

“IF YOU LOSE BUT YOU PUT UP A GOOD SHOW, YOU’LL FIGHT AGAIN!” – MMA AND THE CONCEPT OF SPORT

“SE PERDER E DER SHOW, VAI LUTAR DE NOVO!” - MMA E O CONCEITO DE ESPORTE 

“¡SI PIERDES, PERO DAS ESPECTÁCULO, LUCHARÁS DE NUEVO!”

MMA Y EL CONCEPTO DE DEPORTE 

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Abstract: The characterization of modern sport lists elements that distinguish it from other bodily practices. Mixed Martial Arts (MMA) are often understood as a sportized activity based on changes aimed at regulating and reducing violence. This study analyzed MMA for what distinguishes it from other sports, based on the concept of sportization put forward by Elias and Dunning. Its ethnographic methodology employed participant observation at an MMA gym and fighting events, as well as field diaries and interviews. Three empirical-analytical categories were developed to analyze elements of MMA – the “event owner;” spectacle rather than victory; and violence as spectacle – which raise debates on the notions of victory, institutionalization, belonging, and violence. The importance of broadening the concept of sport to understand MMA is underscored.

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1 INTRODUCTION

Characterization of sport and its processes of change has been the object of analysis in sociological studies since the mid-20th century. Authors in the area share some views, such as the notion that this phenomenon is typical of modern times; that sports were modified by a process of change in their structures and meanings; and that sport somehow reflects aspects of the prevailing social structure. Such analyzes enable reflections on the characteristics of sport and end up defining elements that identify this phenomenon, while distinguishing it from other social practices.

Bourdieu's (1983, 1990, 1997) studies on sport see it as a modern phenomenon characterized as practices institutionalized in federations with a relative level of autonomy resulting from sports associativism. Hobsbawm (2012), in turn, looked into the invention and transformation of sport based on its institutionalization. In search of identity, clubs of students, senior students or alumnae appear in universities, promoting matches between colleges. Two identity phenomena are associated with the function of sport: showing ties between people living in a given place and international championships aimed at highlighting the superiority of nations. Guttmann (1978), in turn, lists characteristics that distinguish sport from bodily practices common to other historical times and considers that only modern sport has features related to secularity, equal opportunities, specialized roles, rationality, bureaucracy, quantification, and record keeping – all at the same time.

In the wake of these discussions, Elias and Dunning (1992) analyze sport based on the civilizing process that began in the 18th century in England, marked by increased sensitivity towards violence, and which would have interfered in the transition from games to sports. Thus, some old pastimes, such as fighting without rules and violent confrontations, would become sports and would be characterized by *highly regulated* contests requiring *physical exertion* and *skill*, characterized in their form of spectacle as “sport” (ELIAS; DUNNING, 1992). From this perspective, sports are social settings that provide opportunities to experience violence in a mimetic way as controlled lack of control.

One of the “empirical characters” that illustrates this invention and its meanings in the civilizing process is the hunter with his pack of dogs in search of foxes. In the social setting of 18th-19th century English elite, the author describes fox hunting's change from pastime into sport. The English sporting ritual prohibited any direct human participation in killing the fox – which represented a civilized advance in controlling violence –, with packs trained by hunters to chase and kill only the foxes. The violence of persecution and death was experienced indirectly (death by proxy), resulting in pleasant, socially accepted tension-excitement, and stressing violence control as its core feature.

In the last three decades, mixed martial arts (MMA) – the object of this study – gained ground as a combat sport and came to be understood under the sportization process (BOTTENBURG; HEILBRON, 2006; SÁNCHEZ-GARCÍA; MALCOLM, 2010; VASQUES; BELTRÃO, 2013). These studies focused on changes in MMA's rules that occurred mainly in the 1990s, when it was banned in parts of the United States after

allegations of violence, with significant financial impacts for its organizers. On the other hand, UFC¹ changed MMA by including rules aimed at curbing violence in fights and thus reduced the amount of violence in combats, keeping the camera away from bloody images and avoiding words that could be considered too violent by the public.

Despite such a sportized understanding of MMA, some of its characteristics distinguish it from other sports and other fights. Downey’s (2014) study presents the notion of apparent hyperviolence to describe MMA, which would be a type of stylized combat that uses violence as a spectacle to meet audience expectations. Under the same logic, Brett (2017) understands that MMA develops into four categories: repulsive excessive violence, boring insufficient action, soft palatable practices, and sublime aesthetic violence.

