

IDEOLOGY DOESN'T JUST HAPPEN: SPORTS AND NEOLIBERALISM

JAY COAKLEY

University of Colorado at Colorado Springs / USA

jcoakley@uccs.edu

Abstract

Research on sports in society is discouraged by essentialist beliefs that define sport as a fixed, innate expression of human impulses. This has undermined an awareness of sports as cultural practices and forms of social organization that are commonly used to reaffirm national and global processes of neoliberalization. This paper clarifies the contemporary meaning of neoliberalism and suggests that it is closely associated with the emergence and support of elite, organized, competitive, commercial form of sports. In turn, these sports often are promoted and represented to establish, reaffirm, and reproduce neoliberal ideas and beliefs. Despite resistance, neoliberalism continues to gain acceptance among people worldwide because of the wide array of strategies used by its proponents. Although the most visible strategies focus on economic and political policies, the long term success of those policies depends on embedding neoliberal ideas and beliefs in the cultural and social spheres of life. Therefore, effective resistance and the establishment of viable alternatives requires strategies based on a full understanding of the cultural and social as well as the economic and political manifestations of neoliberalism. Part of this strategy involves efforts to reclaim physical activities and sports as part of the public sphere and alter funding priorities to support physical activities in forms other than elite, organized, competitive sports. Strategies for producing such changes are identified.

Key-words: sports; sociology; neoliberalism; ideology.

LA IDEOLOGÍA NO OCURRE POR SÍ SÓLO: EL DEPORTE Y EL NEOLIBERALISMO

Resumen

La investigación sobre el deporte en la sociedad se ve desalentada por las creencias existencialistas que lo definen como una expresión fija, innata de los impulsos humanos. Esto ha perjudicado los intereses del deporte como una práctica cultural y como forma de organización social, lo que se utiliza comúnmente para reaffirmar los procesos nacionales y mundiales del neoliberalismo. En este artículo se aclara el significado del neoliberalismo contemporáneo y sugiere que el está estrechamente relacionado con la aparición y el apoyo del deporte de élite, organizado, competitivo y comercial. A su vez, estos deportes son a menudo promovidos y representados para establecer, reaffirmar y reproducir los ideales y las creencias neoliberales. A pesar de la resistencia, el neoliberalismo continúa ganando aceptación entre las personas alrededor del mundo por la amplia gama de estrategias utilizadas por sus defensores. A pesar de las estrategias más visibles se centraren en las políticas públicas y la economía, el éxito a largo plazo de estas políticas depende de la incorporación de las ideas y las creencias neoliberales en la vida social y cultural. Por lo tanto, la resistencia efectiva y el establecimiento de viables estrategias alternativas requieren una comprensión basadas del cultural y social, así como las manifestaciones económicas y políticas del neoliberalismo. Parte de esa estrategia implica esfuerzos para reclamar las actividades físicas y deportivas como parte de la esfera pública y cambiar las prioridades de financiación para apoyar las actividades más allá de las manifestaciones físicas del deporte de élite, organizado y competitivo. Estrategias para producir estos cambios son identificadas.

Palabras-clave: deportes; sociología; neoliberalismo; ideología.

A IDEOLOGIA NÃO ACONTECE SIMPLEMENTE: ESPORTE E NEOLIBERALISMO

Resumo

A pesquisa em esportes na sociedade é desencorajada por crenças existencialistas que definem o esporte como uma expressão fixa, inata dos impulsos humanos. Isso tem minado uma preocupação do esporte como uma prática cultural e forma de organização social, o que é comumente utilizado para reafirmar processos nacionais e globais de neoliberalismo. Esse artigo esclarece o significado contemporâneo de neoliberalismo e sugere que ele é intimamente relacionado com a emergência e apoio do esporte de elite, organizado, competitivo e comercial. Por sua vez, esses esportes frequentemente são promovidos e representados para estabelecer, reafirmar e reproduzir ideais e crenças neoliberais. Apesar da resistência, o neoliberalismo continua ganhando aceitação entre as pessoas em todo o mundo pelo largo alcance das estratégias utilizadas pelos seus proponentes. Embora as estratégias mais visíveis foquem nas políticas públicas e econômicas, o sucesso em longo prazo dessas políticas depende da incorporação das ideias e crenças neoliberais nas esferas social e cultural da vida. Assim, a resistência efetiva e o estabelecimento de alternativas viáveis requerem estratégias baseadas na completa compreensão do cultural e social, assim como das manifestações econômicas e políticas do neoliberalismo. Parte dessa estratégia envolve esforços de reivindicar as atividades físicas e esportes como parte da esfera pública e alterar as prioridades de financiamento para suporte das atividades físicas para além daquelas manifestações de elite, organizadas e competitivas. Estratégias para produzir essas mudanças são identificadas.

