead to a rehashing of the old imperial rivalries. Instead, Said believes that people should acknowledge, accept, and celebrate, their shared experiences so that a more understanding world can result, rather than one that is fraught with antagonisms.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>21</sup> Orlando Paterson, "The Ritual of Cricket," *Jamaica Journal* 3, no.1 (1969): 22-25 quoted in Helen Tiffin, "Cricket, Literature and the Politics of De-colonisation: The case of C.L.R. James," in *Sports, Money, Morality and the Media*, eds. Richard Cashman and Michael Mckernan (Kensington, Australia: New South Wales University Press, 1981), 177-193.

<sup>22</sup> Sean Hayes, "America's National Pastime and Canadian Nationalism," in *Sport and Memory in North America*, ed. Stephen Wieting (London: Frank Cass Publishers, 2001), 154-184.

<sup>23</sup> For the points made about Said, see: Said (1993), especially chapter 1.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

So while the West Indian sense of nationalism found in cricket may have derived from England, it was nonetheless viewed as being distinctly West Indian. C.L.R. James argues that the West Indian way of playing cricket was fundamentally different from the traditional English way of playing. This is related to James's idea that cricket was a form of art, the presentation of which had just as much political significance and impact on the definition of what it meant to be West Indian as any other form of art. James argues that while the English demonstrated their own form of artistic representation in cricket, so too did the West Indians. The West Indian style is claimed to be more expressive and stylistic than the traditional, straight English version, a symbol of the freedom and independence that the West Indians sought through the game.<sup>25</sup>

While it may be difficult for some to accept the notion that cricket is a form of artistic expression, it is clear that there was a direct link between cricket and political or cultural expression during the Caribbean independence era. The great cricketers of the era were born out of the same social movement as the great literary and political minds of the day. There was therefore a strong link between the ideas of those minds, and the actions of their fellow cricketers: each in their own way called for change.<sup>26</sup> James himself was a cricketer before he was a writer, and he credits the game for having taught him a great deal about politics.<sup>27</sup> In this situation the workings of sport were very similar to the use of language, as the sport offered the opportunity for the player to express their desire for national independence.<sup>28</sup>

Cricketers in West Indian society starting in this period have come to be great political symbols or visionaries. During the independence era, cricketers were exalted to a new hero status within West Indian society that required them to be mindful of the political ramifications of their actions, if they were not already.<sup>29</sup> During this era of the 1930s, great Trinidadian cricketer Learie Constantine had his play restricted by the need to conform to a socially accepted position, before later becoming a spokesperson for the West Indian cause.<sup>30</sup> In the independence era, however, cricketers were allowed -- if not expected -- to use cricket as a way of speaking out.<sup>31</sup> The cricketers did speak out, and while a good many have done it outside of the game, a great many more did it within the game itself.<sup>32</sup> The link between cricketers and social activism leads to a link between these men and their role as public intellectuals.

In his book, *Representations of the Intellectual*, Said discusses a number of different understandings of what it means to be an intellectual. While cricketers do not conform to Said's definition, they do share some of the same characteristics. Caribbean cricketers performed the role of the intellectual by standing up against the forces of injustice in the name of freedom and

<sup>25</sup> See in particular: James, chapters 6, 7, 11 and 16.

<sup>26</sup> Searle.

<sup>27</sup> James, 71.

<sup>28</sup> Helen Tiffin, "Cricket, Literature and the Politics of De-colonisation: The case of C.L.R. James," in *Sports, Money, Morality and the Media*, eds. Richard Cashman and Michael McKernan (Kensington, Australia: New South Wales University Press, 1981), 177-193.

<sup>29</sup> Maurice St. Pierre, "West Indian Cricket Part 2: An Aspect of Creolization," *Caribbean Quarterly* 19, no.3 (1973b): 20-35.

<sup>30</sup> James, 105-109.

<sup>31</sup> St. Pierre (1973b).

