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Physical Practices and Sportification: Between Institutionalisation and Standardisation. The Example of Three Activities in France

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Many physical activities, from traditional games to emerging practices, have been and still are confronted with the 'sportification' process. Sports historians and sociologists have produced numerous isolated monographs to try and comprehend this development. Through the compared analysis of three activities – break-dancing, spelaology and mixed martial arts – this study prolongs the modelling effort initiated by Renson to understand the fundamental elements which simultaneously encourage and slow down this process. It shows that this conflict crystallises around the degree of standardisation of a practice and its institutional recognition. To protect the original identity of these activities, their sportification process cannot be completed.

Keywords: sportification; institutionalisation; standardisation; break-dancing; mixed martial arts; spelaology

Introduction

Numerous historical works have attempted to bring to light the sportification process of physical activities which began in the eighteenth century. Borrowed from Elias,¹ who speaks about 'sportisation', the term refers to the transformation of traditional practices or to the emergence of new practices which gradually join organisations that have the power to define

the rules of sport-like recreations more precisely, strictly and explicitly, oriented around an ethos of 'fair play' (...). Non-playing officials such as referees, umpires, timekeepers and judges, with an array of sport-specific sanctions at their disposal, also began to be introduced.²

More specifically, the sportification process can be broken down to three fundamental mechanisms. One can first observe an institutionalisation of the practice with the setting up of bureaucratisation and formalisation of standards (regulations and standardisation of places and times of practice). The latter come along with the implementation of championships entailing the hierarchical organisation of performances and a classification according to level, age and sex. Concurrently, the competitive model leads to a desire for performance through training, creation of sports centres, role specialisation (trainers, sportsmen, referees and judges) and spreading and teaching of technical patterns. Simultaneously, one can often observe that these activities are increasingly staged and given a lot of media coverage, more or less positively as the case may be. Eventually, as developed by Guttmann,³ the sports criteria will be characterised by seven crucial elements: secularism, equality, specialisation, rationalisation, bureaucracy, quantification and records.

Out of the large sum of studies related to sportification, we can retain several important elements. A first set of historical researches attempts to envisage the transformation of former practices – ritual practices or traditional games – and their more or less chaotic sportification process.⁴ A number of sociological works emphasise the emergence and development of ‘new’ practices and how these evolved into more standardised sports forms. This is the case of activities like parkour and street golf⁵ or mountain bike.⁶ Many researchers bring to light the resistances and tensions linked to sportification⁷; others adopt a critical vision of the process, denouncing the standardisation it implies and the impoverishment – even mutilation or total disappearance – of traditional practices.⁸ Sportification is then envisaged as a process of globalisation which can also be observed in other social activities.⁹

Renson¹⁰ presents a panorama of the various studies in this field and wonders about the relationship between traditional games and modern sports. He proposes a modelling based on several developed historical cases. He points out the fact that some authors try to demonstrate how sports are ‘colonising’ all other forms of activities.¹¹ Others evoke this process as a regeneration of traditional forms of practices,¹² thus promoting regional cultural identity. This resurgence of traditional games is sometimes analysed as symptomatic of a transition from modernity to post-modernity.

Thus, two models appear to be conflicting, modern sports on one side and traditional games on the other, the former enforcing a kind of hegemony demanding that the practices be standardised and globalised.¹³ Besides, the links and differences between these two forms of practice are analysed by several authors. Einarsson¹⁴ sets cross-cultural cooperation against cultural isolation. Eichberg¹⁵ evokes three possible models: ‘sportisation (modernisation), pedagogisation and folklorisation’. Resuming this idea, Renson¹⁶ speaks about ‘exteriorisation’ to indicate the process whereby a traditional game follows the way of modern sports and is thus forced to revise its original structures and functions and to adopt a type of standardisation. He gives the example of judo in Japan which is practiced within two organisations supporting different models of practice.¹⁷ ‘Interiorisation’ corresponds to a process of folklorisation and differentiation of the games, aiming at protecting their original cultural forms. Then the last way, the way of ‘mediorientation’, leads to globalisation and hybridisation, offering a cultural adjustment of traditional games to modern society while trying to retain a regional and/or ethnic identity. In this group, he gives the example of the road bowls or bullets in Ireland, of Klootschieten in the Netherlands and of Bosseln or Klootschesses in Germany and explains how these three activities joined within the frame of the ‘International Bowlpla Association’.

In this article, we do not intend to specifically reflect on traditional games and on their resistance or adjustment to sports, but rather to study recent and different physical practices (though coming from plural traditions), in order to probe and see what stand they take with regard to sports. More precisely, we are going to focus on the sportification process of three activities. Each of them, with its own specificities, has to face the rigidity of the French sports system. Indeed, the Olympic and Sports movement is closely related to the State in a strongly centralised organisation of physical activities. Since 1940, the state has taken over control of the sports movement. This *tour de force*, made possible by war times, was turned into an exchange system after the war: the Ministry in charge of sports proposes objectives and the sports federations make a commitment to try and attain them in return for quite important subsidies. The French Sports and Olympic National Committee plays the role of a decentralised International Olympic Committee structure, making sure that the Olympic Charter ethical rules are followed. It is a major intermediary between federations and the Ministry. These central representatives play a normative role through applying the same

programme with each and every federation. In the face of this alliance, the development of new activities is restrained. In order to exist in the sports system, to benefit from the public funds which greatly support the clubs or to be acknowledged by a State diploma allowing the teaching of the activity, the promoters of a new physical activity have to conform to the dominating state model and start a sportification process. They are then pulled between the wish to be acknowledged by both the sports system and the State, and the necessity to upkeep the specificities of their activities. An analysis of these tensions and of their developments over time, seen through three different activities, is at the heart of our reflections.

The questions raised are of a historical nature because they focus on the development of the activities over time (more or less long according to each activity) in their relationships with the sportification process and with the French sports system; they are also of a sociological nature in so far as they question the structural and symbolic modifications engendered by this process.