Palavras-chave: esportes; sociologia; neoliberalismo; ideologia.

Sports are so complex and paradoxical that scholars in the sociology of sport often denounce sports at the same time that they seek to perpetuate them. . . and if they do not confront this paradox, it is difficult for them to claim that they are studying sports critically.

Ian McDonald (2007: 6)

It is an interesting time to study sports in society. The current global economic crisis provides an opportunity to ask critical questions about the forms of sport that have become popular worldwide and to develop progressive visions for what sports can and should be in the future. However, the task of initiating discussions based on critical analyses is difficult. Sport often is viewed in essentialist terms, as if its current meaning, purpose, and organization comprise a fixed and innate expression of basic human impulses. This creates resistance to critical thinking and undermines the significance of research that focuses on the verifiable consequences of sports and sport participation.

The reluctance to view sports as social constructions and study them critically has enabled those who control capital to sponsor and support elite, organized, competitive, commercial sports (EOCCS) to the point that these sport forms exist worldwide and influence how people define and think about sports. Additionally, EOCCS are widely re-presented through the media in ways that foster neoliberal ideas and beliefs that promote and preserve the interests of the increasingly powerful corporations that

sponsor events and teams and use popular athletes to promote products and consumption as a taken-for-granted lifestyle.

The main thesis of this paper is that the growing popularity and hegemony of EOCCS has occurred at the same time that neoliberalization has occurred in many societies (Horne, 2006). Of course, this process varies from one society to another, but neoliberalism appears to be most compatible with sports organized as spectacle and represented to establish (a) the use of competitive reward structures to allocate rewards, (b) the use of market values to determine merit, (c) a focus on the individual and individual responsibility, (d) the belief that capital drives all forms of progress, and (e) popular acceptance of inequality and hierarchical organization as fundamental to all forms of social relationships.

The general topics covered in this paper are:

1. The economic, political, cultural, and structural implications of neoliberalism.
2. Sports as a tool of neoliberalization and how sports are influenced by neoliberalism.
3. The challenge of resisting neoliberalism and the position of the socio-cultural study of sports in the relationship between sports and neoliberalism.

Neoliberalism¹

Ideology is generally defined as a web of ideas & beliefs that guide people as they give meaning to, make sense of, and evaluate the world and their connections with each other. Neoliberal ideology, as commonly defined today, is a powerful organizing and evaluative perspective in many nations. It is manifested in four ways: (1) as an economic doctrine, (2) as a political project, (3) as a cultural perspective, and (4) as a guide for the organization of social relationships. In sociological terms, neoliberalism is a web of ideas and beliefs that identifies a combination of free markets, political deregulation and privatization, individual self-interest, and inequality as the foundation for progress and all forms of development.

The contemporary use of the term *neoliberal* is based in part on 18th and 19th century meanings when *liberal* was used to refer to people who supported individual liberty and opposed the arbitrary and pervasive control of governments and the religious organizations that supported an exclusive ruling class. It also is based on recent interpretations and extensions of ideas that Adam Smith presented in his classic book, *Wealth of Nations* (1776). The core of these interpretations and extensions are attributed mainly to the Austrian economist, Friedrich Hayak, and U.S. economist, Milton Friedman, both of whom had faculty appointments at the University of Chicago (1950-1962 and 1946-1986, respectively).

¹ This discussion of neoliberalism is informed by Bourdieu, 1998a, 1998b; Brown, 2006; Campbell, 2005; Giroux, 2011; Giroux; Giroux, 2006; Glynn, 2006; Harvey, 2005, 2006; Klein, 2007; Ong, 2006; Prasad, 2006; and Westra, 2010.

Hayak asserted that human rights were inherently linked with property rights and that social order and progress required a free market and the unrestricted global flow of capital. Friedman espoused economic liberalization in the form of free and open markets but he and his followers extended the market model to the political and cultural spheres and all forms of social relations (Hill, 2000).

During the late-20th century through today, this form of neoliberalism was especially attractive among powerful capitalists and large segments of the population in the United States where there were widespread Cold War fears of totalitarianism, communism, and central state planning. These fears, combined with growing opposition to the Keynesian economics used to guide the U.S. recovery from the Great Depression of the 1930s, led influential economists and policy makers to promote neoliberalism as an alternative to socialist state control and as an organizing framework for economic, political, cultural, and social life.

