
Sport and the Neoliberal Conjuncture

Complicating the Consensus

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We begin this book by locating our writing in what are very interesting times. We are but a stone's throw into the new millennium, yet we are in a moment dominated by perpetual war; financial crises; enhanced security; terror threats; the seeming ubiquitous celebration of the free market; an increased emphasis on individual responsibility for all facets of everyday life; a rampant media and culture industry that entertains us and educates us in how to act, behave, and live; higher education systems that increasingly act as handmaidens for government and corporations; and the downgrading and diminished import of any public and social services (health services, education, transportation, and so on). As popular cultural forms—both in terms of popularity and in the sense that Stuart Hall (1981) proposed, with respect to how they function as a continuing tension (relationship, influence, and antagonism) to the dominant culture—sporting practices, experiences, and structures are far from distinct from this context. As Giardina (2005, 7) proposes, contemporary sport finds itself sutured into and through this context; “global (cultural) sporting agents, intermediaries, and institutions actively work as pedagogical sites to hegemonically re-inscribe and re-present (hetero)-normative discourses on sport, culture, nation, and democracy throughout an ascendant global capitalist order.” Thus, this book offers an insight into how sport, as a component of popular culture, acts as a powerful educational force that, through pedagogical relations and practices, organizes identity, citizenship, and agency within a neoliberal present (Giroux and Giroux 2006). We begin by thinking through the current neoliberal moment, both in the United States and, to some degree, beyond (specifically the United Kingdom and Canada). It is our contention that neoliberalism has its ideological and figurative core in the United States—hence the focus of this project. Nonetheless, it equally possesses a truly international reach. This signposts our future work examining the relationship between sport and neoliberalism in

a variety of national contexts (settings that differ in terms of geography, level of economic development, and mode of governance, and thus the precise way that the sport and neoliberalism relation is enacted). Having spatially and historically located the trajectory of neoliberalism in its seemingly relentless march toward becoming an ascendant ordering logic of contemporary societies, we then begin to sketch how such processes have been manifest in sport, suggesting that much work is needed to begin to understand the variety of ways that neoliberalism (in its various mutations) has been both understood and mobilized within sporting contexts. This leads to introducing each of the chapters solicited for this text, contributions that begin to fill the void in our understandings of the articulations between the heterogeneous complexities of neoliberal ideology, political praxis, pedagogy, and sport.

Our Contested Present

On October 14, 2008, in the final throes of his presidency, George W. Bush delivered a statement in the Rose Garden of the White House that promised “unprecedented” and “aggressive” steps to address the financial crisis that had devastated the global economy over the previous year (and indeed continues unabated at the current time of writing). In a move that doubtless proved an anathema to the legions of free-marketers who had dominated American economic and political life in the preceding three decades, Bush vowed to save *American* capitalism by taking the unprecedented step of partially nationalizing nine of the country’s largest banking institutions:

This weekend, I met with finance ministers from the G7 and the G20—organizations representing some of the world’s largest and fastest-growing economies. We agreed on a coordinated plan for action to provide new liquidity, strengthen financial institutions, protect our citizens’ savings, and ensure fairness and integrity in the markets. Yesterday, leaders in Europe moved forward with this plan. They announced significant steps to inject capital into their financial systems by purchasing equity in major banks. And they announced a new effort to jumpstart lending by providing temporary government guarantees for bank loans. These are wise and timely actions, and they have the full support of the United States. Today, I am announcing new measures America is taking to implement the G7 action plan and strengthen banks across our country. . . .

They will make clear that the government’s role will be limited and temporary. And they will make clear that these measures are not intended to take over the free market, but to *preserve* it. (“Bush: Moves Made” 2008; emphasis added)