In addition to the use of violence as part of the spectacle, two other crucial and particular elements of MMA, which will be discussed throughout this article, show that some elements of that sport have not been explored. First, unlike other sports, MMA has “owners,” that is, individuals who own the brand – for example, UFC defines rules and organizes major events, while minor events also have their owners. It contrasts with the notion of institutionalization so dear to the concept of sport and which links it to clubs, colleges, federations, etc. The other element is what we call “spectacle rather than victory,” which conflicts with fans’ traditional views of belonging and interferes with the prerogatives of other meanings for the practice, opposed to the notion of meritocracy.

No studies were found that empirically presented such distinguishing elements and analyzed them to understand MMA regarding the general notion of sport, which reinforces the importance of analyzing this specific sport.

Given these distinctive features of MMA, we raise the question: what are the similarities and differences between MMA and other consolidated sports and their characterization in sociology of sport? This work analyzes MMA from what distinguishes it from other sports based on the sportization concept put forward by Elias and Dunning.

2 METHODOLOGICAL PROCEDURES

This is an ethnographic study since it converges with similar studies from urban anthropology. It is also multi-sited in the sense proposed by Marcus (2001), who proposes to think of it as a movement. Therefore, subjects were observed. The cultural analysis of the MMA universe focused on understanding patterns and meanings involved in it, as well as to provide data on academic works in order to establish the link between theory and reality, as stated by Fonseca (1999).

The ethnographic study was conducted at an MMA gym where the researchers substantially attended the 11:00 am-1:00 pm practice sessions from September 2014 to October 2015. The classes included 8-12 fighters. The researcher practiced with the athletes, engaged in conversations, had lunch with the team, and attended the events in which some of them participated. Such interaction involves what anthropologists

¹ UFC (*Ultimate Fighting Championship*) is the company in charge of main MMA events.

call “participant observation” – when a researcher takes on a role that is perfectly acceptable by the observed society to the point of enabling, according to Oliveira (1996), a level of acceptance by its members, which is not ideal but is gentle enough to allow the necessary interaction.

The research data were described in a field diary which, according to Winkin (1998), has functions: empirical, to obtain information from observation; reflexive, relating that information with previous works; and cathartic, which seeks interaction between the researcher and the object based on feelings, changes in views, anxieties, and doubts. Based on observations, eight individuals were invited to formal interviews. They all had fought at least five MMA combats. Furthermore, eight MMA events were monitored and recorded – seven of which were professional.

Data analysis resulted in three empirical-analytical categories: 1) the “event owner,” reflecting the fact that MMA has “owners” who choose who will fight; 2) a social construction among actors, according to which the spectacle — the “show” — is required from athletes, and that such a requirement may become more important than victory; and 3) “violence as spectacle,” which is more explicit in MMA than in other socially consolidated combat sports but becomes attractive and is part of the MMA spectacle when exercised within certain civilizational limits.

3 THE EVENT OWNER

MMA's configuration has characteristics that distinguish it from sports as they were historically constructed. One of these peculiarities is the private nature of MMA organizations. While sports in general are organized by federations that regulate the practice and promote competitions – or validate competitions organized by clubs – MMA is mostly governed by a private company – UFC. Note that even minor events belong to individuals or companies, that is, they have “owners.”

Therefore, the event owner is an empirical character in line with those presented by Elias when portraying medieval warriors (ELIAS, 1993; 1994), King Louis XIV (ELIAS, 2001) and Mozart (ELIAS, 1995). The description of that character seeks to ascribe meaning to his actions in the setting in order to reflect on the characteristics, limits and possibilities of interpreting MMA as a contemporary expression of sport. Some reports from field diaries are presented below.

At a weigh-in in a luxury hotel in Porto Alegre, a certain atmosphere of tension could be felt. Several media outlets were in front of the scale. In the background, athletes appeared with concentrated faces and visibly weak, since most of them had probably lost a lot of weight before the fights. The main process used by these athletes for losing extra pounds and fitting their weight classes is dehydration for minutes, sometimes hours, in saunas.