During the latter half of the 20th century, the United States and closely aligned NGOs, such as the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, the World Trade Organization, and the Inter-American Development Bank, used neoliberalization as a prerequisite for loans and other forms of developmental assistance. This occurred first in Argentina, Chile, and Uruguay; then in other nations of South America, including Brazil (in 1989; see Seisdedos, 2010) and worldwide (Campbell, 2005; Glynn, 2006; Giroux; Giroux, 2006; Harvey, 2005; Martinez; Garcia, 2000; Westra, 2010). Loans from these organizations were predicated on agreements to prioritize the needs of global capital and accommodate neoliberal ideas and beliefs. The ways that this occurred varied from one nation to another depending on their histories, current economic conditions, and form of government. Therefore, neoliberalization occurs as a process of adaptation rather than the imposition of a fixed set of policies and practices (Hicks, 2009; Peck; Ticknell, 2002; Westra, 2010).

Neoliberal policies clearly benefitted economic and political elites, but they failed to produce consistent changes benefiting the general population. This led to the emergence of numerous resistance movements in the 1980s and 1990s. But despite vocal opposition and resistance, neoliberal ideology has proven to be amazingly resilient and has become dominant worldwide during the initial decade of the 21st century. To explain this it is important to understand all four dimensions of neoliberalism—as an economic doctrine, a political project, a cultural perspective, and framework for organizing social relationships. Then it is possible to critically examine the relationship between sports and neoliberalism.

A. Neoliberalism is an Economic Doctrine

Neoliberalism is most commonly viewed as an economic doctrine based on the following assumptions:

1. Free markets and the unrestricted flow of capital drive all forms of progress.
2. Social worth and individual merit are based only on economic indicators.

3. Economic elites safeguard and sustain free markets and, therefore, the future of humankind.

The popularity of neoliberal economic doctrine in the Americas was due primarily to Milton Friedman and like-minded economists. Graduates from the University of Chicago and its satellite university in Chile have held hundreds of influential public policy and administrative positions in national governments and powerful NGOs through which neoliberalization was implemented in many nations, especially those in Latin America. As particular national political leaders worldwide willingly embraced, were seduced by, or were forced to accept neoliberal ideas and beliefs, their policies have become increasingly aligned with global corporate capital and less focused on creating internal resources that can drive forms of development that benefit the general population.

B. Neoliberalism is a Political Project

As a political project, neoliberalism emphasizes three major policy principles:

1. Deregulation of national and global markets so that rules are set by the needs of capital.
2. Reduction or cooptation of state power so that the global flow and accumulation of capital occurs without restriction and, when needed, with subsidies and support from the state.
3. Privatization of public sector programs and industries so the public sphere is subsumed by the market.
4. Elimination of collectives (that is, unions, cooperatives, and “activist” communities), so that social goals do not interfere with the operation of free and open markets.

Freedom in neoliberal terms requires the unrestricted flow of capital. Government regulation of market forces is seen as subverting individual freedom and dignity because the free market contains an inherent ethic that ultimately maximizes the public interest. This means that a primary focus of the neoliberal political project is to remove all obstacles to the global flow and accumulation of capital. This involves deregulation combined with regional trade agreements, bilateral investment treaties, bilateral free trade agreements, and global financial institutions that facilitate unrestricted capital flow and accumulation.

At the same time that proponents of neoliberalism have popularized the idea that government is to be feared and constrained, they have masterfully used the state to protect and strengthen neoliberal interests as represented by corporations and individuals who control capital (Brenner; Theodore, 2002a, 2002b; Giroux, 2004; Harvey, 2006). In this sense, “neoliberalization is a contingent process” that varies in both strategy and outcome depending on “the institutional circumstances in which it occurs” (Hill, 2007).

Current advocates of neoliberal ideas and beliefs clearly understand that markets are neither “natural” nor inherently “free,” and that a state and government are needed to establish enforceable laws enabling capital to function on neoliberal terms. Therefore, their call for “small” or “limited” government” focuses on eliminating state services that empower labor and services that could be commodified for profit (Campbell, 2010: 254). This was clearly explained by Bourdieu when he noted that unions and other collective structures are targeted for destruction by neoliberals because they conflict with “the logic of the pure market” (Bourdieu, 1998b: 2).