For this demonstration, three activities will be mobilised, borrowed from different groups of activities: an outdoor activity, an artistic activity and a combat activity. In a way, these three activities integrate the three patterns identified by Pociello¹⁸: the hedonic pattern, playful and built on relatively free modes – break-dancing; the hard competitive pattern – mixed martial arts (MMA) and the adventurous pattern – spelaeology. Indeed, in these activities, several elements differ, not only the gestural forms but also the underlying ‘philosophy’.¹⁹ One activity favours discovery and is tinged with ecology,²⁰ whereas the other two are very much permeated with American models, illustrating once again the Anglo-Saxon imperialism at work in sports practices²¹ as well as being heavily submitted to the demands from the media. This selection of practices has thus been guided by a concern for diversity in the sports field.²²

All three emerged or evolved in the 1980s, a period of powerful innovation in the field of physical activities when the traditional sport model was threatened by new forms of alternative practices, such as outdoor and ecological activities²³ or by urban glide.²⁴

The activities we have selected for examination are break-dancing, which stems from hip-hop, an artistic activity and an interface between urban, young and artistic cultures²⁵; spelaeology, an outdoor practice very much anchored in the ‘green’ dimension and MMA, a free fight practice which stirred up the media because of the violence of its caged combats, especially in the USA, but which, in France, is trying to acquire the necessary respectability to become organised within a traditional, competitive set-up.

Although very different, these three activities fit the framework called ‘mediorientation’ by Renon. This midway position can be measured through its distance from the cross-cultural characteristics of sport²⁶ as well as from the French sports organisation system which imposes an institutionalised model under State supervision. Thus, the constraints of the French sports system reveal that its classic sportification models are unable to deal with emerging practices, as underlined by Terret²⁷ regarding fitness.

Not being ‘true sports’, their relationship to the sportification process is complex and this needs to be clarified. Our objective is to refine this mediorientation notion in order to show the different forms it can take and the problems posed to each of these activities for which the process can be intended or suffered, encouraged or slowed down.

Two central elements of the sportification process will be discussed here, thus making it possible to understand the position of these three activities from the mediorientation group: standardisation and institutionalisation. Institutionalisation is synonymous with unified structures organised into a hierarchy and managing the practice from national to international levels (like federations). Standardisation means setting up standards with a common reference table managed by specialised bodies including professionals. The standardisation process has

an impact on regulations, competitive forms, and also on the choreographic figures which can thus be estimated.

To bring these two processes to light, we shall analyse the organisations that are crucial to the various physical practices, as well as the competitive set-up that reveals both the institutionalisation and the standardisation processes. Indeed competition is really the crux of the definition of sport given by Parlebas²⁸ or Guttmann²⁹; it also drags in its trail a whole set of fundamental modifications which are the essence of a sports practice: classification, regulations, technical records, directory and so on. Competition is more specifically characterised by five fundamental elements: an organising institution, standardised trials, regulations, officials (judges, referees, etc.), along with classification and hierarchical organisation of performances.

Methods

Our work is based upon three enquiries carried out within the three physical activities in consideration. We have defined a wide panel of indicators which make it possible to characterise the sportification process and, more specifically, the competition development: organisers, formal recognition of competitions by sports and/or state authorities, judges, techniques, regulations and assessment criteria. Adjusting these criteria to each specific activity, an interview work ($n = 35$) was led with the defenders of the various forms of practices – representatives of official organisations as well as of dissident trends – in order to identify and characterise the various possible avenues and what is at stake in the conflicts. This work was completed by an analysis of written sources, whether official – stemming from sports institutions or statutory texts from the Ministry of Sport – or informal, emanating from specialised publications (*Spéléo*, *Karaté Bushido*) or from specialised websites hosting forums. The analysis of these written sources leans on the same criteria to complete the interviews and get a better comprehension of the actors' positions.

Break-Dancing³⁰

Battles: A New Form of Competitive Confrontation for Break-Dancing

The artistic-physical forms expressed within the hip-hop culture are many³¹; three of them clearly stand out, each containing several forms of expression: musical, graphic and danced (break-dancing). The values of the hip-hop culture – 'peace, love, unity and fun' – passed on by Afrika Bambaataa, a leader coming from the Bronx district of New York³² has been spreading since the 1980s and a French Zulu Nation was born. The spreading of hip-hop and then break-dancing in France owes a lot to the media sphere and especially to Sidney's TV programme, H.I.P H.O.P, during the year 1984. It contributed to make this artistic form known and to integrate it into the youth culture.³³ The various artistic forms, originally bound up with the hip-hop movement, gradually separated and this is how break-dancing developed as such. Its forms and practice places are numerous: streets, parties, training centres, training courses and dancing lessons, shows (dance companies and associations), as well as mediatised dance spaces (clips broadcasted on TV and on the Internet, concerts and musicals). Since the 1990s, the 'battle' aspect of the activity has been taking a growing importance within the movement. Many dancers began to dance in the street with friends. 'Underground battles' or street shows were organised on the main squares of cities, thus invaded by break-dancers. The '*pattern of being challenged inside a circle, and the presence of onlookers*' represents a typical practice of the late 1980s, but

which has lost speed in France since then: for more visibility, dancers go to organised battles: *'At some point, it is necessary to move on to the next thing rather than continue with street shows'* (Yann). Today, battles hold a very important place and the other forms of practice (courses, training centres, etc.) are often regarded as a preparation for these confrontations. For break-dancers, battles have become the most attended practice spaces. *'Why has break-dancing become such a hit? Because there are lots of crews and young people like to pit themselves against others'* (Baston).

A battle may have a specific theme, an age limit or an imposed style (restricted to B-girls or to children, for example), a requested minimum capacity level, a team or individual form (the number of dancers in each team may be imposed), and it may offer prizes to the winners. Sometimes a short list of such requirements is drawn up to select the dancers. These pre-selections can take place on the very day and on the very spot where the battle is to take place or in various places and sometimes even over several countries for international battles (for *Battle of the Year*, for example). Selecting the set of dance figures which will be performed during the battle and time keeping are the responsibility of the organising authority (private organisers). They may take place in village halls and gymnasiums, and also in prestigious places such as the Palais Omnisport in Paris Bercy. Many of these events are subsidised by local authorities. A jury is set up where the judges usually are famous break-dancers. As for the audience, it is almost always present and can count thousands of people.

