

Sports: A Catalyst for Social Progress Peddled by American Athletes

الرياضة حافز للتغيير الاجتماعي الذي يقوده الرياضيون الأمريكيون

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Abstract: Sport is the most popular cultural practice that is sewn into the social texture and intersects with its driving forces: political, cultural, and economic. The playing field is, by all means, a terrain upon which social struggles and political debacles are reflected. For all intent and purposes, the article capitalizes on the American athletes' role in distorting and reshaping the political dialogue and tilting the balance of power in favor of the oppressed. The article addresses the politics-sport entanglement, be it conflictual or collusive, through a figurational sociology prism to deconstruct the athletes' protests in and off the playing field across the various social figurations.

Keywords: bodily pleasure- commercialization- figurational sociology-, political dialogue- social injustices- sports

المخلص: الرياضة هي الممارسة الثقافية الأكثر شعبية في كل المجتمعات حيث تم حياكها في النسيج الاجتماعي وتتقاطع مع قواه الدافعة: السياسية والثقافية والاقتصادية. تعد ساحة الملاعب الأرضية التي تنعكس عليها الصراعات الاجتماعية والمسائل السياسية الشائكة. انطلاقا من هذا المنطق، يركز المقال على دراسة دور الرياضيين الأمريكيين في توجيه وإعادة صياغة الحوار السياسي من أجل ترجيح كفة ميزان القوى لصالح الأقليات المضطهدة في المجتمع الأمريكي. يتناول المقال التشابك بين السياسة والرياضة، سواء كان متضاربا أو توائما، من خلال اعتماد منظور علم الاجتماع التشكيلي أو السيسولوجيا التشكيلية لتحليل ونقد محتوى تظاهرات واحتجاجات الرياضيين داخل وخارج الملعب وإسقاطها على الصراع الاجتماعي اليومي للفئات الاجتماعية المختلفة. كلمات مفتاحية: التسويق الرياضي الخطاب السياسي- الرياضة- السيسولوجيا التشكيلية- الظلم الاجتماعي

Introduction:

Sport is an unspoiled field of recreation, unspoiled by alien forces; it is, first and foremost, apolitical. Such allegation proved to be the most contentious statement that wetted the appetite of researchers interested in the sport as a substantial arena of study. Whether advertently or inadvertently, sport lessons orient us to the world; it is ideology-laden, identity-formative, and social-strata-determinate. Sport constitutes, from a Marxist perspective, the superstructure that, in its own right, reflects the base, the socio-economic status of the individual. In this respect, sport is fraught of social struggle and power relation, similar to all popular culture forms.

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Coming to terms with the social institutions and cultural processes starts with a conjured mental image of the infrastructure and dynamics of the American society. A thorough dissection of the sport industry ought to grapple with the intersection of sports, politics, economic forces, and ideological power. A sociological perspective provides a prism through which researchers can take a meticulous dive into the study of sports. In essence, it posits the appropriate theoretical framework that aborts orthodox views reductively wrap sports in "personal achievement and entertainment" veneer. Sports, from a wider perspective, arrogates to itself the role of inculcating individuals with social skills, cultural values, and political awareness.

Sport is among the perennial activities that we enjoy performing since childhood. It takes the form of playing which is fun and entertaining and abates self-insurance at an early age. Organized sports with, to some extent, an audience is well encountered in schools' playground wherein winning is rewarded and valued. The rewarding organized sports relevant to adult athletes who take up sports for a career, earns lefty money, and become a national, and in some cases international, idols. Indeed, athletes have been rendered heroes in movies celebrating their lasting heritage and story of success, famous of which are: the 2021 coach Richard William's biographical movie *King Richard*, the 2001 boxer Muhammad Ali's *Ali*, the 2017 ice skater Tonya Harding's *I, Tonya*, and the 2013 baseball player Jackie Robinson's *42*. High-profile athletes wear their stardom status as a badge of honour and arrogate to themselves the role of a paragon of virtue inspiring the younger generation to drive the wheel of social progress. Undeniably, the burgeoning athletes' activism is transforming the conventional sporting spectrum and, essentially, morphing the polarizing political dialogue. Athletes weaponize their platforms to voice their opposing views and counter the mainstream media hegemonic forces. Thus, this paper aims to highlight the role of athletes in shaping the public opinion concerning contentious political and social injustices vexing the American society and diversifying the political dialogue hitherto dominated by the elite. The article highlights American athletes' bearings on countervailing hegemonic power and reshaping political discourse. Sport is approached as a popular cultural practice as opposed to the commercialized and institutionalized sport that is part of the culture industry. Within this framework, the article sketches the way the politically-imbued athletes' activism ushered in anti-government, classist, sexist, and ethnical sentiments and chronicles pivotal sporting events wherein participants appropriated their platforms as a counter-hegemonic medium to upset the status quo and catalyze a grassroots movement that is incrementally bringing about social progress.