C. Neoliberalism is a Cultural Perspective

As a cultural perspective, neoliberalism emphasizes the following ideas and beliefs:

1. Social order, progress, and solutions to social problems depend on the individual pursuit of self-interest in a free market context.²
2. Big government is dangerous because it is inherently inefficient and constructs barriers to individual success, economic development, and social progress.
3. Market success is proof of an individual’s qualities and skills, and market failure indicates weak character and careless, uninformed choices.

The resilience of neoliberalism depends on the integration of its ideas and beliefs in popular culture. The probability that a neoliberalization process will be sustained or revived in a society varies with the extent to which aspects of neoliberal ideology are uncritically accepted among citizens (Bourdieu; Grass, 2003). For example, when the Chilean economy was struggling during the 1950s, Theodore Schultz, chair of the economics department at the University of Chicago, understood that it was important to infuse neoliberal ideas and beliefs into Chilean culture. Therefore, he worked with Albion Patterson, the director of the U.S. International Cooperation Administration in Chile to create education programs that would teach neoliberalism to Chilean students—a strategy also designed to align Chile with the United States rather than Soviet bloc nations. Together, and with funding from the Ford Foundation, they formed the Center for Latin American Studies at the University of Chicago with an associated program at Universidad Católica in Santiago, Chile.

Between the mid-1950s and 1970 dozens of Chileans attended these programs, which in 1965 also admitted students from other Latin American nations. Inspired by the ideas of Milton Friedman, “The Chicago Boys”—as graduates of the programs came to be known, were brought into the government of Augusto Pinochet to impose neoliberal ideas and policies on the Chilean people. Graduates from Argentina, Mexico, and Brazil introduced neoliberal ideas and beliefs in their countries

² The idea that morality is created by a combination of a free market and self-interest was popularized in the work of Ayn Rand, especially in the book, *Atlas Shrugged* (1957).

during the late-1970s and continue to influence policies and programs today (Bidstrup, 2002; Hill, 2007; Klein, 2007; Sader, 2008).

To promote and sustain neoliberal ideas and beliefs, proponents of neoliberalism have used their resources to influence all forms of socialization processes, especially those that occur through mainstream media. For example, in the United States this involves taking as many opportunities as possible to make sure that individual responsibility, primacy of self, pursuit of self-interest, fear of government interference, deregulation, privatization, and market-based determinations of merit and moral worth are widely embraced at the level of popular culture (Giroux, 2011).

D. Neoliberalism is a Framework for Organizing Social Relationships

As a framework for organizing social relationships, neoliberalism emphasizes the following:

1. The logic of the free market provides an optimal foundation for organizing social relationships.
2. Competition is a natural human process and competitive reward structures are the only fair and effective way to allocate rewards.
3. Efficiency and progress require hierarchical organization.
4. Wage and wealth gaps are inevitable outcomes of progress and development.

Current strategies of neoliberalization extend the market model into the sphere of social organization and relationships. State agencies are reconstituted as quasi-autonomous economic enterprises, citizens become clients and consumers, and governance is organized as a form of business management (Hill, 2007). Competition, inequality, and hierarchical forms of organization are viewed as normal aspects of social relationships and accepted as proof of fairness, meritocratic processes, and progress.

In summary, neoliberalism is a multifaceted way of thinking and organizing economic, political, cultural, and structural spheres of society. As a political project, neoliberalization is driven primarily by the social, political, and economic power of those people whose interests it serves. These include financial brokers, stockholders, wealthy top executives, conservative politicians, and many upper-middle class people who believe that only those who experience the consequences of economic decisions ought to make them. In the process, recognition of the public interest or good fades or is redefined in connection with the growth of capital.

When neoliberal ideology becomes widely accepted in a society, it becomes increasingly difficult to generate support for collectively oriented approaches to organizing a normative and institutional foundation for social life. According to many progressive thinkers, generating this support constitutes

the major challenge of the 21st century, and this is why the relationship between sports and neoliberalism is worth examining.

Sports and Neoliberalism

A central assumption underlying this paper is that neoliberalism does not just happen. It takes commitment, political savvy and hard work to convert neoliberal ideas and beliefs into economic and political policies and practices. This is especially true in democracies, but even when autocratic governments hold power, the durability and resilience of neoliberalism depends on embedding particular ideas and beliefs into popular consciousness.

As highly valued and visible cultural practices, sports are sites at which neoliberalism is reproduced or resisted at the same time that they are influenced by neoliberal ideas and beliefs. However, at this historical moment, proponents of neoliberal interests have used their resources to sponsor and utilize elite, organized, competitive, commercial sports (EOCCS) to extend their power. As a result, this rather unique form of sport has become dominant worldwide and is consistently represented to reaffirm neoliberal ideology. Additionally, it has influenced popular ideas and beliefs about the nature and organization of many physical activities, from play and exercise to folk games and recreation.