As the final sentence of Bush’s statement of intention makes plain—far from signaling an epochal shift and the demise of the largely unregulated, free-market approach to economic structuration and development—this was a

policy announcement that couched government intervention into the floundering economy in almost apologetic terms and promised a swift return to the political-economic order that had brought the American, and indeed global, economy to this perilous state. This was not an effort by the Bush administration to disrupt the sovereignty of a new logic and structure of rule, an empire, centered on a global market and global circuits of production (Hardt and Negri 2000) and to imagine, as Hardt and Negri (2000) might, an alternative power structure or political strategy that resurrects the nation-state against capitalism. Clearly, the Bush administration was continuing to exist and operate under the assumption that, however dire the financial situation might appear, the current parlous state of the economy was merely a *temporary correction* in the neoliberal political-economic modus operandi that characterized his presidency. Therefore, and much like the justification for the wars on Afghanistan and Iraq, the actions were part of the effort of *preservation* of a system of structures and values on which his entire regime was founded. The Bush administration's myopic intransigence simply would not allow it to be distracted from its unwavering belief in the managerial rectitude *and* moral righteousness of a system of neoliberal economic and political governance centered on free-market capital, state disinvolvement, and structure deregulation. Following Robbins (2009, 473) then, it appears that "the cure for a jaundiced neoliberal market order is a moderately revised market order where the government actively socializes the costs and consequences of the care for the diseased and dangerous patient while privatizing the profits."

The inauguration of President Barack Hussein Obama on January 20, 2009, promised much change from the previous administration. Within his first week of office, President Obama began to reverse many of the repressive policies of the Bush administration. The announced closure of the Guantánamo Bay prison camp, the lifting of restrictions on U.S. government funding for groups involved with abortion overseas, and moves toward reversal of Bush's climate change policies all signaled a conscious decision to publicly and strategically distance the regime from its predecessor. However, and without being the harbingers of doom for the *new* era, we would be somewhat naïve were we to think of Obama's presidency as a teleological fault line, a complete rupture, from the last forty years of economic, political, military, domestic, and international "policy." Indeed, less than a week into his presidency, Obama ordered his first military action, a strike against "suspected" militants in rural Pakistan that killed at least eighteen people. Further, he has been critiqued for his deafening silence on Gaza, a stance that shows little distance from that which has gone before and, indeed, one that may well threaten his perception among Muslims throughout the world (Tisdall 2009). On February 17, 2009, as testimony to the continued reliance on and support of financial markets as the primary vehicle for ensuring sustainable economic growth and the preservation of economic stability, Obama signed a \$787 billion stimulus bill: the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act. While cloaked in neo-Keynesian rhetoric, Obama's general approach to the current fiscal crisis is steeped in the neoliberal

underpinnings of the Bush regime, which clearly continue to frame popular and policy consciousness regarding the appropriate form of economic structure and development. As Robbins (2009) suggests, what is interesting and perhaps most disturbing about the Obama administration—the self-styled “change” administration—is that many of the elements of the previous order still hold sway. Without characterizing it too simplistically, in the early stages of the Obama presidency, J. Maynard Keynes and Milton Friedman have seemingly become the unlikeliest of economic policy bedfellows.

While there is much cause for optimism in the Obama regime, it is unlikely that he will distance himself from some forty years of a “triumphant” free market. On one hand, this is not wholly surprising. Unlike the near anarchic turmoil created by the spiraling and biting economic depression in the early 1930s—which necessitated the economic and social radicalism of FDR’s Keynes-informed New Deal—Obama has inherited an America bathed in the afterglow of decades of consumer-propelled economic growth but now in the midst of seemingly unprecedented economic decline. However, as profound as the current *crisis* may in fact be, it has yet to reach the scale and scope of the depression, largely because of the levels of *relative* affluence attained by many (if by no means all) sectors of the American populace. Thus, economic decline within a “postscarcity” society (and we use the term advisedly and with necessary caveats) results in real economic consequences in terms of people’s spending power and lifestyle choices, but it does not have the same degree of catastrophic impact regarding levels of poverty, hardship, and, indeed, starvation that characterized economic downturns within societies in which the “scarcity” of basic requirements for individual and familial sustenance was a widespread concern (e.g., the United States in the early 1930s). As a consequence, the factors that arguably led to the current crisis continue to be viewed as the roots of the economy’s salvation. Obama has consequently inherited an America whose economic existence continues to be prefigured on the primacy of free markets, deregulation, and unfettered international trade (Sassen 2000); is institutionalized within the formation of transnational political structures, alliances, and treaties (such as the World Trade Organization, the International Monetary Fund, and the North American Free Trade Agreement); and is expressed through the ability, and indeed the inalienably perceived requirement, of individuals to define themselves within and through their forays into the consumer marketplace.