1- Sport Through a Figurational Prism

A substantive study into sport ought to grapple with the intersection of sport, politics, and ideological power. A sociological perspective provides a prism through which researchers can take a meticulous dive into the study of sport. In essence, it posits the appropriate theoretical framework that aborts orthodox views reductively wrapping sport in "personal achievement and entertainment" veneer. Sport, from a wider perspective, arrogates to itself the role of inculcating individuals with social skills, cultural values, and political awareness.

In order to obtain some purchase on the topic, the article undertakes the figurational paradigm to circumscribe its scope of focus to the revolutionary and oppositional proclivity pertinent to sport. Figurational sociology, first and foremost, redeems the previously putative chasm between society and individuals hitherto promoted by sociologists. Owing to Norbert Elias's theorizing and drawing on his sociological conceptualization, figurationalists solicited to discard the *homo clausus*, or closed personality, perspective in favor of *homines aperti* perspective that perceives humans as open personalities dynamically constellated into an amalgam of interdependencies:

The network of interdependencies among human beings is what binds them together. Such dependencies are the nexus of... the figuration, a structure of mutually oriented and dependent people. Since people are more or less dependent on each other first by nature and then through social learning, through education, socialization, and socially generated reciprocal needs, they exist... only as pluralities, only in figuration (Elias, 1970, p. 261).

From a figurational standpoint, sport, contrary to the popular belief rendering it a male-dominated and middle-classed culture, permeates multiple figurations: the economic system and its class relation, the patriarchal logic and its gender relation, the logic of tribalism and its race relation, the logic of honour and its relation of status, the logic of state's regulation and its command relation. Henceforth, the article endeavors to evince the entanglement of the various social figurations in the sporting arena, prominently through stadium chants that succinctly mirrors the cross-figurational issues (Scambler, 2005, p. 169).

2- Sport as a Popular Culture Form

In the throes of conducting a thorough critical analysis of the social fabric and the respectively immanent cultural pedigree, researchers encounter the conundrum of soliciting a meticulously serious endeavor to account for popular culture in all its genres, be them frivolous or consequential. Erstwhile, popular culture was mooted with a condescending tone and tenor, for it was associated with the masses that were perceived low-ranking inundated with low-brow mores. Of substantial weight is the high-brow culture that ought to be fashioned by and orchestrated for the

elite. It is such culture, arguably, that is of merit and begs investing one's time and best efforts to unweave its very bolts and nuts. Nonetheless, equating popular culture to mass culture circumvents the conceptualization and discussion of popular culture. Such theorization eclipses the bona fide potential of popular culture and capitalizes on the up-and-down striding of the latter on the cultural escalator. Based on John Fiske's reasoning of popular culture, one can hinge one's research on the definition that contends that popular culture is a culture that is composed by the people out of the culture produced by the power-bloc and levied on the subordinate. In this respect, popular culture is a counter-hegemonic culture that ought to resist the forces of incorporation operating in the interests of the dominant groups. Essentially, John Fiske's appropriation of Gramsci's concept "hegemony" equates popular culture with what people make from the products of the cultural industries- mass culture is the repertoire, popular culture is what people actively make from it, actually do with the commodities and commodified practices they consume. In being the culture of the people, popular culture emanates a sense of identity that hampers individuals under the umbrella of community; thus, enabling individualism to thrive along with collectivity. Studying popular culture offers and informative and entertaining undertaking as one can tread through miscellaneous topics by segueing into books, fashion, music, social media, cartoons and comics, sports and virtual realities, to name but a few. Despite its prevalence in our lives, sports might be the least substantive popular culture form due to its extreme physicality, exclusive use of force, and violence-inciting aura. Admittedly, if one intends to unweave the social fabric and come to terms with its underlying political economy order, sports is the stepping-stone on which substantial research should be hinged (Fiske, 1991, p. 183).