Sports as sites for reproducing neoliberalization

Critical social geographer, David Harvey (2005) explains that social solidarity is weakened during the process of neoliberalization because social order is reconstituted around an exchange of things rather than face-to-face contact between people. This creates a challenge for ruling elites because they realize that it is necessary to sustain a shared focus and sense of national unity among citizens as the nation-state struggles for position in a competitive global market. Failure to do this makes it difficult to maintain social order when people realize that wins and losses are fleeting in global markets and that domestic priorities favor the needs of capital over social services and the public good. As leaders at all levels seek to establish popular forms of identification to counter the erosion of solidarity, it becomes common to foster connections with national and regional sport teams and athletes.

Of course, sport-based identification is not a perfect tool for maintaining social solidarity. It may be too superficial to bind people together meaningfully, or it may be so strong that it fosters dangerous forms of chauvinism or jingoism (Bartoluci; Perasović, 2008; Malcolm, 2009; Poulton, 2004; Tuck, 2003). However, sports often do evoke a “useful” sense of national unity among at least a portion of the population in most societies. For example, this occurs in connection with FIFA World Cups and the Olympic Games, which are promoted and represented as “national events” in host

countries at the same time that they are represented in other nations as showcases for their national athletes and teams.

Such events also suit the interests of capital, because they provide opportunities for large corporations to incessantly inject into public discourse messages promoting consumption as a lifestyle as well as their products. When the messages are effective, people come to accept consumerism as a normal part of everyday life; shopping, upscale tourism, and services for wealthy visitors and residents are identified as the lifeblood of a host city (Hall, 2001). This reproduces the interests of capital and extends the power and influence of those who control it. Over time, this blurs the line between the interests of the nation and the interests of capital in the popular consciousness (Scherer; Jackson, 2010).

The potential connection between sports and power was anticipated by the Italian political theorist, Antonio Gramsci (1947/1971) who explained that ruling elites can maintain control over people by sponsoring popular sources of pleasure and excitement. When sports serve this function, sponsors can position themselves to effectively establish “ideological outposts in people’s heads.” These outposts then serve as “relay” or “delivery” points through which messages supportive of neoliberal policies are delivered. For example, when a popular football team is sponsored by Coca-Cola, and fans are repeatedly exposed to positive messages about Coca-Cola, they are less likely to raise questions or object when Coke machines are installed in their schools, when a Coca-Cola production facility violates environmental laws, or when the children of their nation drink Coke despite its negative impact on national health. This outcome is especially attractive to sponsors that profit from selling fast food, soft drinks, beer and spirits, vehicles that pollute the environment, or any products for which people might resist for moral or practical reasons.

EOCCS have also been used also to reaffirm key ideas and beliefs in neoliberal ideology. These include (a) a belief in competition as the primary basis for assessing merit and allocating rewards, (b) the idea that victories in competitive reward structures are proof of ability and moral worth, and (c) a commitment to meritocracy and the belief that economic winners deserve power and privilege, whereas economic failure is due to poor choices or weak character. Taken together, these ideas and beliefs normalize status hierarchies and socio-economic inequality as inevitable products of merit-based differences (Schimmel, 2006). This outcome is valued by those who possess or control vast amounts of capital in democratic societies where status maintenance depends on widespread consensus that the status of ruling elites is legitimate.

In concrete terms, EOCCs has often been used to facilitate capitalist expansion—“the supreme form of human accomplishment,” for neoliberals (Bourdieu, 1998b). For example, real estate and business development projects have regularly been linked with sports and thereby associated with images of a city, region, or nation. This connection enables capital investors to co-op and/or gain

support from government officials at the same time that they defuse popular opposition to private capital construction with limited or even negative payback for the general population (Flyvbjerg et al., 2003). In extreme cases, the assumed benefits of hosting a sport event, building sport venues, or subsidizing one or more teams is exaggerated and publicized to the point that public money is dedicated to projects that significantly benefit private capital. A classic example of this is when EOCCS are used to promote projects that gentrify urban areas at the same time that poor or marginalized populations are displaced or involuntarily relocated. Even in the best case scenarios, this strategy has done little to attract and retain mobile capital that benefits more than neoliberal interests (Gratton et al., 2006; Schimmel, 2006). French social theorist Pierre Bourdieu highlighted this point when he wrote these words: “Like it or not, the public interest will never emerge, even at the cost of a few mathematical errors, from the vision of” those who have appropriated sports as a tool of capital expansion” (1998b, online).