So the present moment—at least in a U.S. context—can be characterized as a specific stage in the evolution of the liberal capitalist order that has (in various guises) dominated U.S. society for at least 150 years (post-Civil War, in approximate terms). In its present iteration, the Obama regime has inherited a pernicious and regressive social formation instantiated and materialized through the “overlapping” (Frow and Morris 2000) discourses of neoliberalism, neoconservatism, neoimperialism, and neoscientism that have both emerged from and helped to institutionally frame the subjective and material experience of the current moment. No matter the cogency of Obama’s reaction to this moment, academically, there has yet to be adequate critical explication that has

fully developed and understood how the various tentacles of economic and political policy have been and continue to be manifest in everyday life. That is, the ramifications of the cultural tentacles of these overlapping discourses needs to be interrogated; any semblance of progressive change can take place only once the moment has been understood, lest the history books show little in terms of change within the cultural realm of everyday life.

Our focal point for this intellectual project and its sites of critical intellectual engagement are ground within understanding how the sociopolitical-economic trajectories of certain neoliberal regimes and administrations became and continue to be mapped onto and appropriated within popular forms of culture. Specifically, our focus is on the multiple iterations of sporting cultures, experiences, expressions, and structures. For it is from this interdiscursive assemblage that the physical cultural realm comes to exude the “boundaries and limits of tolerable politics” (Hall 1989, 13), through “events” such as the post-Katrina accelerated renovation of the Louisiana Superdome and the popular media’s celebration thereof; the crass mobilization of sport spectacles in support of neoimperialist agendas; the social and racial containment enacted as part of the governance of spectacularized city spaces predicated on sporting consumption; or the personalization and individualization of medical discourses through reality television (see Couldry 2008) that act as powerful forms of public pedagogy correcting the ways in which we should eat, exercise, act, discipline children and pets, behave toward our neighbors, consume, and so on.

In this respect, given the relative importance of ideology and affect in the construction and experiencing of everyday (neoliberal) life, there has never been a greater need to expand “the tools of ideology critique to include a range of sites in which the production of knowledge takes place (including, but not limited to, television, Hollywood films, video games, newspapers, popular magazines, and Internet sites)” (Giroux 2001a, 14). Clearly, we can and should add sport and exercise cultures to this partial list. That is, through locating or articulating sport as an element of the cultural terrain within a wider cultural politics, critical interrogation can begin to understand it as a site through which various discourses are mobilized in regard to the organization and discipline of daily life in the service of particular political agendas (Andrews 1995; Giroux 2001a, 2001b; Grossberg 1992, 1997). In this regard we can begin to understand how sport serves as an economy of affect through which power, privilege, politics, and position are (re)produced. Before sketching out these relationships, however, and contrary to the many standard commentaries that treat neoliberalism as a largely uniform and undifferentiated identity, we highlight the heterogenous complexity of neoliberal ideology and political praxis.

Our Neoliberal Present

While neoliberalism has been manifest in complex and multiple ways within sporting contexts, it is important to offer a sense of what the term means and from where it emerged—no matter how contested and how it is experienced,