3- Sports and the Politics of Pleasure

Pleasure is endemic to culture, be it highbrow or popular. The hailed cultural pleasure can take up three categories: political (reactionary pleasure), aesthetic (sublime pleasure versus lowbrow enjoyment), and discursive (the pleasure of making meanings versus accepting ready-made ones), and sometimes physiological (the spiritual versus the bodily pleasures). Nonetheless, popular culture entails popular pleasure, a pleasure that is forged as the subordinate comes in a head-on collision with the power block. The bottom-up oppositional pleasure is by no means the only pleasure the subordinate enjoys along the course of pop culture architecture; the pleasure of conformity is conspicuous in instances when power and its disciplinary thrust are passively accommodated and experienced by the subordinated group. Thus, one might identify two diffuse pleasure categories: popular pleasure and hegemonic pleasure (*ibid.*, p. 49).

4- Sport through the Marxist Prism

In pre-modern societies, the folk pastime contest-based games constituted the loosely disciplined 'rough play' sports. The rationalization of the athlete body, rule binding play, fair competition, edificatory values, scientific approaches, unifying tribal and national identification, and the commodification of the sports industry cemented the transmutation of sports amateurism to sports professionalism. The evasive march of commerce into sports was crucial to the emergence of a powerful sports-industrial complex:

One consistent theme that emerges [from this survey of] the birth and growth of modern competitive sport is the increasing shift away from the Victorian ideals of individual participation and self-cultivation towards the public exhibition of high-achievement sport as both a universal vehicle of mass entertainment and a symbolic representation of international political/ideological struggle (Goldlust, 1987, p. 53).

The bearing of capital accumulation on the sporting enterprise is evidenced in the transformation of the economics, socio-cultural character of the regulation of sport. In this framework, sports are no longer a sheer entertainment enterprise; rather, it is a professional that pays off and consigns fame to its professionals and shamateurs¹ alike. Entertainment and pleasure are no longer the only endemic concomitances of sports. The commercialization of sports has morphed it into a profit-driven industry that not only changed the norms and conventions of the said industry but the whole societal texture. Indisputably, "capitalism is a dynamic system: no stone is left unturned in the quest for profit and the restless process of accumulation causes continual assaults on conventional social mores" (Stilwell, 2014, p. 83). Sporting activities are tailored to meet the exigencies of television schedules, sponsors and advertisers, carefully planning and executing campaigns to harness sports fans and thus consumers.

Playing sport is, by no means, hardly conducive to pleasure. Athletes' pleasure, akin to the spectators', is inherently a decorative addendum to the lucrative world functioning under the dogma of capitalism. Individuals take on sports as a professional that guarantees social mobility. Athletes got caught up on sports commodification trap by commodifying their labour, countenancing the alienation inflected on their labour, purchasing sports equipment, leisure goods and services such as high-tech training shoes and outfit, and fitness consultants and trainers:

¹ A shamateur is a sportsman who is officially an amateur but who makes money from playing, or who otherwise behaves as a professional.

Within the capitalist labour process the means of production, teams, cartels, leisure organizations, are purchased in the market by the capitalist. So too is labour power. The athletes, the teams, the music star, and the box-office film hero/heroine perform the work under the supervision of the capitalist with the product of the labour remaining the property of the owner of the means of production (Jarvie and Maguire, 1943, p. 92).

Sporting performance is, in the Marxist tradition, a labour that is, unfairly and illegitimately, detached from the performing players. To specialize and professionalize in sports, akin to specializing and professionalizing in any other popular cultural practice, inevitably emanates class conflict, between the upper class- mainly media owners, advertisers, sponsors, sports clubs and associations agents, sports equipment manufacturers, the staggers and promoters of sports events, government agents- and the lower-class wage labourers- athletes. In crude terms, the masters of productions and the direct producers struggle for power insofar as the capitalist profiteers exploit the athletes economically and suppress them politically, and the athletes appropriate their position of power, as models of success and idols, to fight for social justice for themselves and their fellow citizens alike. The foregoing account invokes Marx famous base-superstructure model through which he elucidates the main forces and schemes of the class-based societies. All that is hampered under the economic venture rubric constitutes, from a Marxist perspective, the base that, in its turn, embalms, stabilizes, and yet distorts the superstructure. In a broad sense,

It is the economy which has determining effects on the superstructure. One key function of the superstructure is to act as a framework for ideologies that justify and stabilize the modes of production and consumption under capitalism. Due to the dependence of the superstructure on the base there will, eventually, be a relationship of total correspondence between them. Consequently, the superstructure reproduces the key ideologies of the capitalist system and reinforces the social realization of the latter (Rigauer, 1981, p. 31).