When the emotions of large population segments are associated with a sport event, team, venue, or particular athletes, advocates of neoliberalization are able to create nondemocratic planning and policy groups that operate with little or no transparency or accountability, even when they make decisions about using public resources (Flyvbjerg, 2005; Horne; Manzenreiter, 2006). For example, local organizing committees for the Olympic Games, Pan American Games, and similar mega-events have often represented the interests of capital and encouraged those outside the flow of capital associated with an event to relish temporary emotional benefits as compensation for the public debt created by hosting the event. Although sports are contested cultural terrain on which various ideas and beliefs can be represented, advocates of neoliberalism have over the past half century effectively linked their interests with sports to the point that most fans have come to take them for granted as a part of the overall sport experience (Hall, 2006).

Celebrity athletes are drawn into the process of reproducing neoliberal ideas and beliefs when they are hired to endorse corporate products at the same time that they are presented as models for individual success (Andrews; Jackson, 2001). As more general forms of sport participation increasingly depend on private sponsors, the messages associated with sports focus heavily on consumption and the “need” to consume the latest piece of equipment, clothing, or energy drink being endorsed by the athletes. Although some athletes choose to endorse progressive causes, most make choices that they and their agents think will build and nurture the athlete as a brand to be consumed in its own right—a strategy consistent with neoliberalization and the focus on individual success apart from the collectives with which individuals could be associated.

Neoliberal sport forms and patterns of access and participation

As neoliberal ideas and beliefs are increasingly accepted, the ideological climate fosters consent for the privatization of sport participation opportunities, the imposition of user fees, and the reduction of public programs designed to serve the public good (Donnelly; Coakley, 2002). This occurs gradually and, among some people, becomes taken-for-granted, even some of those who lack resources for participation.

There also is a decline in physical activities and sports played for pleasure and collective well-being. This is coupled with support for a physical culture organized around the *ethos* of elite, organized, competitive, commercial sports. Similarly, traditions of informal games and publicly funded neighborhood sports give way to organized programs emphasizing paid membership, exclusive recruitment, systematic training, certified coaches, preparation for competition, and regularly scheduled competitive matches, tournaments, playoffs, and championships. To fit with a neoliberal model, non-elite forms of sport are legitimized by organizing and labeling them as “developmental”—a commonly used to describe youth sports organized around progressive skill development with young people “graduating” from lower to higher and more demanding levels of competition.

The privatization of sport programs leads people to seek sponsors for their teams and sports, and sponsorships further link sport to consumption as a valued component of everyday life. Additionally, competition for sponsors reproduces core neoliberal beliefs about the assumed link between merit and market value, meaning that the most elite teams received the most support.

The influence of this link also occurs in sport programs designed and marketed as solutions to social problems. These programs often claim to “fix” young people labeled “at risk”—usually ethnic minority males in low income areas where schools and other basic institutions have been decimated by lack of public support combined with unregulated market forces.

Under neoliberal conditions, these “rehabilitation-oriented” programs are created by “sport entrepreneurs” as part of a “social problems industry” that emerges when people overlook the adverse impact of neoliberalization on the underlying fabric of social life. Therefore, programs generally focus on the personal troubles of individual young people instead of the social issues that lead to those troubles. The need for social justice, rebuilding local institutions, reestablishing a viable resource base, raising political awareness among young people and empowering them as change agents for their communities is seldom acknowledged by the founders of these sport programs. In fact, the funding required by these programs is often controlled by organizations and corporations in which decision-makers favor proposals stressing that sport will simultaneously control and inculcate discipline among “disadvantaged” and “at-risk” youths in the hope that they will develop the attributes needed to achieve socially acceptable goals in neoliberal society (Coakley, 2002; 2011).

A similar pattern has emerged in the rapidly expanding field of “sport for development” that now encompasses literally thousands of organizations working in resource deprived regions of the world. Most of these organizations are headquartered in and staffed by people from societies where neoliberal ideas and beliefs are widely accepted. Their mission statements and fund-raising narratives are generally similar to those used in the social problems industry in the United States and Western Europe. The programs they administer tend to be organized around a deficit reduction model with young people portrayed as needy victims of drought, civil war, the oppressive or genocidal actions of national and tribal leaders, and general social disorganization caused by corrupt local and national leaders. However, to deal directly with the need for structural changes would be overwhelming and politically contentious. Therefore, they focus primarily on fostering self-efficacy and self-esteem among young people, changing gender attitudes in the hope of reducing gender inequities, increasing knowledge about HIV/AIDS in the hope of changing sexual practices, and providing leadership training in the hope of creating young adults that will work alongside existing staff and possibly become involved in their communities, if communities actually exist.