with different intensities, in specific parts of the world and at different times (and many of the contributions to this volume offer variations on our efforts to explicate the term). Our understanding of the extant neoliberal mantra is that of a populist political and economic ideology and praxis manifest in the reappropriation of the poststructuralist leitmotif pertaining to the *death of the social* (Giroux 2000a, 2000b, 2001a, 2003a, 2003b, 2004a, 2004b, 2004c). For Giroux (2001a), the defining essence of neoliberalism is the morbidity of the social sphere, evidenced from the hegemony of a cynicism toward all things public and collective, the corollary of which has been the rise of a virulent contempt for the notion of social welfare provision; an equally pernicious and questioning attitude toward its recipients; and a individualizing culture of surveillance, accountability, and resentment. Of course, this palpable shift in the political landscape—what Stuart Hall (1983) referred to as the “Great Moving Right Show”—emerged from particular sociostructural conditions. Specifically, the political landscape became profoundly altered in response to intensifying conditions of local and global recession, the related decline of mass-manufacturing economies and industries, and the precipitated crisis of Keynesian welfarism (see Harvey 2007). Thus, coming to the fore in the late 1970s and early 1980s after a considerable incubation period, within most Western democracies, an alternative political philosophy was strategically advanced, prefigured on the need to dismantle the basic institutional components of the postwar social welfare consensus and to mobilize policies intended to extend market discipline, competition, and commodification throughout society (Brenner and Theodore 2002a, 2002b; Hobbs et al. 2000; Jessop 2002). The increasing worldwide ascendancy of neoliberalism in the early 1980s was closely intertwined with a pervasive rescaling of capital-labor relations, intercapitalist competition, financial and monetary regulation, state power, international configuration, and uneven development throughout the world economy (Brenner and Theodore 2002a). Subsequently, the loosening or dismantling of the various institutional constraints on marketization, the logics of competitiveness and commodification, the hyperexploitation of workers, the deconstruction of labor unions and social welfare programs, and the discretionary power of private capital, processes of deregulation, liberalization, and state retrenchment (or, more accurately, reorganization) became manifest in an alarming range of spaces, institutions, and policies (Brenner and Theodore 2002a, 2002b; Peck and Tickell 2002). This ideologically and economically based form of political revisionism provoked an “epochal shift” away from the supposed “social mentality” proclivities underpinning the role of the state (Rose 1999)—a shift that saw the state relieved of its powers of obligation to answer for all society’s needs for order, health, security, and productivity. For Nikolas Rose, this involved a “double movement of autonomization and responsabilization [in which] [p]opulations once under the tutelage of the social state are to be made responsible for their destiny and for that of society as a whole. Politics is to be returned to society itself, but no longer in a social form: in the form of individual morality, organizational responsibility, and ethical community” (2000a, 1400).

The global hegemony of this mode of political rationality has led many to suggest that it has become a commonsense “nebulous phenomena” (Peck and Tickell 2002, 381), a “new planetary vulgate” (Bourdieu and Wacquant 2001, 2), or an ideological “thought virus” (Beck 2000, 122). Despite there being different inf(lection)s impacted by the particularities of various locales, neoliberalism can be seen as a new political consensus that became materialized via new, deeply interventionist forms of institutional hardware and invasive social policies, congealed around “social” issues such as crime, immigration, policing, welfare reform, urban order, surveillance, and community regeneration (Peck and Tickell 2002). While the doses vary, the basic prescription of neoliberalism is the same: purge the system of obstacles to the functioning of free markets; celebrate the virtues of individualism (recast social problems as individual problems, such as drug use, obesity, or inadequate health insurance) and competitiveness; foster economic self-sufficiency; abolish or weaken social programs; include the marginalized (often by this shift in the role of government) or the poor into the labor market, on the market’s terms (such as through the workfare scheme); and criminalize the homeless and the urban poor (subject this population to curfew orders, increased surveillance, or “zero-tolerance” policing) (Giroux 2004b; Peck 2003; Rose 1999, 2000b).

This emergent and active period of “roll-out neoliberalism,” predicated on the technocratic embedding of routines of neoliberal governance, the extension of neoliberal institutions, and the erosion of pockets of political and institutional resistance, has meant that particular attention needs to be directed toward the “purposeful construction and consolidation of neoliberalized state forms, modes of governance, and regulatory relations” (Peck and Tickell 2002, 384). Critical scholarship then, as Peck (2003) proposes, needs to interrogate what the reorganized state is doing, and to whom, and thereby expose the causes and consequences of neoliberalism across a range of spaces (Katz 2001).

