

MEANINGFUL COMPETITIONS: FROM DUELING TO DOPING AND TITLE IX

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Introduction

Is there a fundamental conflict between equality and excellence? Perhaps the more equal we become, the more we dumb down our hopes of real excellence. Or is it the other way round: someone can be excellent only in comparison to equals? This is one of the enduring dilemmas of modern politics; it is the central question of this book. The book begins to answer the question by exploring the solutions — contingent, controversial ones — others have offered at three different historical moments. It explores what the modern state's promises of “careers open to talents” and equality of opportunity have meant at different times, and how those promises have been cashed out. The exploration gets us to the vexed questions of personal status in a democratic polity and of how those on the margins of the polity have staked claims to status, resources and respect from the state.

Consider three curious political phenomena. One: At the turn of the 18th and 19th centuries, the German bourgeoisie begins to duel, even though one might have expected them to reject the practice as a feudal relic. Why would recognizably modern political actors be sympathetic toward dueling? The bourgeois benefit most when merit and wealth replace birth as the markers of status. Perhaps they just want to be aristocrats, as some have suggested. But maybe not: maybe they turn dueling into something more modern. It is a practice that deals in respect-worthiness and requires equality from its participants, and those features can be used for a politics of equal dignity. Two: Not quite a century later, debates range among European working-class movements on what to do with sports. Some workers point to the 19th-century ethos which infers moral character from physical prowess and then argue that mass sports are a way of gaining political respect: If ruling classes think that being a good athlete shows you are worthy of respect, they say, let's get some respect by beating them at their poncy games. Others agree on the value of sports, but worry that competitiveness means buying into capitalist values. They urge the working classes to

embrace non-competitive models of physical flourishing. Still others find the whole business a dangerous distraction from politics and lament workers' delight in spending their newly established leisure doing and watching sports. Three: In 1999, a group of disabled athletes accuse of the New York City Marathon of discrimination under the Americans with Disabilities Act. Their charge? Although they are allowed to participate in the marathon, they are not treated *as athletes*: their participation is not a competition. Similar demands to make competitive pursuits more accessible — more “democratic,” many say — have also generated a backlash: critics claim our ideas of “excellence” and “achievement” are being “dumbed down.”

Physical culture is a metaphor for political culture during these episodes, but it is also political in its own right, a site where knotty political disputes are sorted out. One of the knottiest is the nature of modernity: Is the 18th-century commitment to people's equal dignity an ideal worth realizing, or is it a recipe for dumbing down culture, perhaps emasculating it? This book takes both the modern ideals and the worries about them seriously. I compare and contrast the three episodes along several dimensions. Two discourses in the late 18th century generate an enduring tension whose contours I trace. On the one hand, I study how 18th-century reformers try to realize the new ideals of equal human dignity. I focus on the educational ideals of German pedagogue Johann Bernhard Basedow, whose radically egalitarian theory introduced physical education to modern Europe (and significantly influenced, among others, Immanuel Kant). On the other hand, I analyze the stakes in political debates about dueling and aristocratic honor. Some commentators see these reforms as ways of realizing the modern ideals; others see them as evidence of cultural degeneration. Bourgeois dueling and non-lethal dueling, for example, just make a mockery of masculine honor, they think.

These questions crop up in recognizable but significantly novel forms in the later episodes. In the late 19th century, we see them in mass sports: where the working classes try to make sport a political means to equal respect, others see mass sports as the *reductio ad absurdum* of human excellence. Still later, similar claims arise about the participation of women and the disabled in pursuits of physical excellence.

These episodes also illustrate the changing relationship between individuals, the state, and civil society. The politics I explore is necessarily outside the institutions of the state, I argue: it happens in the social space we now call civil society. But “civil society” itself looks radically different at the three moments: we can hardly talk of civil society in

the 18th century; it exists uneasily alongside the weakly democratic state in the late-19th and early-20th centuries; and at our own *fin de siècle* the liberal-democratic state and civil society have consolidated. Instead of thinking of life outside the state as a school for political virtues, as neo-Tocquevillean scholars like Robert Putnam do, I show that the nature of civil society varies radically depending on the kind of politics that take place in it. Should civil society be a site where we sort out what equality of opportunity means, or where we challenge the fundamental values of capitalist society, for example? Or should it instead just be a place for free but apolitical associational life?