In the most liberal democracies, sport is a governmental formal apparatus whose main function performs the role of ethic promoter and chauvinism amplifier (Rowe, 1995, p. 102). This snatch of the base-superstructure exposition entails that the undeniably existing interrelation between cultural practices and processes (the superstructure) and economic ventures (the base) circumscribes the individual's agency to the confines of the prevailing forms of production and interdependency (Rigauer, 1981, p. 147). More tellingly, German sociology educator Bero Rigauer went further to espouse Marx endeavor that grounded the study of the "concrete realities of social life" on abstract structure, such as those of class (ibid., p. 33). In his book *Sport and Work*, Rigauer unequivocally equates sports with wage-labour as he contends:

[u]nder conditions of industrial capitalism sport as an integral part of the superstructure (culture, ideology) reproduces features of social behaviour that are functionally and normatively ingrained in capitalistically organized processes of working, marketing, rationalization, scientification, communication, and socialization. All these social processes are reduced in sport to the quantitative principle of 'ideal' and 'material surplus value' (reification, alienation). On the other hand, the central ideological function of sport consists of transposing its base-related (economic) superstructural relation and interdependence into societal practice. On the other hand; it also has to blur this very structural correspondence ideologically in a way that allows the idea of sport as a socially autonomous area to be maintained (Rigauer, 1981, p. 41-2).

Of mitigated weight is the importance attributed to agency vis-à-vis structure. It is ineluctably resonant that the so-called capitalist-executive may exercise hegemony over the working class through wielding wealth, information, and power. Nonetheless, the working class, in its own right, ought to hold at bay the top-down hegemony and exert a bottom-up resistance and subversion through articulating its expediences and peddling its political and cultural precepts. Just like workers unionize to fight for the betterment of their work and life conditions, athletes may organize their voiced discontent on their platform to fight to change the conversation around race/gender/class inequalities, alongside other wedge issues. Fundamentally, hegemonies exertion is erroneously believed to be a one-way street practice. Rather, hegemonies can be constructed by and for more than class; "the superstructure can influence the base as well as the base the superstructure" (Scrambler, 2005, p. 148). The aforementioned account is slotted in what has come to be known as the Conflict Theory². Nonetheless, relegating sport's function to the enactment of capitalists' lucrative agenda dismisses its liberating, self-asserting, and creative potentials.

As sport's uniquely pristine properties and discrete domain has been utterly distorted as it insinuated various social institutions, politics, economics, media, and education, social scientists took it upon themselves to analytically study sport not as autonomous field of study but as social phenomenon strenuously pervasive in people's daily lives and formatives of public opinion, as a culturally entertaining enterprise conducive to pleasure, and as a lucrative industry advantageous to

² Conflict theory, attributed to Karl Marx, holds that social order is maintained by domination and power, rather than by consensus and conformity. According to conflict theory, those with wealth and power try to hold on to it by any means possible, chiefly by suppressing the poor and powerless. A basic premise of conflict theory is that individuals and groups within society will work to try to maximize their own wealth and power.

the sportbiz executives and labourers alike. Such a claim ascertain the trickle-down theory of sporting success and social mobility to the well-motivated gymnastically apt individuals dissonates with the deeply entrenched inequality prevailing sports in terms of concentration of wealth, opportunity, inclusion, and media coverage. The misleading allegation that holds the advancement of some athlete's testimony to the success of all condones and legitimates the discriminatory façade of the sporting arena. More tellingly, the sportbiz, similar to any capital accumulation-driven enterprise, deliberately sublimates the industry to unwarranted material improvement and renown, yet while many black people strive to step out of their social deprivation, few actually make it in some sports (football, boxing and basketball). Notwithstanding the undertaken hard assays, handsome remuneration is usurped by the capitalist executives:

Few attain the heights they wanted to conquer and even fewer surpass them. An unstoppable motivation and unbreakable commitment are valuable, perhaps essential, asset to success in sport and this is why so many possessors of these achieve some level of distinction. But titles are, by definition, reserved for only a very small elite and, while blacks are always well-represented among the elite of all sports in which they compete, there are never enough championships to go around. The majority inevitably fails. Blacks' success in sport may look impressive, but compared to the number of youths entering sport, their interest primed, their success is not so great, even when their chances are affected by 'stacking' and other racist manoeuvres (Cashmore, 2010, p. 91).

Stacking is a racially profiling and stereotypical practice that consigns specific sport or field position for ethnic minority players in accordance with their innate potential, that is, black athletes are "athletically gifted but lack leadership and resilience." Such psychological and physical attributes underpinning distributional patterns in sports are reminiscent of the racist legacy segregating natural/animal/manual and the civilized/human/cerebral, and more commonly the manual/mental labour allocation on which class-based ideologies of dominance are established and perpetuated. The rhetorically benign stereotype relegates blacks to a status that declines them holding a posture of power in prestigious arenas such as academia, politics, law, and even sports (Edwards, 1969, pp. 9-10).