These battles are coordinated by private and plural organisations. Thus, the 'Battle pro' in Chelles, near Paris, is organised by Phase T, a not-for-profit association created in 1998 which houses a dance company, teaches classes and plays a major role in the organisation of this sports event. For 10 years, the Chelles Battles Pro have been taking place in partnership with the city of Chelles which supports part of the event, along with the General and Regional Council. Having reached a real media audience, they have attracted sponsors (like the Red Bull drink) who have become partners in the event, giving out prizes to the participants.

Battles depict a sports form of break-dancing, a form of competitive organisation and a rationalisation of the practice, based on measurement, between several participants whose performance will be assessed by a group of experts named 'judges', but they are unofficially organised, remaining outside the French sports world managed by sports federations under State supervision.

Competitive Confrontation and Low Standardisation

This new form of competitive confrontation – trials, measurement and hierarchical organisation of the participants assessed by judges – brings many changes to dancing itself. Dancers no longer train in the same way because there is a specific preparation for battles – the technical aspect of training is privileged so as to be always more spectacular – and thus turn away from other ways of dancing like those prevailing in parties (fun, improvisation, relaxation, work on the flow,³⁴ etc.) or in shows (choreographic and scenic construction around a theme, creating one's own universe, conveying various feelings, etc.). In a battle, pressure weighs heavily on the dancers who are confronted to opponents, observed by an audience and assessed by a jury, all in a limited lapse of time and dancing on a music which they do not know in advance.

This competitive form brings about a rationalisation of techniques. During our interviews, many dancers mentioned these basic rules made of a series of technical

movements: *'Before, when battles did not exist (1989/1990), we formed large circles and had challenges, but there were no rules, no technique'* (Minouche).

Besides, battles imply an organisational set-up made of rules and arranging a jury:

It is no carnival where you can come as you are. No way! For us, there is a lot of work behind it! We have to know the name of the dancers who have performed; we have to select and present the juries! (Youval).

In battles, measurement and competition are synonymous with comparing the dancers, a task devolved to judges. On this point, it appears that there is no consensus and that different schools exist. Competition tends to modify the basic artistic conventions of break-dancing, splitting schools and raising reservations with regard to judgement. Generally speaking, 'sportification leads to a reconfiguration of the physical practices themselves',³⁵ arousing quarrels affecting the judging procedures and thus competition itself.

Thus, in France, the break-dancing scene is divided into the 'old school' and the 'new school'. It is both a dissociation of styles and a temporal break in the evolution of the conventions of this dance which really began in the 2000s. The old school promotes the foundations, the components of the dance and the creativity arising from the bases, while the new school insists on technical performance – called 'phases' in French. The new school encourages a different way of 'breaking', more athletic and better adapted to the battle requirements. The dance aspect is still present, but it no longer leans on bases: the very point is to create new movements. Tensions have arisen between these two schools since both want to control the evolution of break-dancing and impose their own artistic conventions:

There are some who, as soon as you put your leg behind your head or do a lotus (a technical figure with both legs behind the head), would shout: 'This is not dancing, this is gymnastics or circus!' They downright call it circus! (Matthieu)

Battles and their competitive aspect entail a form of technicisation which leaves aside the dance aspect:

It is no longer a question of doing some cool freestyle. There is an emphasis of technique which makes those who 'have the flow' totally insignificant. This is due to the competition effect in battles. (Minouche)

Judges are in an awkward position with both schools. Judgement raises problems of standardisation and objectivity. Unlike in figure skating, the absence of a code makes the judgement process extremely fluctuating. All the judges do not have the same way of judging and the battle competitors know it. Some B-Boys go as far as conforming to the jury's expectations to make sure they win a battle. If the judges defend the old school artistic conventions, then the B-Boys will put forward bases, musicality, improvisation and flow. On the contrary, if the judges favour the new school artistic conventions, then these same dancers will use more technique and originality (personal style and creation of *ex nihilo* movements). *'There are some who really care about the evolution of the dance. I mean, the technique, the flow. But really, it all depends on the judges'* (Virgile). This shows how difficult it may be to standardise trials and assessment criteria.

Resistance to Standardised Competition: The Artistic and Emotional Dimension

As a matter of fact, behind this quarrel between old and new schools lies the real root of the problem: the original identity of hip-hop and how it was distorted by competition. This question about the original cultural identity of a certain practice is classically underlined

by researchers who study the transformation process of traditional practices into sport. They insist on the fact that sportification standardises praxis³⁶ and erases the sense of regional identity: '*Games permanently oscillate between two poles: the patrimonial one of tradition with its inherited and perpetuated cultural identity, and the modern one with the sportification of practices viewed as a necessary condition for survival*'.³⁷ Besides it is also a source of tensions and quarrels between the dancers who uphold tradition and the original spirit of the practice, and those who wish to promote its development. This problem can be found in break-dancing:

I can see many break dancers who couldn't care less about the music. To them, music is optional. That's a great pity. And nowadays, to win a B-Boying battle, what do we need? Big phases (technique), that's all! (Nasty)

Nevertheless, the important point in performing seems to be more a matter of showing off than respecting rigid techniques: '*If you are in a battle, you just have to show off as much as you can and make the show*' (François).

This resistance to standardising a practice, which would limit the artistic aspect of dancing, eventually gives rise to a type of singular confrontation where assessment standards are unpredictable and where the emotional dimension comes first. Communion with the public, the flow and every other sense-related aspect produces a hybrid form of confrontation.