Finally, the focus on physical culture gives us purchase on the enduring question of what role “nature” plays in politics. The issue culminates in the discussion of performance enhancing drugs in sports, but it is important throughout the book. The scientific background picture about what is and isn’t natural is different at each of the different moments. That profoundly affects what kinds of differences between human beings count as salient. Is the human body the window to a person’s soul, as the Victorians thought? And how are “natural” differences between, say, men and women, salient. Salient for what? Where is the boundary between natural and non-natural differences in the first place?

The book does not give fixed answers to any of these questions, even less to questions of what, say, equality or freedom “really” mean. Its contribution is to offer tools for triangulating between these different dimensions. This is a substantive contemporary contribution: it will help us know better how to wrap our minds around *our* pressing questions of merit, achievement, and status, of fairness, equality, and freedom.

Approach and methods

I am a political theorist trained as a philosopher, and this is a project in political theory, not in political sociology or history: my primary “data” are texts, and my method the interpretation and conceptual analysis of arguments. Some of the texts I explore are by canonical authors: Montesquieu, Rousseau, and Kant, for example, or Thomas Carlyle, Herbert Spencer, and Karl Kautsky, although in many cases I focus on slightly unusual and underexplored discussions and works by these writers. But because I understand the texts as contributions to specific debates in the contexts I study, the analysis can be neither ahistorical nor asociological. As a result, I also draw from sources less familiar to political theorists and particularly political philosophers: pamphlets and journalism as well as secondary historical sources.

This project builds on my first book, *Arguments and Fists: Justification and Agency in Liberal Theory* (Routledge, 2002), where I also tried to develop a more discerning vocabulary of “the political” than is on offer from those who see “politics” equaling “government,” on the one hand, or from those who think everything is political, on the other.

Intended audience

Political theory is interdisciplinary and lives in the borderlands between social sciences and humanities. Although its methods and approaches are its own, its audiences can be quite broad. I am writing this book with a general academic audience and the well-educated lay reader in mind, and my “focus groups” on draft chapters so far suggest the book will be accessible to humanists and social scientists. It should be of interest to all students and scholars of modernity, particularly to political theorists, political historians and sociologists. Since I draw from gender, disability and sports studies, the book also has parts that will interest specialists in those areas, but it will not require expertise in them.

The closest analogue to what *kind* of book mine is is Michael Walzer’s *Spheres of Justice* (Basic Books, 1983): it studies a theoretical concept by looking at how it is embedded in specific practices. Bernard Yack’s *The Longing for Total Revolution* (California, 1992) and Susan Neiman’s *Evil in Modern Thought* (Princeton, 2002) are also very similar: both trace the curious life of a modern theoretical concept through roughly the same historical terrain, with attention to theory and practice.

Chapter outline

I indicate in brackets the state of completion for each chapter. I expect to have a rough draft of the whole manuscript written by the time I finish my sabbatical in August 2005.

Fin de siècle I: 18th Century

I. Introduction: What Is Enlightenment?

This chapter motivates the book with a brief survey of motley contemporary controversies: affirmative action, the educational challenges facing not only the United States but most OECD countries (achievement gaps, regional disparities), lifestyle-related public health problems, the prevalence of doping in sports. It anchors these issues provisionally into liberal-democratic political culture and then revisits one of the periods during which that culture began to shape: the 18th

century. The chapter illustrates some of the ideals that define that culture — equal dignity of all human beings, their right to freedom and autonomy — and describes some of the ways the ideals emerge. [Early draft written]

2. **Dueling for Equality**

This chapter begins with the ambivalence late-18th and early-19th-century political actors and social thinkers expressed toward dueling. It analyzes dueling in early-modern and modern West as a practice for the maintenance of masculine aristocratic honor, and then shows how the ethos of that practice gets reinterpreted in the 18th century. It focuses on Montesquieu's and Immanuel Kant's discussions of honor, but it situates them in a larger socio-political context. The chapter argues that the necessarily extra-legal nature of dueling helps prepare the political role of modern civil society. [Advanced draft written]