The extension of the domain of economics into politics affords neoliberal market rationality the “responsibility” to organize, regulate, and define the basic principles and workings of the state. As opposed to assuming responsibility for a range of social needs, the state is instead interested in pursuing a wide range of deregulations, privatizations, and abdications of responsibility to the market and private philanthropy (Giroux 2008; Steinmetz 2003). Yet as the forces of neoliberalism dismantle the historically guaranteed social provisions provided by the welfare state—profit becoming defined as democracy—a growing disjuncture emerges between the ideology of self-regulating markets and the everyday reality of persistent economic stagnation, manifest in a growing apparatus of social control, intensifying inequality, generalized social insecurity, and a battered citizenry (Giroux 2004b, 2008). As a diverse political, economic, and pedagogic project, Giroux (2004b, 2008) argues, the state has been transformed from a social state to a punishing state manifest through the “proto fascism” of the present—the cult of traditionalism, the corporatization of civil society, a culture of fear and “patriotic correctness,” the collapse of the separation between church and state, a language of official “Newspeak,” and

the ownership and control of the media. The normalization of an authoritarian neoliberal ideology, then, has meant that the ever-expanding militarized neoliberal state, marked by the interdependence of finance capital, authoritarian order, a vast war machine, and a “culture of force,” now serves as a powerful pedagogical influence that shapes the lives, memories, and daily experiences of most Americans, waging an internal, domestic war against the poor, youth, women, and the elderly, especially those further marginalized by class and color (Giroux 2003a, 2004b, 2008). In this sense, the agenda that positions abject bodies in the degraded borderlands of the broken promises of capitalism projects class and racial anxieties onto the “abject,” polices and governs the presence of disposable populations in an increasingly gentrified *urbanité*, weakens support for citizens’ rights, downgrades social services, and creates an increasingly criminogenic public school, a militarized popular culture, and a surveillance-dominated cityscape (Giroux 2003a, 2003b, 2004b, 2004c).

We would argue that we can set down multiple manifestations of inequality as markers of a neoliberal conjuncture centered on bolstering the logics of the marketplace as opposed to the welfare of the citizenry. For example, a variety of traditionally public health issues and concerns have become incorporated into the reach of the private sector: disease prevention, health promotion, latchkey children, personal and public health, juvenile curfews, medical services, day care, nutrition, substance abuse prevention, mental health and family counseling, teen pregnancy, services for the homeless, family and community revitalization, family abuse, arts and cultural awareness, education, recreation, career structures, improvement of infrastructures, and economic revitalization (Andrews, Silk, and Pitter 2008). Indeed, health disparities may constitute the most concrete disadvantages associated with the social and racial patterns of polarization and postwar neglect (Hillier 2008; Squires and Kubrin 2005), given that poverty causes poor health by its connection with inadequate nutrition, substandard housing, exposure to environmental hazards, unhealthy lifestyles, and decreased access to and use of health care services (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Department of Disease Control and Prevention 2005). As an indicator of the shift of the role of government away from social provision, the ratio of black to white infant mortality increased from 1.6 to 2.4 between 1950 and the 1990s (Kington and Nickens 2001; Squires and Kubrin 2005). Disparities in health and wellness of populations disadvantaged by class, race, and social and spatial location are well established; for example, access to clean air and water, exposure to lead paint, stress, obesity, smoking habits, diet, social isolation, availability of public spaces (such as parks and recreation facilities), proximity to hospitals and other medical treatment facilities, and availability of health insurance are all traceable to the withdrawal of welfare (compare Bullard 1996; Dreier, Mollenkopf, and Swanstrom 2001; Kington and Nickens 2001; Klinenberg 2002; Squires and Kubrin 2005, 52). In this sense, neoliberalism produces, legitimates, and exacerbates the existence of persistent poverty, the absence of employment opportunities, inadequate health care, and substandard housing and education—an extant racial apartheid created

by ever-increasing “problems of social dislocation in the inner city” (Wilson 1987, 22), leading to growing inequalities between the rich and the poor (Giroux 2004b, 46). Such disparities—concentrated poverty, the restoration of class power, and racial segregation and (health) inequality—were perhaps most vividly exposed in the racially skewed death toll of Hurricane Katrina, particularly with regard to the loss of life in New Orleans (Gibson 2006; see also Denzin 2006 and Molotch 2006).