<sup>32</sup> Searle.

equality. In Said's mind however, a part of being an intellectual was the notion that they are not just someone playing a role, but rather someone who is fully committed to the intellectual cause, in all manner of fields and at all costs, expressing an idea to and for the public. So while the cricketers spoke out in much the same way as real intellectuals, their scope was not large enough to be consistent with Said's definition.<sup>33</sup>

The fact that the cricketers did express these ideas is important nonetheless; the fact that they played such a central role in the West Indian fight for independence is perhaps symptomatic of the fall of the public intellectual. Michael Ignatieff bemoans what he sees as the fall of the public intellectual because of the absence of any real, substantive challenge to the politics of the day. A rise in populism and over-democratization, he argues, has left no one to speak for the public need. The fact that West Indian people have been forced to find arguably their most important "intellectuals" on the cricket field is a perfect example of what Ignatieff sees as a lack of real intellectuals to speak for the public.<sup>34</sup>

As cricket began to take on an increasingly important role in the expression of West Indian nationalism, tension inevitably arose between the West Indian and English conceptions of the game. The West Indians believed that the best way of advancing their nationalist sentiment was to beat the English at their own game.<sup>35</sup> There was the equal notion on the other side that the English could perhaps retain their cultural supremacy, and therefore reinforce their grip on the colonies, by beating the West Indians.<sup>36</sup> The test match provided an arena for the two sides to dramatize their conflict, as tension remained high on the pitch, especially throughout the independence era.<sup>37</sup> Even after independence was firmly established, cricket remained a way for the former colonists to stroke back at the imperial ruler for their past sins.<sup>38</sup>

These tensions can once again be related to the antagonisms that Said envisioned developing out of cultural imperialism. Said noted how pressure exerted on the colonial society by imperial rulers would inevitably result in a "push back" by the colonies. In the West Indian experience, cricket was one of the ways that the colonists pushed back. What worried Said, however, was that the tensions and antagonisms of the past would continue to be played out over and over again in the future as the notion that the two cultures were separate remained. The fact that the cricket ground has remained a scene where the colony confronts the imperial ruler for the sins of the past speaks to this idea.<sup>39</sup> The fundamental cause of all of this is related back to the idea of the invented tradition. In this case, the invention comes not from a false continuation of English values of the past, but rather the sidestepping of the English influence to refer instead to a distinct West Indian historical background.<sup>40</sup> It is perhaps arguable that had West Indians such as James been able to accept the "Englishness" of cricket, rather than

<sup>33</sup> For Said's understanding of public intellectuals see: Edward W. Said, *Representations of the Intellectual: The 1993 Reith Lectures* (London, Vintage, 1994), especially chapter 1.

<sup>34</sup> For Ignatieff's arguments see: Michael Ignatieff, "The Decline and Fall of the Public Intellectual," *Queens Quarterly* 104, no.3 (1997): 395-403.

<sup>35</sup> Tiffin.

<sup>36</sup> Searle.

<sup>37</sup> Holt, 222.

<sup>38</sup> St. Pierre (1973b).

<sup>39</sup> For the points made about Said, see: Said (1993), especially chapter 1.

<sup>40</sup> For the points made about "invented tradition," see: Hobsbawm.

demonstrating their own uniqueness, these antagonisms may not have been so great.

The change in reference point from an English to a West Indian one is an aspect of the notion of branding which has found its way into West Indian cricket. Peter van Ham expresses the idea behind this in his discussion about the rise of the brand state. The branded state, van Ham argues, uses aspects of its history, geography, and ethnic motifs to develop its own distinct image. This image is then used to sell the branded state to the globalized world. Nevertheless, this constructed image lacks any sense of the true national identity and nationalism. The notion that the West Indian game had more panache than that of the English game is an example of this, with the West Indies attempting to show off their less conservative, more free-spirited side.<sup>41</sup> Now, as a result of the West Indies selling themselves through cricket, the only thing that people in other nations tend to know of them is their cricket image,<sup>42</sup> while the actual West Indian culture is clearly more diverse than this.

Cricket has indeed had a long and colourful history from when it was first played by shepherders in England to the more commercialized game that is played today. Through all of this has survived the idea that cricket is more than just a game as it continues to represent a great many things to a great many people. While West Indians see the game with a great sense of pride and a part of what it means to be West Indian, the English use the game in exactly the same way. Despite this, the two sides have clearly imparted on the game their own values and preconceptions, which has resulted in completely different understandings of the game.

The example of imperial cricket is a historical one and yet it is very much a contemporary one. While it may sound cliché, one cannot know the true nature of the world in which they live if they do not understand the past and how it is related to the present. The example of cricket games in the past have mirrored similar examples in the present and have been helpful in understanding current theories about the nature of the world in which the sports-as-politics game is played. Sports such as cricket are intensely political because they are played by humans. They reflect the human tendency to rule and divide just as much as they do the tendency for humans to play for pure recreation and entertainment. All one should need to play the game is a bat and a ball and eleven people per team. Unfortunately, when there are people involved, no game could ever be so simple.

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<sup>42</sup> Stoddart.

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