

Vishad Raj Onta

Visions of America

Professor Juan de Pascuale

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Kayfabe: a Concept Fundamental to Understanding America

One of the most effective tools to understand America is the insider professional wrestling concept of Kayfabe. Kayfabe is the depiction of fake or real events as real and true. In this paper, I will explain why this seemingly arbitrary idea, taken from pro-wrestling of all places, is worth understanding, not least following a mind-boggling Donald Trump presidency. I also contend that Kayfabe showed up in the course material several times. Subsequently, I will present some ideas about how Kayfabe shows up in important parts of American culture. Finally, I will show how understanding Kayfabe and its implications could impact the modern day, and possibly change how the pandemic is being dealt with.

As mentioned earlier, Kayfabe, in pro-wrestling, is the layer of fakery that presents scripted fights as real. To Eric Weinstein, an intellectual podcast host and proponent of Kayfabe as a critical cognitive framework, Kayfabe is an example of the process by which “endeavours turn from failed reality to successful fakery.” Weinstein's interpretation of the concept comes from the evolution of scripted professional wrestling from the legitimate sport of catch wrestling, a submission grappling sport. Weinstein notes two undesirable aspects of catch wrestling that Kayfabe solved. The first aspect is that catch wrestling, as a submission sport, caused “occasional but extreme peril” for the wrestlers. The second aspect, somewhat paradoxically, is

that while occasionally dangerous, catch wrestling matches are generally monotonous for the audience and participants. A match may descend into monotony if both competitors are hesitant to engage with each other. Boredom may also ensue if one competitor is immobilising his opponent for a period of time but not attempting any submissions.

Kayfabe solves both of these problems by having scripted matches that are exciting. It solves the problem of danger because participants are skilled at performing well-rehearsed sequences. It solves the problem of boredom because the moves are carried out excitingly. Weinstein believes that the process of Kayfabe, which he calls “Kayfabrication”, may occur in any field with the ‘twin attributes’ of being occasionally very dangerous, but generally very boring. Weinstein cites “war, finance, love, politics, and science” as examples.

Kayfabe goes far beyond the mere rehearsal and scripting of moves in a match. It includes everything that adds to the spectacle, such as a fake fight between competitors--what is known as a “work.” One important concept within Kayfabe is that of a “Babyface,” used to describe any competitor who the audience likes. A Babyface exhibits honorable attributes such as humility, determination, and honesty, and they love the crowd back. The opposite of a Babyface is a “Heel,” a wrestler who is designed to elicit a negative reception. A heel is typically narcissistic, generally bitter, and sadistic. They may use unfair tactics, such as taking a cheap shot when the referee is looking away.

Why is it important to understand a concept from a “fake” sport like pro-wrestling? Well, thinking of pro-wrestling as more of an entertainment product than a sport helps. Professional wrestling has been an enduring part of American culture. It was one of the first television shows in the USA, and it is the one of the most watched forms of entertainment with worldwide fans and a market cap of 6 billion dollars. It was the first American product I consumed, as a kid. One

of my lasting childhood memories is trading professional wrestling moves with my buddies on the mattresses after gym class, paying no heed to the warnings imploring not to try moves at “home, school or anywhere.”

Indeed, so many of my friends and I were gripped by professional wrestling in a way that I did not understand as a kid. Roland Barthes, in his essay “The World of Wrestling” from “Mythologies,” explains the appeal of wrestling by comparing it to Greek theater and bullfights. He characterises wrestling as a “spectacle of excess,” where the public are uninterested in whether or not it is fixed. Rather than a fair fight and a logical outcome, the audience wants to be involved in the show as if they were watching a play.

Barthes contrasts pro-wrestling to judo. He notes how while subtlety is a major feature of Judo, exaggeration is a key component of professional wrestling. When a judo competitor takes a fall, they are most interested in getting back up. When a pro-wrestler takes a fall, they are most interested in making the biggest spectacle out of helplessly staying flat on the mat.

Barthes states that the main appeal of an “immediate pantomime,” in that as the match unfolds, the audience feels a pleasure at seeing good prevail over evil. He uses the example of a “Heel,” using an unfair tactic to win a match. Barthes states that the audience is not angry about the cheating, it is only angry if the action goes unpunished. Barthes brilliantly notes how a wrestler is transmuted in the ring to a God-like figure in that they separate good from evil. He notes how this transmutation is akin to that which happens in a theater or in religious worship.