Our neoliberal conjecture, then, drawing on Sheller and Urry (2003), indicates a power shift from democratic local governing regimes to a constellation of public/private institutions that operate largely independently from democratic politics, with little public accountability and less of a commitment to extend social justice to the whole of society. In this regard, as the state becomes keyed on bolstering the logics of the market and more closely aligned with capital,

politics is defined largely by its policing functions rather than as an agency for peace and social reform. As the state abandons its social investments in health, education, and the public welfare, it increasingly takes on the functions of an enhanced security or police state, the signs of which are most visible in the increasing use of the state apparatus to spy on and arrest its subjects, the incarceration of individuals considered disposable (primarily poor people of color), and the ongoing criminalization of social policies. (Giroux and Giroux 2006, 26)

What then of the complex relationships between different forms of sporting experiences, structures, and organizations and the conceptualization of the destructive and creative moments of neoliberal policy, politics, economics, praxis, and ideology? In what ways have these relationships been formed, contested, played out, and framed in, through, and by sport? How has sport been affected by, and indeed affected, the role of the state, the market, or the subject within a neoliberal conjuncture? Do sporting institutions, organizations, and forms bolster or reject the advancement of the free market, and how do individuals experience sport within our neoliberal present? What of the place of sport in the multiple manifestations of social inequality and the citizenry alluded to previously? Complex debates can be held around each of these initial questions, discussions that form the essence of this text as we consider how sport has been appropriated and mobilized within the major institutional arenas in which capital accumulation and regulation occurs.

Sport in Our Neoliberal Present

This book emerges from an intellectual and political project that has occupied our work and that of a number of other scholars in recent years. Along with our colleagues, we have been equally fascinated and perturbed by nationalist assaults and war cries; growing economic disparities and social inequalities; the

increasing pathologization of the poor, the black, and the welfare recipient; the urban apartheid manifest in “smart”-growth initiatives; the demonization of schooling; the seeping corporate ideologies that frame the “scholarship” of academics; and the “blame the victim” cultures all mobilized in and appropriated through the seemingly apolitical and banal sporting world. With others, we have questioned the normalization of war in the construction and experience of everyday life through various mediated sporting spectacles and products that opine a myopic expression of American jingoism, militarism, and geopolitical imperial domination (see, e.g., Hogan 2003; Silk and Falcous 2005; Falcous and Silk 2005); the neoconservative appropriation of NASCAR dads and the privileging of patriarchal masculinity, the Republican Party, Christianity, and corporate consumerism (Vavrus 2007; see also Giardina 2009 and Newman 2007); and the “innocent” Disney-produced Little League World Series children’s baseball tournament that acts to reinforce the notion that America is “a morally superior, righteous” place and that any critical attacks on it are misguided at best and criminally unsubstantiated at worst (White, Silk, and Andrews 2008). Some have centered on the putative scientific hegemony of the corporatized university, the corollary of which is a “methodological fundamentalism” (House 2005) that privileges the randomized experiment as that which “counts” (see Freshwater and Rolfe 2004)—social and economic conditions that privilege a science that is embedded within, and looks to expand, economic modes of governance and efficiency (Murray et al., 2007; Murray, Holmes, and Rail 2008). With critics of “state” science (i.e., Denzin and Giardina 2006; Giroux 2004a; House 2005, 2006), we sit in a field that points to the politics of evaluation, narrowly understood, as a manifestation of the neofundamentalisms evident within the Bush regime and we decry a “scientific knowledge” that is political through and through, a knowledge ground within our contemporary social and political conditions that authorize particular regimes of truth (Murray et al. 2007; Silk, Bush, and Andrews 2010).

All of these projects and works—which have framed our embryonic thinking about sport and the neoliberal conjuncture—have been part of a wider moment of cultural critique that has, at its heart, the aim of exposing how the project of the right has been nurtured and expressed in and through the affective realm of popular culture and within the structures and institutions of the state, of which the sporting economy is a significant component. Yet while all of these projects have endeavored to interrogate cultural texts through a focus on how they operate within the material and institutional contexts that structure everyday life (Giroux 2001a), a lacuna of work has explicitly centered on critical explication of how, in various guises and often in highly localized contexts, the tentacles of neoliberalism have been manifest, experienced, appropriated, and mobilized within multifarious iterations of sporting experiences, expressions, and structures. Thus, when viewed in toto, the book is our effort to highlight the diverse ways in which neoliberalism has been understood and mobilized within sporting contexts.