Half-Way Forms between Fun, Art and Sport

As mentioned in the introduction, it looks as if the fundamental problem put by break-dancing, regarding its adjustment to a strict sports form, is the question of the artistic, emotional and spectacular dimensions of dancing. The history of hip-hop shows this practice as festive and one where sensuality and interaction (between dancers and with the audience) play an important part. As a matter of fact, even though battles rationalise the practice and give it a 'sporty' aspect (without turning it into a sport in the strict sense of the term), they retain many ingredients from the original hip-hop, thus making these spectacular meetings the intermediate forms between fun, art and sports. Besides, its modes of organisation – taken care of by private groups not connected to a federal system (as is the case for all sports practices in France) – present a rather low degree of institutionalisation. The main objective remains to 'make the show'. The media coverage of this activity becomes crucial to its structuring. In the end, break-dancing remains outside the traditional sports system and its institutions. It mainly exists within the show world while proposing competitive forms which are close to it though still specific.

Competition and Spelaeology: A Necessary Evil?

An Opportunity for the Continuity of the French Federation of Speleology

Speleology is an adventure sport; therefore, it has a specific identity.³⁸ Gilli³⁹ first defines it by means of its relationship to its environment: the underground world. According to him, speleology comprises all activities taking place in the underground environment. This includes various contemporary uses of caves, mainly for sport, tourism and science.⁴⁰ Even though speleology was born in France at the end of the nineteenth century within a learned society, since 1963 it has been organised within a sports federation which remains closely related to the scientific world. Since then, this institution has constantly been pulled between the will to gather together everyone interested in the underground world,

and the fact that, as a sports federation, it is supervised by the Ministry of Sport, which does not necessarily please all its members.

This permanent identity crisis feeds a fear: that of a rival institution which would make a better job of gathering cave lovers. It is important to underline that this very federation arose from the merging of two groupings with different interests: one supporting scientific speleology and the other supporting a more sporty form of practice.⁴¹ Furthermore, during the 1980s, climbing, a mountain activity, enjoys a similar development in France. Gloria and Raspaud⁴² show how, despite the aversion many leaders of the French Mountaineering Federation felt for climbing competitions, a French Climbing Federation was eventually created and proved a serious competitor, capable of mobilising an increasing number of followers.

During this period influenced by '*the performance cult*',⁴³ competition wins over every field in social life. In this context, various outdoor sports are subjected to this trend, in particular through the Pyrenean Adventure Games.⁴⁴ This event, instigated by a few aficionados, aims at developing a sport happening which would be the counterpart of the Olympics games, exhibiting a number of mountain activities usually presented as leisure activities. It is also an opportunity to create new methods of practice which, thanks to media reports, will promote both the activities and the tourist territories which accommodate them. Besides, the organisation of competitions could make it possible for the Federation to obtain a State-granted power delegation which would ensure its privileged position for everything regarding the organisation of the activity.

Fruitful Initiatives

This idea of competition is not just a whim from the leaders; it leans on a double phenomenon: the evolution of techniques and the example from abroad. First of all, the 1970s were marked by a deep technical change: ascending with ladders was replaced by the use of ropes. Thus, speleologists had to abandon a relatively ordinary tool – the ladder – to adopt specific instruments and learn a new physical technique which makes it possible to go up a rope with lesser effort. Even though the logic of efficiency favours good control of one's energy during prolonged efforts within the framework of an ordinary subterranean exploration, it can also be reversed and fall over towards a search for speed in a time trial. Efficiency of movements and energy capacities mixed with possible technical innovations were the basis of the first trials.

Second, a federal magazine began to publish a series of articles reporting the development of rope racing in the USA.⁴⁵ The first article, written in a very enticing style, will be materialised a few years later. In 1984, on the occasion of the International Festival of Speleology Movies in La-Chapelle-en-Vercors, a course was set up for participants to use their instruments in order to overcome a series of obstacles – artefacts of narrow and other air obstacles which speleologists have to get over when progressing underground. This festive event revealed an obvious public interest for this type of recreational activities.

The question of competition remained latent, but then an opportunity arose to study it in depth: Spanish speleologists organised competitions and invited their French counterparts who practiced on the other side of the Pyrenees': the Haute-Garonne Departmental Committee of Speleology. Two competitors participated in the trials, accompanied by observers whose task was to evaluate the appropriateness of this form of practice. The results were very positive for the French competitors who got first and fourth places. The following year, the experiment was renewed and the four French participants stood on all three steps of the podium. The Pyreneans positively estimated the competition development and decided to organise a similar event in France.

The Haute-Garonne Departmental Committee of Speleology was entrusted with the organisation of the national gathering of spelaeologists in 1992. Taking advantage of this opportunity, the organisers added the first French spelaeology championship to the usual programme. The participants competed in various trials and the winner was designated. This experiment was renewed the following year within the framework of 'the Pyrenean Adventure Games'. These were the outcome of a local initiative in favour of the development of sports tourism in the Pyrenees. However, to fully realise this project, challenges had to be spectacular in order to attract the media.

The energy displayed on such occasions did not go unnoticed by the sports authorities. The president of the French Sports and Olympic National Committee, N. Paillou, went to Saint-Gaudens to support the organisers' initiative. However, this inflection in favour of sports orthodoxy was not without hurting the sensitivity of the spelaeology community which generally tends to gladly break from the predominant social values. A certain number of spelaeologists convey anti-capitalist ideologies.⁴⁶ For them, the development of professionalism means marketing a public good: the access to caves. It is important to note that spelaeology has the specificity to be the object of turning practice sites into tourist places, which translates as difficulties or even bans for spelaeologists to access certain caves. So the rise of professionalism means that more caves will probably be closed to them, which is an impingement on the liberties that are the centre of their preoccupations.⁴⁷