Many fighters face the scales, and they all reach the marks set for their weight classes. Fans and coaches celebrate with the athletes, who exude joy and relief. However, at the weigh-in session in one of the main fights of the event in the featherweight division (under 65.7 kg), Dieguinho² is unable to “make weight.”

² Names have been changed.

The first fighter, Carlinhos [...] enters the room. [...] He climbs on the scale, observed by the “event owner,” his coach, the announcer, and his opponent’s coach. He “makes weight.” The announcer says: 65.6 kg. The athlete celebrates with his team [...]. His opponent Dieguinho comes in. He and his team look worried. Their faces are serious, as if they knew something not very good was about to happen. [...] He gets on the scale. His weight is announced: 66.2 kg (500 g above the weight limit). There is silence in the room; the fighter and his coach are visibly uncomfortable. The opposing team is upset, they shake their heads [...].

Now it’s Sérgio’s [the event owner] turn to step in. His words are interesting: “Dieguinho didn’t make weight, he wasn’t professional. Now it’s up to his opponent to fight him or not. If Carlinhos doesn’t accept it, only he will get the grant and there’s no fight. Dieguinho will get nothing. If Carlinhos agrees, there will be a fight, but the opponent will lose 20% of his pay. There is no room for amateurs in MMA anymore; you have to be professional.” The ‘event owner’ asks the athlete if he still accepts the fight, even without his opponent making weight. Carlinhos says yes. There is celebration in the room and people call him a “warrior!” Everyone applauds and Sérgio gives his message: **“You didn’t make weight, so you’ll have to put up a show tomorrow, otherwise you’ll never fight at my event again.”** I keep thinking about this loosening of the rules: an athlete does not make weight, but he fights anyway, with his opponent’s agreement. Sérgio solves the problem as he pleases. He can. He is the “event owner.” (F. D. Dec. 20, 2014)

The event owner is an important character because he can change the setting. While he punishes the athlete by taking 20% of his pay, he pressures him to “put up a show” the next day. Furthermore, he draws attention to that fight to attract audience. He establishes some sort of “good guy” role (the one who accepted the fight, even if he had to fight an opponent who is overweight) against the “bad guy” (who did not behave professionally). That strategy is widely used to mobilize the audience in the world of fighting. Since the 1960s, challenges between boxers created some sort of “rivalry” before the fights (REMINICK, 2000), in a climate that mixes elements of “sport” and “altercation,” creating pleasant tension-excitement (ELIAS; DUNNING, 1992) that draws audience to the events.

Sérgio knows what he is doing. He used to fight MMA on a famous team back in the 1990s, but he was more successful as an event promoter. There are reports (GRACIE, 2008; AWI, 2012) that show the advertising strategies he uses to promote the fights. He created an MMA event/brand in Brazil that is seen in the fighting world as a possibility to rise to bigger events. During the weigh-in, I understood the role played by that character.

His social role in the setting is crucial, since he will decide when the rules can be loosened. It is also revealing, since it unveiled criteria for athlete selection that made it possible to understand the importance of the spectacle in that context. Still, the event owner’s performance contrasts with institutionalization of sports, historically linked to federations. There are MMA federations, but they were created after UFC, as a strategy to get closer to sports organization in general. However, they do not set the rules for the sport or specific competitions.

For Elias and Dunning (1992), institutionalization amounts to “outsourcing” of sports regulation. After the social differentiation that took place in post-industrial

England, groups are no longer responsible for establishing the control of violence, and they “outsource” it to the State, which holds monopoly on that control. Institutionalization represents this instance capable of regulating and determining the ethical standard of sport. As shown by our data, quite differently from what happens in the world of institutionalized sports, in the MMA setting, event owners will define who fights and, when necessary, they can loosen the rules so that the event is a spectacle as expected.

4 SPECTACLE RATHER THAN VICTORY

The second category of analysis is intended to show how spectacle, or “putting up a show,” becomes as important as – or even more important than – winning in MMA. After weight-in, the event owner instructs – yelling – how the athletes should behave. He decided that there would be a spectacle and demanded “beating.”