Recreation and corporeal activities have always been, and still are, portrayed as a soothing outlet from everyday life's shackles and mundane; a corrective to the individual's misdemeanor that endeavors to abrogate stereotype and prejudice with the aspiration of bringing together the world-wide amalgam of races and nationalities. Realities on the ground disavow the aforementioned allegation (*ibid.*, p. xiv). Athletes' power is defanged beyond the field's lines; moreover, their

protesting voice is depreciated, discouraged, and, thus, dismissed. Sport, from this regard, is set to be detached from the societal moorings. Relevant to the recurrent anathema plaguing the American society is the issue of police brutality inflicted upon African Americans. The latter are consistently racially profiled and end up in most cases incarcerated, worse still shot, for no serious charges. Black activists, celebrities, and sports superstars alike had no qualms about using their designated platforms to bring light to the issue. NFL players have, by no means, been impervious to off-the-field controversies and pregame national anthem protests.

5- American Athletes and the Bottom-up Resistance

Sport is the battleground on which racial and sexual tensions are being dramatized throughout history. The incident of the Brooklyn Dodgers signing black baseball player Jackie Robinson in 1947 coincided with the incrementing Civil Rights Movement activism and symbolized the end of segregation in professional baseball that had relegated black players to the Negro League since 1880. Gender issues were by no means non-existent in sports. Women were degraded as to fit passive participants or sheer audience for the highly-male dominated sporting activities. Volleyball players, cheerleaders, and pompom girls were the only sporting positions in which women could participate. Feminist activism railed the female base so that they started seeking power and control over their lives and choices and repudiated the restrictedly male imposed 'sexual role'. "Since women now want to compete in social activities, sports have become a natural place for them to want to prove themselves" (Combs, 1984, p. 61). The women's movement across the sporting spectrum ensured broader participation for women in the 1990's as the committee on Women's Athletics (CWA) and the American Physical Education association drove female athletes toward a status more or less in line with their male counterparts: "in 1969, a schedule of national championships for women's sports was announced that included gymnastics and track and field. Swimming, badminton, and volleyball in 1970 and in 1972, basketball was added" (Bell, 2023).

5-1- Athletes' Activism and Political Dialogue

The top-down power display was incrementally met with a bottom-up subversion and resistance. Athletes on remarkably controversial social incidents articulated their riveting discontent and protest. The iconic raised-fist salute symbolic of Black power and the fight for human rights on the 1968 Summer Olympic podium waded African American Olympians Tommie Smith and John Carlos into a roiling controversy. The heightened racial tension and the burgeoning ambit of the Civil Rights and Black Power movements catalyzed protests nationwide and abroad. By abetting the organization of the Olympic Project for Human Rights in the run-up to the Olympics, Smith and Carlos were poised to protest racism against black people around the world, and demand banning

apartheid South Africa and Rhodesia from participating in the event. The politicization of their medal ceremony was not countenanced by the spectators and the organizers of the event as they were rushed from the stadium and expelled from their team (Blakemore, 2023).

In scenes reminiscent of American athletes' protests during the 1968 Pan Am Olympics in Mexico and American football fields in 2016, American athletes across the board protested the ongoing issues in the United States during the 2019 Pan American Games. Race Imboden, an American fencer, used his platform to take a knee. Divulging his uncompromised nationalism and taking pride in his country as the country endowed with excellent athletes, he, nonetheless, expressed his well-founded reasoning to protest: racism and mistreatment of immigrants. Under Trump watch, many immigrants died in ICE (Care of Unaccompanied Children) custody due to abhorrent detention conditions. Imbolden stated that the catalyst for his demonstration was certainly the mass shooting and the government's inaction on gun control. The American record holder and gold medalist hammer thrower Gwen Barry told the "USA TODAY Sports" paper: "Somebody has to talk about the things that are too uncomfortable to talk about. Somebody has to stand for all of the injustices that are going on in America and a president who is making it worse." She went on to assert: "It is too important to say something; something had to be said. If nothing is said, nothing will be done, and nothing will be fixed, and nothing will be changed" (Armour, 2021). Through coded and sometimes not so coded language, President Trump emboldens racists who are prone to committing more mass shootings. Gwen Barry ascertained that she loves presenting her country that is amongst the most prosperous countries in the world; however, what she stands for revolves around utter injustice. Injustice is what former NFL (National Football League) player Colin Kaepernick and other black athletes fought for by taking a knee as the American anthem was played. Kaepernick started a resistive movement by bending a knee- a movement that unravels the pugnacious realities of race relations in the USA. He gained fame not as much for his performance on the field as his knee taking on the sideline. Kneeling has become his signature to protest discrimination against minorities. Black athletes started this protest as the number of black men killed by police increased and demonstrators along with "The Black Lives Matter" movement rallied nationwide. Other black athletes quickly followed suits, but the backlash against Kaepernick grew just as swiftly. NFL retaliated by ostracizing and denying him a job, and Civil Rights groups gathered in front of NFL headquarter in New York city to support him. Kaepernick threw his 14 million contracts in the towel refusing to backpedal on his stance. Analysts and commentators alike evoked the "faltering performance is the upshot of his expulsion" pretext to justify the deeply entrenched injustice that the USA seems to countenance. The trend that the aforementioned athletes fuelled still