3. **Kids and *Körperkultur***

This chapter explores how the education of children becomes one way to solve Enlightenment's "autonomy problem," i.e., how to create conditions for civic independence when most people don't have it. I focus on the so-called *Philantropinen* movement in German-speaking Europe, particularly on its founder Johann Bernhard Basedow, and the movement's influence on canonical thinkers. The *Philantropinen* were radical educational reformers who advocated public and equal education, opposed rote learning and physical punishment, and were the first Western theorists to stress the importance of physical education. The chapter shows how these ideas helped ground what the concept of "autonomy" means for modern canonical thinkers, particularly Kant and his followers. [Advanced draft written]

Fin de siècle II: 19th Century

4. ***Mens Sana*, the Playing Fields of Eton, and Other Clichés**

The 19th century grew obsessed about physical culture. This was in part because of developments in science and medicine: an increasingly sophisticated understanding of human biology, hygiene, and psychology meant the whole human body became the window to the soul. Victorians and their Continental and transatlantic counterparts thought a person's moral character was exemplified by his [sic] physical prowess. This influenced, among other things, theories of education. But there were also disputes about what "proper" physical prowess meant. The chapter

shows how these controversies reflected and shaped more general preoccupations about social, political and economic change. [Early draft in progress]

5. Physical Culture for the Masses

This chapter focuses on the emergence of socialist and other working-class sports organizations at the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th centuries. The chapter begins with a puzzle about these political organizations' inordinate interest in sports. It argues that one reason for this was exactly the 19th-century obsession with the physical: political actors saw physical culture as a promising site for a kind of "practical political rhetoric." There were fierce debates in and between working-class organizations, however, as to whether this preoccupation was a good idea. Central for my purposes are debates about the nature of competition, on the one hand, and the extent to which the social space of physical culture was political, on the other: was it within the unavoidable control of the capitalist state, or could it help change the state? [Early draft written]

Fin de siècle III: 20th Century

6. Being a Woman and Other Disabilities

This chapter explores the general question of how difference matters for ideas about equality of opportunity and excellence. It focuses on two so-called ascriptive categories, gender and disability. It begins by asking questions about the surprising salience of sport in these matters: Why does Title IX, a law about gender equity in education in general get associated with sport in particular? The chapter then turns to broad questions about how we — a liberal democratic society at the turn of the 21st century — understand excellence. How does someone whom society *defines* as disabled exemplify excellence? What does it mean to pursue excellence? What might an equal opportunity to pursue excellence look like? If equality of opportunity is guaranteed by a boundary drawing between groups of people — women and men, say — what are the principles we use? If Casey Martin can't walk, can he play in the PGA? Can you run a marathon in a wheelchair? What kind of wheelchair? Does it matter how you got in the wheelchair? If Marla Runyon is blind but still as fast as sighted athletes, should she go to the Paralympics or

Olympics? And if you win a Paralympic gold medal claiming to be mentally disabled, but aren't, who should be ashamed? [Early draft written]

7. The Political Theory of Doping

The chapter begins by observing the shortness of our cultural memory: the contemporary obsession with athletic doping rehearses similar earlier obsessions (like the one I discuss in ch. 4), but remains blissfully unaware of them. However, the shortness of our memories isn't trivial. I argue that the current salience of athletic doping reflects not only contemporary partisan divisions between "liberals" and "conservatives" — although it does reflect those — but deeper tensions about individual achievement and fair competition in an age that is increasingly called "the age of biopolitics." The chapter refuses a choice between a "reductionist" analysis — approaching the question as a nature-versus-nurture debate — or a macropolitical one — contemporary macropolitical interests such as nationalist or capitalist ones overdetermine the nature of modern sports — or an individualist-moralist one — competition is rife with bad moral characters. Instead, it takes all these seriously and charts the relationships between them. [Not yet written]

8. Coda: Meaningful Competitions

This brief concluding chapter begins with a discussion of the concept of competition. It explores its various and culturally contingent meanings: for example, in the Anglophone world, you "win" a scholarship; in many other languages, you "get" one. It revisits the way competition is both a key metaphor in liberal politics and, if David Hume is to be believed, at the very center of *all* politics: "circumstances of justice" arise only when we compete for scarce resources. The chapter then revisits the different dimensions of politics the book has discussed and shows how the dimensions get triangulated at the different historical moments. It concludes by taking the issue beyond the social context the book has focused on and suggests how we might better understand contemporary political debates. [Not yet written]