Listen, guys: it'll be war tomorrow! I don't want to see anyone “holding back”; I want to see you beating each other up. **If you lose but you put up a show, you'll fight again at the event!** If you play soft (*amorregar*),³ you'll never be called on to fight again. Fight! Here is the place where children cry and their mothers don't hear it. (F. D. Dec. 20, 2014)

His speech seems to have an effect on fighters. Their expressions became serious, their faces concentrate, and silence settled in the audience. Athletes join their teams, and many take pictures with Sérgio. He smiles, aware that the pictures will be “posted” in other contexts. Nothing is done without interest. The owner's actions focus on attracting the audience by presenting the event as a show, a spectacle in which fights are not only intended to define winners or champions; they are also spaces for pleasant tension-excitement, built over the use of violence as an attraction but within limits that are socially accepted in the sports setting.

The owner's role in dictating rules and athletes' ways of acting led to our reflection upon winning-losing in MMA. Is winning the most important element in fights? Wouldn't the main element in a fight be “putting up a show”? Therefore, we asked athletes in interviews: “What do you think it's more important in MMA – winning or having a good fight?” Their answers allowed us to examine the dilemma more clearly.

Celso: It's winning; that's what everybody wants. Nobody wants to lose. But I think having a good fight is more interesting. [...] The MMA world has turned into a money business, so there are very good fighters, good athletes, who may not be good at knocking out, but they take large crowds to see them fight. So, I think it's very interesting for you to have a good fight because, **whether you win it or not, you'll have the opportunity to fight again.** Now, if you have a bad fight but you win, it's ok. It's good. But I think **people want to see a show – from an unthinkable move to your victory.**

Fernando: **Of course, the spectacle is more important than winning.** Because sometimes you fight and, hey, you have an easy victory; and then you can't show all your technique. Now if you get a high-level opponent and you can show all your technique, all the work you've done, what you've trained to achieve, that's much better than winning. Even if you lose. **I'd rather lose and put up a show than beat a dead opponent.**

³ “*Amorregar*” is a local term that means that a fighter's is trying to protect himself too much.

Diego: Nowadays, the promoters of the event not only want victory; they want you to have a good fight. There are events that focus on good fights, so you can keep fighting in them, and there are events that demand results, the athlete’s achievements. So, I think there are two roads in the same direction. [...] I think that **winning and having a good fight are crucial for you to have a successful career.** (emphasis added)

The three fighters pointed out the importance of good fights and good spectacles to be successful in MMA. When the event owner tells them to “not hold back,” they understand it. The owner pointed to “fighting well” (or not fighting) as crucial and no one doubted that. Nor was his authority questioned. Protecting oneself too much and not attacking one’s opponent is to “play soft” in the fight. The athletes should “go get them” without much fear of being knocked out, so they might be hired again for events. At the same time, if they do not put up a show, they may no longer be hired.

In football, for example, we can say that tension-excitement also lies in the “beautiful game,” but winning is more important, so much so that fans criticize teams that “risk” attacking when the score is favorable. In any case, playing well but losing does not help much, as the institution is based on results, and no club advances for playing well in a competition – only winning counts. And as long as they win, they advance, even if they win “playing ugly.” In this situation, no one will doubt it and decide on other criteria.

The arguments reveal the importance of “putting up a show” over winning. Celso includes unpredictability in fights when he speaks of “an unthinkable move.” In the internal dynamics of MMA, unpredictability is important for balancing tension-excitement, which is marked by variability in moves and the many possibilities of a knockout, which makes it difficult to predict the winner before the fights. Fernando says he prefers to “lose and put up a show than beat a dead opponent”. That is not the result of individual preference, but rather of a social setting: if athletes win but do not “put up a show,” they will lose space in that context.

The importance of an athlete fighting with the intention of pleasing the audience was also observed in person at a UFC event, where boos were heard when fighters went to the ground or there was little “*trocação*.”⁴ At these moments, shouts of “fight!,” “beat him!,” “don’t play soft!” were heard. The audience wants action, an important element in the setting. It is possible to say that the MMA audience does not usually support any athlete in particular, and this was also noticed in this event. Under this logic, MMA fans’ belonging is different from traditional sports such as football, for example, in which club and national belonging play a major role in narratives and the construction of identities. Identity belonging is a structuring part of modern sport, as highlighted by Bourdieu (1983) when portraying sports associativism, as well as by Hobsbawm (2012) when he analyzes proliferation of national identities based on sport. In MMA, belonging does not take place so as to support a particular athlete, which can be confirmed in the field data described below.