ensues with other athletes, black and white alike, on their platform and protestors in the streets. Sports, in crude terms, claims a unifying posture that brings people from different backgrounds together to fight for the greater good (Boren, 2020).

The Olympic Games might be the most fitting forum for political overtone. Nation states do not avail themselves of utilizing the said continental game to boast their political values and ascertain the superiority of their citizen athletes through winning. Indeed, governments invest exuberant resources into the sporting industry since sports constitute an efficacious apparatus to cater to people's basic quest for entertainment and pleasure and avert the public opinion from national crises. Erstwhile, sports have always been a site for power struggle, an anesthetic that numb the subordinates' senses into submission to existing social order. "Communist countries such as the Soviet Union and East Germany invest great resources into Olympic success, since this dramatizes the alleged superiority of 'socialist man'" (Combs, 1984, p. 65). Interestingly enough is the appropriation of sporting events and athletes for presidential campaigning. Inviting athletes who walked out victorious of the playing fields to the White House is not an aberration; in the guise of national congratulations, James Carter, the sitting president in 1980, invited the triumphant U.S. Winter Olympic team to the White House for the sake of harnessing voters' approval in the run-up to the presidential election. Americans, in their own right, rejoiced at the victory the hockey team snatched against its Soviet Union rival, albeit their disinterest in hockey. The sport win, in this context, is peppered by a political win over the U.S rival: the Soviet Union. In a similar fashion, though with no identical pleasing receptiveness, President Trump invited the U.S. women's national soccer team to the White House; however, not long after his open invitation has been issued, he backpedaled on it as the team co-captain Megan Rapinoe unequivocally declared her disinclination to take a winning lap at the White House. As a member of a minority group herself, LBGTQ+, Rapinoe has incessantly condemned President Trump's "sexist," "misogynist," "small-minded," "racist" persona (Boren, 2019). She took a knee during the national anthem in a 2016 game in solidarity with the NFL player Colin Kaepernick's protest against police brutality and racial injustices. More to the point, defender and co-player Ali Krieger endorsed Rapinoe's protests for social equality and basic human rights: "I don't support the administration nor their fight against LBGTQ+ citizens and immigrants & our most vulnerable" (ibid).

In their endeavor to prove women's worth on and off the playing-field, female athletes have waded into a staunch advocacy of equal pay. In the throes of equal pay lawsuits and relentless protests of the players, US women national football team managed to dismantle the capitalist dogma legitimating gender discrimination on the pretext that men earn more money because men's

sporting industry makes more money than women's: "the USWNT earned more money from its male equivalent reaching the knockout stages of the 2022 FIFA World Cup in Qatar than it did from winning its own tournaments in 2015 and 2019" (Woodyatt, 2023). In light of this monumental achievement, a landmark equal pay agreement has been enshrined in 2022 wherein the Federation "agreed to a new 50-50 split in the way it pays men and women competing for the US national soccer teams, meaning both sides will receive the same pay and prize money, including for participating at World Cups" (ibid). Such unprecedented win for female athletes does inspire American women to take collective actions and push for progressive change.