Spelaeologists Massively Reject the Notion of Competition

From the very first hints of competition, at the beginning of the 1980s, every argument against it is clearly expressed. Indeed, in answer to the first article that is mentioned above, P. Veyrunes,⁴⁸ claiming to be representative of spelaeologists at large, expresses his opposition to rope racing. According to him, these competitions may well misrepresent spelaeology as a competitive practice to the detriment of its scientific aspect. Furthermore, the inevitable mediatisation of competitions may develop mass practice when it should be kept in mind that too many visits of the underground environment raise numerous problems, from possible deteriorations of the environment to accessibility to caves. Besides, if spelaeologists became famous sports stars, many beginners might be tempted to participate in difficult races and cause accidents. For all these reasons, Veyrunes altogether rejects any form of competition in spelaeology. However, the weight of these arguments could be uncertain if this group of spelaeologists became minority when faced with the development of a competitive practice form as showed with the evolution of judo.⁴⁹

All along the first French championship in Saint-Gaudens, demonstrations were held by a fringe of spelaeologists brandishing signs condemning this form of practice. Their position was all the stronger as the organisers had chosen to organise underground trials in the real-life conditions of practice. Thus, the negative aspects were clearly exposed: the repeated passages of competitors and judges in the same places revealed environmental nuisances, while the mistakes made by competitors in order to achieve better performances were detrimental to their safety. Protests went on even after the championship. *Spéléo*, a magazine independent from the Federation, granted a large place to the subject. Right after the Games, an interview of the champion brought to light the fundamental gap between spelaeology and the proposed competitive course:

J. Marbach: Here you are! The champion of France!

C.Clary: I decline this title! It is quite ridiculous. [...] The style of the trials was obviously intended to distinguish the strongest ones. Not the best speleologists!

This reaction is revealing: competitors themselves have to admit that the best spelaeologist is not the fastest one. By extension, spelaeology cannot possibly be reduced to a physical performance. Through reading spelaeology magazines one can clearly see the followers' lack of interest for speed performances. To them, the only true 'performances' have to do with the exploration of new networks or new cavities. For a few decades, spelaeologists have been breaking another type of record: the world depth record. In this podium, abysses are classified and people are unobtrusive. When names are mentioned, they are the names of the discoverers. Consequently, even though this ranking is not the only representation of the spelaeological performance, it is close to the spelaeologists' views by placing the caves before the people and the exploration upstream to the physical performance. Discovering an environment prevails over the physical effort necessary for its exploration.

However, the isolated reaction of the first French champion could not veil the background debate which was agitating the whole community. This is the reason why a survey was organised to allow each member to express himself or herself and thus quantitatively measure the importance of the phenomenon. The results were clear: 75% came down against the trials organised in Saint-Gaudens and 66% were set against any form of spelaeology competition. The hostile reactions before and during the trials, along with the complete case published by *Spéleo*, are revealing: a large majority of followers are opposed to competition and even those who participate in them do not fundamentally share their values.

In this context, the federal managers had to face a cruel dilemma, torn between institutional recognition and their members' support. Eventually they gave up the competitive forms, thus more strongly resisting sports standards than any other physical activity.⁵⁰

Resisting Sports Standards

It is interesting to note the factors which favour the sportification development of a practice and those which slow it down. In this case, the development of a roping technique seems to offer a convenient support to the implementation of competitions, especially as it takes the practice out of its natural environment – just like artificial climbing structures – and focuses the attention on technical and physiological aspects. However, when this form of competitive practice is taken underground, it hurts the followers' fundamental values.

Looking beyond the initial playful initiative, spelaeologists are aware of what is at stake in a sportification process. Very much attached to protecting the underground environment and to maintaining the relationship to the cave at the heart of their values, the great majority of the community rejects the sports model. This is how the members of the French Federation of Speleology have reconsidered the sportification process of the activity, the consequences of which could be too hard on the identity of the practice, as Aube⁵¹ analysed it for climbing. In parallel, there is an important stake at the level of institutions. The State-managed sports system tends to standardise all physical activities claiming similar rights. This puts an indirect pressure on these activities, which may especially distort those who have not emerged in a sports logic. Spelaeology joined a process of exteriorisation,⁵² which enabled it to receive institutional recognition. The quick withdrawal back to its original values did not alter the Federation's privileges and allowed it to be situated in a mediorientation form, legally approved within the sports institution, but not in line with the cultural reality. So even though spelaeology may seem strongly anchored in institutions, it resists the standardisation process implied by the competitive form.

MMA: From Free Fight to Ruled Competition – A Difficult Recognition

Is MMA a Most Violent Martial Practice?

MMA is the outcome of the technical and statutory evolution of what used to be called ‘free’ or ‘ultimate’ fighting. It was popularised in particular through the Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC) broadcasted on cable channels in the USA from the beginning of the 1990s. The regulations, limited to a bare minimum, consisted almost only in prohibiting bites and eye attacks. In the early 2000s, threatened with ban in the USA, the match promoters endowed the fights with some slightly less tolerant regulations in order to make them look more ‘respectable’ (use of gloves, ban on certain dangerous knocks, time limits, etc.). This regulating process continued in 2003 with the adoption of the ‘Unified Rules of Mixed Martial Arts’. Used by many MMA organisations, these unified ‘rules’ participate in a standardisation process, but are still way beyond any recognition from the international sports authorities.⁵³

In France, free fighting was developed from the 1990s, taking on various forms, at times derived from already institutionalised combat sports within existing federations (e.g. kenpo, a ‘hard’ version of karate), and also outside the federal system approved by the Ministry of sports. In the 2000s, the problematic recognition of MMA became a real challenge for French followers who, even to this day, have to emigrate if they want to fight following the original MMA rules. In 2011, a petition calling for the Ministry of Sport’s acknowledgement of MMA as a sports activity was signed by more than 6000 people. However, this practice is still considered as most violent and contrary to sports values by a large part of the sports federation executives and political actors. This is testified by the recent interview of Chantal Jouanno, high-level karateka, former French Minister of sport, published in a martial arts magazine where she says, ‘*MMA is contrary to all ethics, contrary to every sport value*’,⁵⁴ and by Jean-Luc Rougé, the president of the French Federation of Judo and Associated Sports, who declares, ‘*I have the impression that these new sports come right out of video games*’.⁵⁵ These comments echo a recommendation from the European Council saying that:

the Ministers’ council [...] considering that fights such as cage fighting cannot possibly be viewed as sports and that they constitute a danger for onlookers, compromise the fighters’ health and have links with illegal activities, especially betting [...], recommends to the governments of the Member states to undertake every necessary measure to forbid and prevent free fighting such as European cage fighting which started spreading in 2009.⁵⁶

Faced with this rejection, MMA followers try to make their voices heard by showing a practice which complies with sports values. Along with the actors participating in the organisation and in the structuring of the activity, they regularly express, on the Internet or in specialised publications, their will to see MMA competitions taking place in France.