In addition to the discussion about belonging, the core element is that losing or winning is secondary to the audience. Event owners and athletes know that. But what happens when other interests are at stake? When a belt is under dispute and athletes

4 Local term for a fight in which fighters exchange blows, such as punches and kicks.

want to win more than they want to “put up a show”? In this case, there is tension in the setting. An example occurred in the belt dispute between Márcio “the Stone” and Alex “the Bomb.”

[...] “Stone” and “Bomb,” two fighters who are well-known to the audience. [...] The fans were thrilled about both of them, and [...] **it seems that they were not rooting for either of them.** The fight begins and the two fighters’ inaction is visible. They study each other and do not attack much. [...] the crowd start to **boo them.** The screams are strong and seem to have an effect on the fight. Stone jabs and crosses, and he scratches Bomb’s head. Bomb manages to throw Stone on the ground and the round is over. Despite the action in the end, the crowd boos them [...]. The second and third rounds follow the same dynamics. [...] The fans boo all the time, but the fighters give the impression of not wanting to expose themselves to the possibility of being knocked out and losing the belt. [...] Then the referee [...] announces: [...] and the belt champion [...] is... Márcio the Stone’. **The fighter celebrates, but the crowd boos the champion.** He receives the belt from the event owner and gives an interview [...]: **“Guys, I’m sorry if you didn’t like the fight.** But the thing is, this is worth much more than the belt. I fight for my family, for my son, and I want to give them a better life. I couldn’t expose myself too much because I really wanted this title. Thank you so much for coming here and watching my fight. I love you all.” The crowd, who had booed the fighter a few minutes earlier, began to applaud him. It seems that his arguments were convincing. (F. D. Sept. 12, 2015, emphasis added)

Fans booing the champion and the winner apologizing for his victory are not common attitudes in sports, but they do occur in MMA. A “tough fight” is what the audience wants, and some fighters know how to act when that purpose is not achieved. The suffering of training, their families, and their pursue of a “better life” are convincing arguments. The balance of tensions is maintained. As reported by Wacquant (2002) about the gym, the configuration of the MMA builds this ideal of social mobility.

The arguments and scenes show that athletes have learned that winning is not enough in MMA; they have to fight according to the rules of the spectacularized game: “put up a show,” “fight well,” “show all the technique,” “go get them,” “tough fight,” “beat.” In this game, elements produced in order to create pleasant tension-excitement in the audience are required as a form of catharsis,⁵ and they are related to spectacularization of violence. This seems to happen in other fights as well but it is essential for MMA athletes to continue (or not) in their careers.

Brett’s study (2017) indicates “boring insufficient action” as a structuring element of MMA, that is, athletes’ actions in combat should be enough to entertain spectators. In MMA, “boring” is crucial to guide ways of acting. The emergence of this element challenges the meritocratic logic and contrasts with the notions of result, victory, progress and record (GUTTMANN, 1978), which are central to sport. It is crucial that the ways of fighting reach a high level of tension-excitement for spectators. Therefore, the event owner and spectacle-rather-than-victory are two crucial elements for MMA, which challenge the notion of sport as it has been described in sociology.

The result of combat and the search for victory are destabilized when the spectacle and “putting up a show” play a major role in the social setting and in the fight’s

5 For Elias and Dunning (1992), catharsis refers to the transformation of emotions by the pleasant tension-excitement caused by sport.

internal dynamics. The athlete who loses but does not “play soft” still has a chance in that universe. With the notion of “doing the run” (*o corre*), Bastos (2006) showed that sporting capital in skateboarding was not the only determinant for success; rather, knowing the modus operandi of that universe was essential to get sponsorship. It is understandable that the skills needed to be successful in sports are not limited to sporting competences, but broaden into social, educational and access dimensions. However, the distinguishing feature in MMA is that, in order to be successful, winning the fight is important but “putting up a show” is essential.

5 SPECTACULARIZED VIOLENCE

Violence is part of the spectacle in MMA. Therefore, fighters are forged beyond strategies to win; they are constructed so that their actions convey elements of spectacularized violence. According to Mariante Neto, Vasques and Stigger (2021), the image of MMA fighters is not built only “in the cage;” a series of strategies are used to produce a fighter’s image. This topic starts with a scene that shows construction of violence as part of the spectacle.