Athletes' activism garners a larger scope of influence with respect to shaping public opinion by virtue of their social media reach and prolific fanbase. Unlike politicians, whose partisan platform excludes and antagonizes the opposing party's followers, athletes' fanbase is bipartisan and diverse inasmuch as it cuts across political, racial, class, gender, religious spectrums. Athletes transposed the playing field protests- that could easily dodge, or worse censored, by pointing the camera away from the athletes' manifestations or discrediting athletes' allegedly misinformed politics- to social media platforms wherein freedom of speech is rampant. The findings of research paper "Can Celebrity Athletes Burst the Echo Chamber Bubble? The Case of LeBron James and Lady Gaga" attest to the high-profile NBA player's awareness of social injustices and ability to narrow the political chasm characteristic of modern-day American zeitgeist. In contrast to the biased sport networks, such as ESPN, and the unapologetic liberal entertainers and artists, namely Lady Gaga, whose fanbase is averse to conservatism and right-wing values, LeBron James is amongst the very few celebrities who can reach the other side of the aisle and whose views, however dissenting might be to some, more or less resonate with the wider public (Hayat et al., 2019, p. 11-2). Shrinking the digital political divide runs contrary to the echo-chamber³ ethos and the recursive nature of algorithms.

The posts that are recommended by social media algorithms for users are more likely the posts users will view, react to, and share. Such recommendations are based on data gathering and analysis of users' preferences and orientations. That is, they are "not centered on who we are, nor even on what our data says about us, but on what can be imagined and inferred about who we might

³"Echo chamber" is an ecosystem wherein participants encounter beliefs and opinions attuned to their own convictions. The echo chamber tends to amplify and, thus, reinforce their preexisting beliefs by consuming and disseminating like-minded information inside a closed system utterly insulated from rebuttal

be- on our proclivities and potentialities" (Amoore, 2011, p. 28). In this vein, algorithms constitute an integrated part of the social infrastructure as it tends to levy a distorted version of reality upon internet users: "They have the potential to become a reality and to reinforce, maintain or even shape visions of the social world, knowledge and encounters with information" (Beer, 2013, p. 81). Echo chamber, filter bubble, epistemic bubble, recommender system and a plethora of similar concepts and metaphors coined by media scholars elucidate the inner workings of algorithmic processes and the boundaries and limitations they clandestinely impose upon internet users' agency:

An algorithm selects and reinforces one ordering at the expense of others. Agency, therefore, is by definition contested in and through algorithms. They affect what can be said and done . . . It both naturalizes certain orders and animates certain movements. An algorithm naturalizes who does what to whom by subsuming existing patterns and orderings of cognition, communication and movement (Mackenzie, 2006, p. 44).

The algorithm-instigated selectivity of data runs the risk of eclipsing diverse perspectives and worryingly generates confirmation-bias conducive to polarization and extremism (Hayat et al., 2019, p. 2). The power of algorithms lies in their undetected structural forces that shape public opinions, decision-making, and cultural tastes. In effect, the digital invisibility of the algorithmic processes with regard to rule setting and maintaining creates a "technological unconsciousness" and naturalizes the jeopardy of users' agency and the censorship of information (Beer, 2013, pp. 69-70).

With 52.8 million followers on twitter, 149 million on Instagram, and 251 on Facebook (Shekhar, 2023), LeBron James took to his social media platforms to unequivocally voice his disapproval of government's policies- more prominently his scathing criticism of former President Trump's and his polarizing rhetoric. Despite his celebrity status, his political commentary is not amicably condoned. Right-wing mainstream media does not pull any punches to condemn athlete's activism and entanglement with politics; thus, the adage "shut up and dribble" was regurgitated by many news anchors and sports commentators, chief of whom is Fox News host Laura Ingraham. In her reaction to LeBron James and Phoenix Suns basketball player Kevin Durant criticism of Donald Trump, Ingraham unabashedly retorted: "You are great players, but no one voted for you... so keep the political commentary to yourself, or as someone once said, shut up and dribble" (Galily, 2020, p. 2). Not only did the said players post their views on their social media platforms, but also, they always had no qualms about emphatically voicing them on podcasts whereby listeners would interact with them directly. On the sports Emmy-Award winning podcast Uninterrupted, James and Durant asserted: "We will definitely not shut up and dribble;" moreover, James responded to

Ingraham condescending portrayal of athletes as "being dumb jock," "ignorant," and "barely intelligible": "I will definitely do that... she did the best thing to help me create more awareness... I get to sit up here and talk about social injustice, equality" (Galily, 2020, p. 2).