Debates Around MMA Regulations

Is Permissiveness a Synonym for Violence?

MMA is frequently described by its detractors as an extremely violent practice, a violence connected to the permissiveness of the competitions, since it is possible to box, fight or even strangle one’s opponent in order to obtain victory. The actors of MMA argue that permissiveness is not synonymous with violence. If sportsmen can practice hand-to-hand fighting in wrestling or judo, if they can strike in boxing and karate, use joint lock in jujitsu, ‘*why would the practice of all these individual sports be honorable and a mixture of them be degrading?*’⁵⁷ B. Amoussou asks, a former judoka, high-level jujitsuka and current president of the National MMA Committee (CNMMA), whose objective is to get official recognition of MMA in France.

Among the MMA fighting techniques, ground fighting is particularly defamed. Granting a fighter in an upper position, the possibility to strike his opponent is often considered as unbearable and absolutely contrary to the elementary principles of sports ethics. However, for the followers, eliminating ground striking would not bring more safety, but would abolish an essential part of the technical–tactical arsenal of the fighters: *‘If they eliminate ground fighting, it will be like playing checkers. Why play checkers when you can play chess?’* This is what David says, thus highlighting the strategic dimension of MMA fighting.

The idea that the freedom granted to fighters makes fighting more dangerous is also demolished by the advocates of MMA:

For people who do not know anything about fighting, this freedom may mean open access to violence. They think that because you are free, because you can do what you like, it necessarily means violence. In fact it is the opposite! Because more freedom means a wider choice of strategies, which is going to allow you to work with minimum effort, minimum danger and have maximum efficiency. (Loïc)

When coaches are asked the same questions, they also highlight the low number of wounded people in their courses compared to other sports such as rugby or judo. Likewise, on a discussion forum dedicated to MMA (www.riddum.com), B. Amoussou quotes a study carried out by three researchers from John Hopkins Medical University,⁵⁸ which says that the wound rates in MMA competitions are similar to those registered in other combat sports. More precisely, this study specifies that out of the 1270 fights which were taken into account over the period extending from 2002 to 2007, most of the wounds are skin injuries (lacerations) and hurts in the upper limbs. Shocks were registered in 3% of the fights (that is, a rate of 15.4 for 1000 exposed athletes), and no death or serious injury was recorded. Coaches also underline the fact that according to them, it is technical hyper-specialisation which causes traumas and compare MMA to percussion sports. In boxing, for example, where only knocking is allowed with a limited number of techniques and where boxers always strike the same physical zones, practice is more traumatising than in MMA where phases of wrestling, percussion and ground fight alternate.

Cage Fighting: Savagery or Technical Necessity?

Some organisations and especially the most prestigious one, the UFC, use a specific fighting area, often called a ‘cage’. It is an enclosure – often octagonal – surrounded by flexible wire netting which can support the fighters’ weight during combat. This fighting area, considered as degrading by MMA’s detractors, has been extremely slandered.

Many match organisers have exploited this image to promote their activity with a public in search of spectacular images, comparing the fighters to modern-time gladiators. This image and all the symbolism surrounding it have favoured MMA’s mediatisation and thus its development, both processes being closely connected.⁵⁹ What this cage represents is quite a cumbersome image today, but MMA followers claim the use of this enclosure which defines the specificity of their activity. A technical and security argument has developed around the matter of the cage, which some people prefer to simply call ‘the octagon’ or a ‘fenced boxing ring’ – terms less suggestive of violence. The octagon would allow a wider technical range than the traditional boxing ring, for example, the wire support allows a fighter to get out of an awkward situation when he is on the ground in a lower position, while constituting a safer space because a boxing ring presents significant risks for the fighters in case of fall between the ropes during the phases of hand-to-hand fighting.

Necessary Compromises to Organise Competitions

In the 1990s, a grouping developed in France around a practice called 'pancrace', in reference to the antique sport. In the mid-2000s, it joined the French Federation of Full Contact and Associated Sports, then in 2009 it went under the supervision of the French Federation of Contact Sports and Associated Sports (FFSCDA) recently created. A competition circuit with various levels of practice was developed. The first 'official' regulations, published in 2008 under the aegis of the Full Contact Federation, read very much like the regulations used in the larger MMA organisations, thus testifying of a will to standardise the practice, but they also differ on two points: ground striking is forbidden and fighting has to take place on a classic boxing ring. The regulations published in 2011–2012 are a little more flexible for what regards the fighting area, but they say in bold characters that any ground striking is prohibited. The people in charge of pancrace have joined a state-approved sports federation and, to be accepted and display a respectable competitive practice, they have revised the most criticised points of the regulations, especially regarding ground striking.

Institutional Drifting of French MMA

The FFSCDA is not the only institution participating in the organisation and structuring of the mixed fight practice. The French Federation of Labor Sport, a multisport federation, also organises pancrace events. On the other hand, other groupings claim a more authentic MMA practice. This is the case of the CNMMA. This association which organises non-state-approved training courses and coach trainings are pleaded for recognition of MMA as practiced in the fenced, octagonal enclosure, including ground striking. The CNMMA also underlines the MMA-specific technical know-how, especially during transitions between phases of remote striking (like in karate) and hand-to-hand fighting.⁶⁰ These techniques, which are a part of the technical panel of most of the fighters, would be essential to the identity of the practice.