With the growth of MMA, event companies came together to create images that build the anteroom for combats. The events have social media profiles showing fights and practice sessions, and fighters expose their routines on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. The posts seem to represent everyday life but focus on image construction by producer companies. At the gym, we witnessed a video recording. Antônio, a member of the team, had a fight scheduled, and Carlos, the video producer, advised him on how he should act on the recording.

The coach [...] starts describing a few sequences for Antônio to perform. They are variations of kicks and punches [...]. Carlos tells him: “Hit stronger; let’s show him that you’re going to rip his head off.”

It’s time to record the video in which the fighter “challenges” his opponent. [...] the producer [...] advises him: “You have to put on a bad guy’s face. [...] when I give you the signal, you say: ‘Hey Bald [*the opponent*]! Wait and see! This belt is gonna be mine; you won’t take it away from me.’” [...] Antônio can’t memorize the sentence and Carlos repeats it. The recording is resumed, and once again Antônio cannot say what was agreed and the recording stops. [...] Finally, the athlete manages to say the words challenging his opponent.

[...] in the afternoon, I search for the video on the producer’s Facebook page. It is about two minutes long; it shows some fragments of the athlete’s fighting, images from the morning practice, and his final speech. [...] The images show a brave, skillful and almost unbeatable fighter. His words sound threatening, his voice is steady, and his challenge to the other athlete feels almost personal. His weaknesses are gone, his mistakes are not shown, Antônio seems almost like a super athlete, an iron man capable of knocking out anyone who comes his way. Anyway, I think the video was well produced. (F. D. Dec. 12, 2014)

The video shows intentional mechanisms for turning fighting into challenge. Antonio did not know his opponent and there was no rivalry between them. For the events to happen, the public must be interested in the fights, and elements of violence (“rip his head off,” “challenge”, “bad guy’s face”, “tough”, “unbeatable”, “threatening”, “strong voice”) are listed so as to create tension-excitement in the audience.

Another scene from the weigh-in event shows how challenge, threats and symbolically violent elements are employed.

The fighters stood in front of the [...] large banner with the main brands that support and sponsor the event. They all put on the famous “bad guy’s face” of fighters. Some clench fists and put it in front of their faces in a “on-guard” position. Others just look at the cameras from the top down. No smile. Sérgio stands in front of the athletes. His expression doesn’t show any gentleness either. The feeling is that a war is about to break out. (F. D. Dec. 12, 2014)

This scene has nothing of uncontrolled violence, considering the intention to create that environment. The “bad guy’s face” and the “war atmosphere” are recurrently produced in other fights as well, for example, in boxing. However, MMA is recurrently accused of being “more violent” than other sports, especially by actors from other combat sports, including boxing. An example is former Brazilian world boxing champion Éder Jofre’s statement that Mixed Martial Arts is a “return to barbarism” (MARIANTE NETO, 2016). Therefore, violence in MMA would not be only in the intentions of its production for the spectacle; it would also be category of accusation (CURI, 2017).

Both scenes show elements constructed to convey symbolically violent elements – n“war,” “bad guy’s face,” “threatening,” “rip his head off” – as part of the show. These data also support MMA’s notion of apparent hyperviolence (DOWNEY, 2014) and the category of sublime aesthetic violence (BRETT, 2017), which indicate the use of these elements in MMA as a way to attract the audience.

In dialogue with the sportization process proposed by Elias and Dunning (1992), which shows decreasing violence in combat as an element of the civilizing process, the scenes presented here indicate that violence in MMA is placed within certain civilizing standards that may not be accepted by society “in general,” to increase the level of tension-excitement in combats.

This leads us to reflect on the ruptures related to violence based on non-linearity of the civilizing process. In this sense, other elements in MMA’s setting (private events and spectacle) redirect other tensions related to violence. What could be called “extension of violence” is not new to the proposed theory. While Elias and Dunning show us that death in fights used to be a constitutive element and a type of “violence” accepted in Ancient Greece, today, when we live in a spectacularized and more complex society, this “broadening” seems to produce pleasant tension-excitement, co-opting the fight’s audience and TV viewers. What we sustain, therefore, is that MMA, despite being sportized, produces violence with a sense of spectacle, and that, even though there is a disapproval discourse, the uses of this violence helped to make the sport popular and co-opt many followers.

6 CONCLUSIONS

This work aimed to analyze MMA based on what distinguishes it from other sports based on the sportization concept proposed by Elias and Dunning. For this purpose, ethnography was chosen as a methodological procedure.