The counterpart of these sport-for-development programs in relatively wealthy areas in neoliberal societies focus on personal growth that is based on planned skill development combined with pep talks emphasizing internal reflection, endless possibilities, “being all they can be,” and lifelong personal transformation; structural changes through active engagement in the community or society is rarely acknowledged in the mission statements of these programs (Coakley, 2002). Unless the young people in these programs are guided to embrace alternative ideas and beliefs, these sport programs produce neoliberal athletes adept at seeing their bodies and skills in market terms.

At the same time that access to active participation becomes increasingly scarce, and sport experiences are shaped by neoliberal ideas and beliefs, commercial spectator sports, live and mediated, are heavily sponsored and promoted. As they come to pervade the media programming and the popular consciousness, these sports, involving elite athletes and highly organized competitive leagues, become the “ideal” and a standard against which other sports are compared and evaluated. Sports that don’t match this ideal often are seen as second rate and lose support in the community as a whole. For example, in the United States, community-based, publicly funded “recreational” sports are avoided by many young people who see them as the activities for those who are not good enough to play on private, elite club teams. Similarly, intramural sports, once a popular in U.S. high schools and colleges, lose support as attention and resources are dedicated to exclusive, elite teams that represent the school in interscholastic competitions.

Although there are notable exceptions to these patterns, they struggle to survive in neoliberal contexts. For example, young people have resisted the neoliberal model and created alternative sport

forms, but the material resources, media coverage, spectator interest, popular discourse, and cultural acknowledgement given to them is practically nonexistent when compared to what is given to EOCCS. In fact, emerging/alternative sports such as skateboarding, disk sports (Frisbee), BMX bike riding and other sport-like activities having local or regional resonance in many communities around the world often have been banned and associated with deviant lifestyles. Seeking recognition, some participants have eliminated or “hidden” the free-flowing, expressive, non-competitive spirit that initially constituted the heart of these sports and allowed them to be reorganized them as EOCCS. With guidance and sponsorship from corporations and transnational media companies, such as ESPN (X Games) and FOX Sports (EXTREME SPORTS Dew Tour), they were reborn in neoliberal form.³

(Re)Claiming Sports By and For the People: The Challenge of Resisting Neoliberalism

As neoliberal ideas and beliefs are woven into the social order it becomes increasingly difficult to collectively resist and gain support for alternative forms of organization. As people adjust and create ways of life under neoliberal conditions, many passively accept parts of neoliberal ideology as useful in their lives and some embrace the ideology as a whole as they seek to understand the world around them. As this occurs, neoliberalism becomes rooted in the popular consciousness.

Even when there is resistance to neoliberalization and neoliberal leaders are replaced, the structural changes prompted by deregulation and crafted in connection with privatization are difficult to change. Rebuilding infrastructures to effectively re-develop and deliver public programs and services is a long term task. When people do not understand this and become impatient, it provides proponents of neoliberalism opportunities to reintroduce their ideas and beliefs and raise doubts about the merits of alternatives to neoliberalization. This partly explains why leaders who support neoliberal policies sometimes regain power, even when their original policies created the very crises that their political opponent-successor has struggled to resolve. Additionally, when commercial constantly promote the “logic” of economic liberalization, deregulation, privatization, and the primacy of the individual and the family, it becomes even more difficult to implement policies and create programs that deal effectively with problems created by previous neoliberal policies. Because these policies enabled private individuals and corporations to gain enormous power, neoliberal interests have the resources to persistently lobby

³ The fastest growing media sport in the United States in 2011 was mixed martial arts (MMA), the epitome of neoliberal sport—a person-on-person competitive struggle with few rules and a focus on individual combatants and their personal stories. In August, 2011, Fox Sports signed a seven-year contract with the primary MMA promoter, Ultimate Fighting Championship, and will pay about \$100 million per year for media rights. Previously, Televisa and TV Azteca in Mexico signed rights contracts with World Wrestling Entertainment, and expanding global company wanting to replace lucha libre, a sport form that has recently been represented in neoliberal terms.

for or demand other changes consistent with their ideas and beliefs. This raises the question: “Where is the public hand that will restrain global neoliberalism in its liberal and illiberal varieties?” (Hicks, 2009).