There was also a recent initiative from the International Federation of Amateur Wrestling (FILA) to develop an amateur MMA practice, with helmets and shin protections besides the usual protections (shell, gloves and gumshield), and to allow ground striking. This initiative, relayed by the French Federation of Wrestling (FFL), was quickly slandered in France. The Ministry of Sport demanded that this practice be abandoned at the risk of immediate penalties for the federation. FILA members vainly tried to convince the ministry, advancing the necessity to structure a practice which must be controlled in order to escape the excesses of commercial professionalism.

Lastly, some competitions are organised by private societies, but always under the supervision of a state-approved federation (the FFSCDA or the French Federation of karate, for example). Most of these competitions take up the regulations set for pancrace, to avoid being banned, as was the case for the FFL. In the end, this is a sort of institutional drifting which characterises French MMA, torn between various groupings and federations which sometimes conduct rival initiatives to claim their legitimacy in managing this practice.

Sportification Required and Unfinished

The MMA sportification process, especially in its competitive dimension, comes up against the fundamental problem of the level and type of violence considered acceptable by public authorities. As a matter of fact, in France no grouping or federation has managed

to legitimise and organise competitions such as practiced at the international level, which today makes it a fragmented practice at the institutional level. In France, mixed fighting is on the path of mediorientation.⁶¹ In other words, it is looking for adjustments to its original regulations. These adjustments result from a compromise between a will to follow the MMA model and the constraints imposed by public authorities which reject some of its components considered as contrary to sports values. One can view this rejection as resisting the globalisation of a form of practice and sports show which tends to spread all over the world – a phenomenon brought to light in other researches⁶² – but it is actually considered by the political authorities as contrary to the legitimate values of sport, in particular with regard to the non-violence ideal promulgated in the Olympic Chart. Because of this official opposition, most of the competitions organised in France follow the pancrace regulations, but this orientation is not unanimously approved. The weak institutional structuring of this activity in France and the existence of a plurality of groupings reveal tensions between those who accept this compromise consisting in organising a practice within sports normality at the cost of distorting the original activity, and those who aspire to organising an authentic MMA practice.

Conclusion

Our presentation has portrayed three different relationships to sportification for three different activities. First of all, we can bring out some common characteristics in the competitive implementation of these activities and their historical development in the French context.

The first factors they have in common are the tensions and controversies at work in the sportification process. The implementation of competitions entails resistances coming from the top, that is to say from institutional authorities, or from the bottom, that is from the followers. On this particular point, spelaeology and MMA offer totally opposed viewpoints.

Besides, these tensions encourage protagonists to mobilise arguments in favour of one position or the other. These arguments are articulated around two large groups: the foundation of the practice in a somewhat essentialist perspective (the activity and its initial spirit should not be distorted) and sportsmanship (respect for human dignity, for example). Thus, it is the artistic and underground essence of hip-hop which urges break-dancers to claim a singular competitive form valuing the flow (sensory expression of the music), because they cannot accept a sports-like sharp assessment of their performances. In the same way, it is the initial scientific essence of spelaeology which urges its followers' rejection of competition. In the case of MMA, the governing bodies widely mobilise the argument of sportsmanship to define what a sport should or should not be. This spirit is essentially oriented to the respect of the individual's physical integrity and even more to his dignity as a human being.

We have also been able to bring to light the consequences of competitive organisation, how it changes the regulations as well as the physical aspects of a discipline, making them more technical and thus creating forms of hybridisation with the original practice forms. As soon as competition appears, techniques are rationalised and physical forms are transformed to coexist more or less happily with the initial forms (in this respect, the conflicts between old school and new school in break-dancing are quite meaningful).

It should then be noted that implementing competition is very closely related to wanting to make a show of the practices. It appears, first of all, that to be a spectacular, a practice must be competitive and, second, that this imposes singular forms forcing

organisational modes towards the spectacular. Break-dancing and MMA seem especially concerned by this entertainment aspect which was originally inherent to them.

Lastly, the study of these three forms of practices allows us to re-examine the traditional forms of sports practice organised around Guttman's seven pillars. New forms have emerged. They cast reservations about the classic model of sports culture with its integrating, statutory and ethical function, the commercial, spectacular and communication functions, with their playful and entertaining aspects now becoming central, at least for the younger followers. Break-dancing and MMA illustrate this trend. As for speleology, the split is elsewhere, more at the level of ecological values placed before performance.

So these new forms enable us to model three sportification forms related to the standardisation and institutionalisation criteria evoked in our introduction.

Despite heavy institutionalisation in classic French federal structures, speleology and its followers refuse competition in the name of the scientific and exploratory aspects of the activity; competitive rationalisation cannot agree with its spirit. With MMA, competition is demanded by its followers, but forbidden by the supervising institutions in spite of a rather high level of standardisation (regulations and specific technical means). This rejection along with the institutional drifting of the activity, which cannot manage to become integrated into the sports model structured as it is, are due to the image of a violent activity disregarding human dignity. Lastly, with break-dancing, competition is simultaneously organised by followers and organisers, but it remains restrained by the initial artistic characteristics of the practice and takes shape in several varied commercial organisations, which do not strictly harmonise their assessment standards. Moreover, in each case, we can perceive a singular relationship with the sports institutions. While speleology is completely structured in this respect, it keeps a non-sports specificity which contributes to its marginalisation. MMA, on the other hand, through its promoters' actions, shows a strong desire to integrate official structures, but can find neither a specific space nor a satisfactory form of practice in what already exists. The official reticence to its integration creates a sort of institutional drifting. Finally break-dancing remains outside the sports institution and, even though this separation can sometimes be regretted, it gives rise to a profit-seeking parallel commercial private organisation which seems to satisfy its actors.