LeBron James' thinly veiled radical liberalism channeled through his protests against social injustices is deemed by many conservatives provocative and un-American. Dissing him would discredit his message and ruin his career. Drawing an analogy between Black American athletes, Muhammad Ali's on-the-ground activism during the Civil Rights Movement and Michael Jordan's apolitical persona grata reflective of a dwindling black American activism in the 1980's renders James's hashtag campaigns "a message of consideration rather than revolution" lest an on-the-ground marching or demonstrations would damage the "LeBron James brand" (Hayat et al., 2019, p. 6). Owing to his low-stakes show of support, James is accused of "slacktivism⁴" conducive too little to no consequential contribution to the overall cause. Indeed, James, along with other fellow athletes, started a plethora of hashtags in support of the victims of police brutality against minorities. The hashtag *#wear Trayvon martin* captioning his photo posing with his teammate wearing hooded sweatshirts akin to the one worn by Trayvon Martin when he was shot by a cop in February 2012 took over the internet. In 2014 Cleveland Cavaliers- Brooklyn Nets pregame, he wore the iconic "I Can't Breathe" protest shirt- a slogan that would be reiterated in consecutive protests- to show support for Eric Garner, "the Staten Island man who died after an NYPD officer put him in a banned chokehold while arresting him" (ibid., p. 5). However inconsequential the hashtag campaigns' impact might be, they do help in terms of allocating resources for the victims' families via online fundraising. Over and above, athletes themselves lend their resources, passion, and time to the subordinate and the marginalized.

In a polarized society, athletes' platforms constitute an intersection point wherein diverse and opposing perspectives could reach a *modus vivendi* without feeling the need to cancel the Other. Their digital platforms managed to puncture the echo chamber that reinforces existing beliefs to the detriment of tolerating dissident views. Athletes became agents of social change and a bacon of a healthy democracy and freedom of speech.

⁴ Slacktivism is a portmanteau of slacker and activism associated with young people social media activism. The term was coined by Dwight Ozard and Fred Clark in 1995 at the Cornerstone Festival to refer to bottom-up activities by young people to affect social change on a small, personal scale (such as liking and sharing posts/ hashtags pertinent to a social cause, signing an online petition, as opposed to participating in a protest).

5-2- Sports Spin-off Industry and Bogus Activism:

Sports apparel constitutes a lucrative spin-off business that targets sports fans beyond the confines of the playing fields. The industry's famous brands have launched a fashion niche that is supplying the market with Jerseys, footwear, and other workout gear suitable for everyday use. The industry is at pains to achieve inclusivity in order to amplify its profit margins. Far from being an ideological apparatus that espouses certain groups' pathos, the sports spin-off industry endeavors to garner more consumers from all walks of life. Despite the fashion statement each item might appear to pronounce- the 2023 Nike partnership with transgender influencer Dylan Mulvaney as the new face of women's sport bra to promote transgender inclusivity (Dass, 2023), Sport Illustrated swimsuit issue of 2019 featuring Muslim model Halima Aden in a burkini to combat Islamophobia (Parisi, 2021), the 2022 issue featuring plus size model Yumi Nue to promote body positivity (Keeley, 2022), the 2023 issue featuring the 81-year-old home-making guru and TV personality Martha Stewart to neutralize criticism of ageism (La Ferla, 2023), the 2023 Kim Kardashian's skim ad campaign featuring disabled models in adaptive clothing collection to combat ableism (Royce, 2023), and Adidas "Pride 2023" women swimwear collection modeled by a man to celebrate "self-expression, imagination and the unwavering belief that love unites" (Thaler, 2023)- a thorough dissection of the industry's marketing strategies debunks its alleged progressivism and wokeism⁵. Allegedly, the *raison d'être* of Sport Illustrated swimsuit issue solicits to celebrate femininity and the female pulchritude although its targeted audience are men who unabashedly indulge themselves in the objectification of the female body. The sports spin-off industry monetizes the bodily pleasure on the pretext of inclusivity and social justice.

6- Conclusion

Sport is, by all means, interwoven into the American social fabric; it enshrines, subverts, or destabilizes the status quo. It is a territory of power struggle wherein social inequalities- racism, classism, sexism, ageism, ableism, - are re-enacted, downplayed, or resisted. Athletes' protests are a popular cultural phenomenon that treads across various social categories and claims territory beyond the stadium's confines. It is a discursive protest that preludes a subversive political campaign. Athletes' protests are testimony to class consciousness, millennial engagement in politics, identification, militant, yet civil, activism that solicit to swing the balance of power in favor of the

⁵ Wokeism is the promotion of liberal progressive ideology and policy as an expression of sensitivity to systemic injustices and prejudices. It used sometimes pejoratively by conservatives to connote an ideology that weaponizes personal grievances masquerading as a genuine social concern.

subordinate group. Suffice to say, athletes use their sporting platform to exercise freedom of speech and drive the wheel of social progress.

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