Long-time pro-wrestling writer, Eric Bischoff, known as a booker in the business, echoes Barthes’ sentiment that people do not watch wrestling for a logical end with the technically superior wrestler winning. Bischoff states how wrestling is written in order to make audiences feel and not think. He explains that it does not matter whether or not the audience likes or dislikes a

wrestler: as long as they feel passionately about him either way, they will keep watching and the company will keep making money.

This ability of Kayfabe to make humans ignore logical thought through being caught up in drama, is what Weinstein and Bishoff both point to as important. Both agree on the fact that corporate media has undergone Layfabrication. Weinstein notes how “investigative journalism seems to have vanished” and corporate rivals cooperate in lobbying. Bishoff notes the same, stating how it is easier and cheaper for news channels to have talking heads constantly arguing around talking points than to have journalists actually reporting on events. He characterizes this as “cheap heat,” akin to how a “heel” wrestler might draw out a pretty much guaranteed negative response from a crowd by disparaging the city of the show.

Weinstein also gives two other examples of where Kayfabe has meant that more attention was paid to a rivalry, to the point where their joint failings are ignored. First, he talks of the battle between “ ‘freshwater’ Chicago macro economists and Ivy League ‘saltwater’ theorists” happening inside a Kayfabe system, in that both groups escaped criticism for failing to predict the financial crisis of 2008. Weinstein also gives the example of the rivalry between string theory physicists and loop theory physicists being a distraction to the fact that neither group has come up with a theory for quantum gravity.

Meanwhile, Bishoff points to Donald Trump’s presidency as a result of Kayfabe. Indeed, Trump is in the World Wrestling Entertainment(WWE) hall of fame, and was the star of a reality show: he understands the intricacies of layering fakeness over reality. He certainly was passionately felt about: half the country hated him with a vengeance, the other half loved him beyond belief. He was simultaneously a “face” and a “heel.” Further evidence of Trump’s understanding of kayfabe can be seen in his (correct) predictions of news ratings plummeting

once he was out of office. Another such instance is his bragging about high TV ratings during his coronavirus briefings.

Presidential debates can be viewed as a result of Kayfabrication. They take political debate, which fulfil the attributes of being occasionally dangerous, in that occasionally controversial topics are discussed. At the same time, it is for the most part very monotonous. Presidential debates take the most controversial topics, and make it as interesting for the audience as possible, with entertainment implicitly encouraged. Again, despite this, the importance of presidential debates is clear in them playing a large part in converting the undecided voter.

Weinstein notes another important aspect of Kayfabe in having found the limits of the human mind in tolerating layers of deception. Weinstein notes what are called “shoots” and “worked shoots” in professional wrestling. A “work” would be the primary level of deception, where an actor is for example simply playing a character. A “shoot” would be a secondary level of deception, where a real-life storyline is brought into the wrestler’s storyline. For example, a real-life romantic interest of the wrestler may be brought in to supplement the storyline. A “worked shoot” would be a tertiary level of deception, in which there is a fake real fight that appears real. Weinstein points to the breakdown of the human ability to separate too many layers of fact and fiction to when an invented affair between a wrestler’s partner and another wrestler, turns out to actually happen.

It is my belief that we saw Kayfabe turn up on several occasions throughout the course materials as well. Two such occasions were in the documentaries we watched. In “The Power of Nightmares: the Rise in the Politics of Fear,” Kayfabrication occurs when the “failed reality” of utopian ideals is turned into the “successful fakery” of the supposed existence and vast danger

posed by al-Qaeda and terrorism. Arbitrary caves in Afghanistan are made out to be elaborate, multi-storied underground bunkers and scratches on paper are made out to be fighter planes. The actual war itself may be monotonous, but to “sell” it to the public, as a wrestler “sells” a move, the media must present a story and anticipation of horror.