The first category developed was the “event owner.” Starting from the construction of an empirical character with a crucial role in the setting, since he modifies rules according to his interest, we reflected upon institutionalization that, in MMA – unlike other sports – is centered on a private company and on events with “owners.”

As for “spectacle-rather-than-victory” – the second analytical category of this study – there are relative distinctions between MMA and sports results. The pleasant tension-excitement provoked by the spectacle and materialized in “tough disputes” was favored over victory, causing athletes to perform actions – important in a fight – to move the spectacle to a level that is above victory/result. In addition to relativizing sports features such as result, victory, progress and record, this category reflected on “rooting” in MMA, dialoguing with the notion of belonging, which is a foundation of modern sport.

The third category was based on understanding that violence is used as part of the spectacle in MMA. Thus, an analysis was conducted of the spaces occupied by violence in this sport, its use within civilizing limits and the “broadening of a violence” that produces a sense of spectacle in order to create pleasant tension-excitement, which indicates a new ethical standard for that sport.

These elements must be taken into account when resorting to analyzes of classical sociology of sport, precisely because they end up being somehow typical of their time, which is normal in historical and social studies. Therefore, framing all elements of MMA, or current sport, within sociological theories is questionable.

Thus, we raise the question: where does MMA fit today? The data indicate that contemporary sport requires a discussion relativizing some classic concepts of sociology of sport. Considering that society is undergoing profound changes in terms of communication and customs, such changes would also apply to the analysis of sport.

To conclude and contribute to the sociological discussion about sport, we sustain that the concept of sportization (ELIAS; DUNNING, 1992) is limited when it comes to analyzing MMA. If the authors analyze changes in the internal logic related to repudiation of violence, we conclude that this violence may also be spectacularized nowadays. If the authors claim that rules are transformed based on behavioral restrictions, we conclude that these rules also serve the spectacle. If the authors present a sportization process related to industrialization of English society, we can conclude that, in today’s society, we are experiencing a “second sportization” – now related to spectacle, media and private events.

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Resumo: A caracterização do esporte moderno elenca elementos que o distinguem de outras práticas corporais. As artes marciais mistas (MMA) são frequentemente compreendidas como uma modalidade esportivizada a partir de mudanças que visaram ao regramento e à diminuição da violência. Este estudo objetivou analisar o MMA a partir daquilo que o distingue dos outros esportes com base no conceito de esportivização proposto por Elias e Dunning. A metodologia, etnográfica, utilizou a observação participante em uma academia de MMA e em eventos de luta, da produção de diários de campo e de entrevistas. Três categorias empírico-analíticas foram construídas para análise de elementos do MMA (o “dono do evento”; o espetáculo acima da vitória; e a violência como espetáculo), as quais sugerem debates com as noções de vitória, institucionalização, pertencimento e violência. Indicou-se a importância de um alargamento do conceito de esporte para compreender o MMA.

Palavras chave: Esportes. Violência. Institucionalização. Sociologia.

Resumen: La caracterización del deporte moderno tiene elementos que lo distinguen de otras prácticas corporales. Las artes marciales mixtas (MMA) suelen entenderse como una modalidad deportizada a partir de cambios destinados a regular y reducir la violencia. Este estudio tuvo como objetivo analizar el MMA a partir de aquello que lo distingue de otros deportes y tuvo como base el concepto de “deportización” propuesto por Elias y Dunning. La metodología, etnográfica, utilizó la observación participante en un gimnasio de MMA y en eventos de lucha, la producción de diarios de campo y entrevistas. Se construyeron tres categorías empírico-analíticas para analizar elementos del MMA (el “dueño del evento”, el espectáculo por encima de la victoria y la violencia como espectáculo), las que sugieren debates sobre las nociones de victoria, institucionalización, pertenencia y violencia. Se señala la importancia de ampliar el concepto de deporte para comprender el MMA.

Palabras clave: Deportes. Violencia. Institucionalización. Sociología.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest in this study.

AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

Flávio Py Mariante Neto: Author of the research project. Writing and analysis of the article. Proofreading.

Daniel Giordani Vasques: Writing and analysis of the article. Proofreading.

Marco Paulo Stigger: Advisor. Writing and analysis of the article. Proofreading.

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EDITORIAL RESPONSIBILITY

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