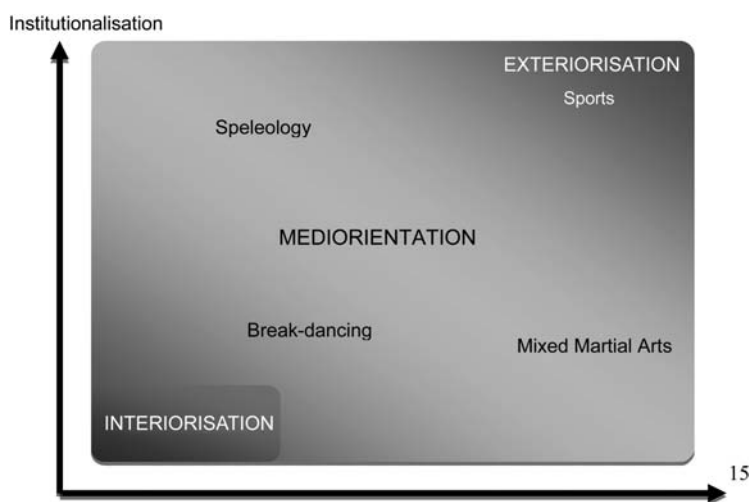


Figure 1. Position of the activities according to their degree of institutionalisation and standardisation.

To finish with, we could position these three activities according to the two criteria we proposed to examine: standardisation and institutionalisation (Figure 1). This model relating to three types of activities – outdoor, combat and artistic – could well be put to the test with other physical practices.

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Notes

1. Elias and Dunning, *Sport et Civilization*.
2. Van Bottenburg and Heilbron, "De-Sportization of Fighting Contests," 262.
3. Guttmann, *From Ritual to Record*.
4. Pigeassou and Pruneau, "Regards Critiques sur les Rites."
5. Lebreton et al., "Cultures Urbaines et Activités Physiques."
6. Savre, "L'institutionnalisation du Vélo Tout Terrain."
7. Like Gloria and Raspud, "Emergence des Competitions en Escalade," about climbing.
8. Parlebas, *Jeux, Sports et Sociétés*.
9. Maguire, "Sportization Processes"; Donnelly, "The Local and the Global"; Horne, "The Politics of Sport."
10. Renson, "The Cultural Dilemma of Cultural Games."
11. Eichberg, "Olympic Sport."
12. Friedman, "Being in the World."
13. Eichberg, "A Revolution of Body Culture?"
14. Einarsson, "An Attempt to Describe Some Facts."
15. Eichberg, "A Revolution of Body Culture?"
16. Renson, "The Cultural Dilemma of Cultural Games."
17. Saeki, "The Conflict."
18. Pociello, "Les Tendances Lourdes."
19. Bessy and Lacroix, "Glisse D'hier et Surf."
20. Bessy and Mouton, "Sports de Nature."
21. Darbon, *Diffusion des Sports*.
22. Pociello, *Les Cultures Sportives*.
23. Pociello, "Un Nouvel Esprit D'aventure."
24. Adamkiewicz, "Les Performances Sportives."
25. Bazin, *La Culture Hip-Hop*; Shapiro, "Qu'est-ce que L'artification?"
26. cf. Guttmann's earlier quote regarding the essence of sport.
27. Terret, "L'institutionnalisation de L'aquatic Fitness."
28. Parlebas, *Jeux, Sports et Sociétés*.

29. Guttman, *From Ritual to Record*.
30. In France, *break-dancing* is also called B-boying or street dance.
31. Hager, *Hip Hop*.
32. Chang, *Can't Stop*; Bazin, *La Culture Hip-Hop*; Stapelton, "From the Margins to Mainstream."
33. Since 1984, several French TV programmes have been offering break-dancing (for example, *Dance Street* on France since 2010; *On va faire le show* on Canal 21 and NTV 2) as well as on the Internet (*Canal Street*, *Move it TV*, *You can dance*, *I Love this dance*...). In addition, *Dailymotion* and *Youtube* have made it possible to put videos online easily and rapidly.
34. Feeling the music, physically integrating its rhythm.
35. Lebreton et al., "Cultures Urbaines et Activités Physiques," 315–6.
36. Parlebas, *Jeux, Sports et Sociétés*.
37. Vigne and Dorvillé, "Les Jeux Traditionnels Nordistes," 54.
38. McNamee, *Philosophy, Risk and Adventure Sports*.
39. Gilli, *La Spéléologie*.
40. Schut, *L'exploration Souterraine*.
41. Schut, "Sport ou Sciences."
42. Gloria and Raspaud, "Emergence des Compétitions en Escalade."
43. Ehrenberg, *Le Culte de la Performance*.
44. Suchet et al., "The History and Geography."
45. Chabert, "Des Courses sur Corde?"
46. Schut, *L'Exploration Souterraine*.
47. The analysis of the professions of faith made by the candidates for federal elections in the 1980s reveals the recurring theme of free access to the caves.
48. Veyrunes, "Des Courses sur Corde... Pourquoi?"
49. Gray-Carr, "Making Way."
50. Pfister, "Sportification, Power and Control."
51. Aubel, "Les Enjeux de la Sportivisation."
52. Renson, "The Cultural Dilemma of Cultural Games."
53. Van Bottenburg and Heilbron, "De-Sportization of Fighting Contests."
54. Interview of Chantal Jouanno in *Karaté Bushido*, no. 1012, January 2011.
55. Interview displayed on the website of the l'Équipe newspaper: <http://www.video.lequipe.fr/video/tous-sports/tous-sports-sport-buzz-22-09-11/recentes/page/1/?sig=iLyROoaf2hs->
56. Recommendation from the European Council No. R (99) 11, adopted by the Ministers' Committee on April 22, 1999, during the 669th meeting of the Ministers' Delegates.
57. Bertrand Amoussou's reply to Chantal Jouanno's interview, posted on many websites like http://www.ikusa.fr/index.html/_news/bertrand-amoussou-repond-a-la-ministre-des-sports-r492.
58. Ngai et al., "Injury Trends."
59. Coakley, *Sports in Society*.
60. For example, for a specialist in hand-to-hand fighting, the techniques aiming at getting nearer one's opponent without being hit in order to grasp him and throw him off.
61. Renson, "The Cultural Dilemma of Cultural Games."
62. For example, Harvey et al., "Globalization and Sport."

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