Similarly, in the documentary “Father Roy: Inside the School of the Americas,” we see an instance of breaking a Kayfabricated system. As Weinstein points out, “betrayal in wrestling comes not from engaging in unsportsmanlike conduct, but by the surprise of actual sporting behavior.” If we understand the School of the Americas to be a kayfabricated system in which the goal is political control in South America, Father Roy Bourgeois was being unsportsmanlike by pointing out that it was all deception. The “gimmick” in this case was democracy: proponents of the school cited that the individuals of the school were getting an education in democracy and human rights. The reality of the situation was that the school was producing dictators and mass killers.

A third instance in which kayfabe was quite perfectly seen in the course was in Bernard-Henri Levy’s description of the village of Cooperstown in “American Vertigo”. Here, the Kayfabrication occurs in the conversion of a town which had ties to difficult parts of American history, namely the slaughter of Indians and the civil war; to a town that is the world capital of baseball. Levi points out how easily debunked myths are created and believed that turn Cooperstown into a place of pilgrimage. For example, a myth is that civil war general Abner Doubleday “baptized” baseball by laying out its rules in Cooperstown in 1839. The myth breaks down when it is learned that Doubleday was actually at West Point during that time. Levi notes that one of two things are possible: either everyone believes in the constructed reality, or they see the hoax and play along anyway. The second option is exactly analogous to pro-wrestling.

Levi takes this idea further in the description of a Cooperstown museum that would have perhaps had actual old relics, but prefers to present models. He identifies the goal as to “reconstitute a false truth and celebrate it as such,” and to “revere a counterfeit as if it were real.” The echoes of Kayfabe are obvious, in pro-wrestling enthusiasts appreciating the skill of the wrestlers in making the fight appear realistic.

An important condition to make Kayfabe work seems to be the admission of fakery, whether explicit, or implicit through the over-exaggeration of the spectacle. In professional wrestling, Kayfabe is explicitly fake in World Wrestling Entertainment(WWE) CEO Vince McMahon admitted as much to a court to avoid taxation as a sporting event. It is also implicitly fake in the over-exaggeration of the spectacle, as Barthes noted. Perhaps the kayfabrication of Al-Qaeda was successful because of the over exaggeration of the details of the terrorists, and the utter, tragic spectacle of 9/11. The kayfabrication of the School of the Americas failed because it was obvious to anyone what the graduates were actually doing back in their countries. A recent failure of Kayfabrication in the news happened when an actor staged a supposedly racist and homophobic attack. People quickly dismissed the attack and disapproved of the actor because the stunt was easily debunkable and was perceived as an attempt to further his career.

There has been another supremely interesting evolution of the use of Kayfabe. It has bled into actual fighting, in the Mixed Martial Art(MMA) arena. It is most interesting that the best paid MMA fighters are not always the best fighters in terms of technique. Rather, the richest fighters are those who are quite good at the sport but are very skilled at cultivating a persona and being able to talk to the crowd. We see the same idea of while fans love to see skill, they want to be involved in the drama even more. In history, Muhammad Ali can be taken as an example of someone who got Kayfabe. While there may have been better boxers technically, Ali is loved

and remembered by all for his personality, flair, and skill with words, as much as his boxing. It is interesting to note that “Muhammad Ali” was a persona, albeit created genuinely.

Finally, how might we apply Kayfabe to better understand the situation we find ourselves in with the Pandemic? Well, I want to bring back Weinstein’s idea of corporate rivals benefiting from the public focus being on a rivalry rather than on what the logical goal is, and on Bishoff’s warning to tread carefully whenever you are feeling rather than thinking. There is a clear division in the pandemic between those who want to get the vaccine and those who do not. Clearly, this has gotten emotional, in that vaxxers are mad at anti-vaxxers for not following the science and anti-vaxxers are mad at vaxxers for this pressure to be forced to get something that they see to be unsafe. Perhaps kayfabe means that everybody is picking a side, while ignoring the fact that certain vaccines may be more effective than others.

Additionally, the pandemic has gone on for two years now and shows no sign of stopping. Perhaps the shift needs to be an acknowledgement that there will always be a large majority of the population that will not get the shot and rather than get angry about this, alternative methods to contain the pandemic must be explored. The question becomes, are there such alternative methods? Well, certain parts of the world like Brazil, India, Indonesia and Japan have had some success with alternative methods. Perhaps the public’s focus should shift from the rivalry of vaxxers and anti-vaxxers to at least talking about treatments that are more readily accepted.