Political scientist Richard Westra suggests that hope rests in developing an “ontology of socialism” to identify “what must be *undone* in our economic lives dominated by centuries of capitalism and decades of neoliberalism” (2010: 33). Progress, he explains, requires that this ontology be used to revise institutional structures that permit the achievement of socialist goals formed in connection with new definitions of *development*. But building widespread consensus around such definitions is difficult after neoliberalism has taken root in many institutional spheres of society.

Clearly, as Bourdieu (1998a) has noted, the role of the state must be revived and refigured to effectively limit the excesses of capitalism and restore an infrastructure of social support. However, given the current the power of global capital, the political fragmentation of the middle and working classes in relatively wealthy societies, and residual intellectual support for neoliberalization, this is a daunting task. When individualism and self-interest remain at least partially embedded in the dominant culture, healthy political debate is difficult to sustain because people are pulled in many contradictory directions, even if they are united in their opposition to neoliberalism.

Giroux and Giroux (2006) have argued that the most effective strategy for undermining neoliberalism is for oppositional groups to unify around a critical pedagogy emphasizing social engagement and critical thinking. This intellectual effort, they suggest, is needed to create a collective sense of utopian possibility and actions to restore the public realm. However, this strategy assumes that there is an automatic connection between ideas and action. But anyone reading this article knows that critical thinking does not always lead to engaged citizenship. If it did, scholars in the sociology of sport would be much more visible as agents of progressive social change in sports and the larger social world.

The purpose of questioning the strategy suggested by Giroux and Giroux and referring to my colleagues in the sociology of sport is to encourage more discussion about the need for critical self-reflection in our field and to become more fully aware of the consequences of research as well as our involvement with and in sport organizations and programs. Unless we are aware that most sport organizations today exist in neoliberal political environments and compete for scarce funding, we may spend much of our time and energy, and even our personal resources, in ways that reproduce processes of neoliberalization (Hayhurst et al., 2011). For example, I have found myself on more than one occasion, working with well-intentioned people who seek funding for their sport programs by highlighting the uniqueness of what they do relative to other organizations seeking the same funds. In the process they unknowingly undermine the possibility of partnering with those organizations in mutually beneficial ways and forming political alliances through which they could work to make progressive structural changes part of their mission. This is especially common among sport-for-

development organizations, which often have leaders and staff that embrace an “uncritical and one-dimensional view of ‘sport,’ and believe that it has inherent properties that inevitably produce positive outcomes in the form of ‘development’” (Coalter, 2010: 17).

This means that the primary goals of the sociology of sport should include the following:

1. Challenge, discredit, and eliminate myths about inherently positive qualities of sport and automatic positive consequences of sport participation;
2. Define the focus of study in the field so that our research does not unknowingly privilege elite, organized, competitive, commercial sports or reproduce them as an unquestioned dominant sport form worldwide;
3. Emphasize work that connects sports, sport organizations, sport programs, and athletes with other organizations and projects dedicated to learning about and taking actions to restore the public realm and promote the public good.

Discussing these goals will heighten awareness of the context in which many of us do our work as well as the context in which sports are organized, promoted, and played today. The recent work of Kim Schimmel at Kent State University in the United States suggests that working to achieve these goals is not easy. As the relationship between sport culture and the neoliberal agenda of many political and corporate leaders worldwide increases, those who challenge that agenda risk marginalization in research funding processes and global intellectual networks that are called on when there is a need for expertise in research and theory. Supporting those who resist the seductive rewards of aligning with neoliberal interests is certainly a legitimate task of our professional organizations and the journals they publish.

References

ANDREWS, D. L.; JACKSON, S. J. (2001). Introduction: Sport celebrities, public culture, and private experience. In: ANDREWS, D. L.; JACKSON, S. J., eds. **Sport stars: the cultural politics of sporting celebrity** (pp. 1-19). London: Routledge.

BARTOLUCI, S.; PERASOVIČ, B. (2008). National identity and sport: The case of Croatia. In: TOPIČ, M. D.; LIČEN, S. (Eds.), **Sport, culture & society: an account of views and perspectives on social issues in a continent (and beyond)**. Ljubljana, Slovenia: University of Ljubljana.

BIDSTRUP, S. (2002). **Free market fundamentalism: Friedman, Pinochet and the “Chilean Miracle”**. Available at: <http://www.bidstrup.com/economics.htm>. Accessed: Aug. 5, 2011.

BOURDIEU, P. (1998a). **Acts of resistance: against the tyranny of the market**. New York: The New Press.

BOURDIEU, P. (1998b). The essence of neoliberalism (trans. by Jeremy J. Shapiro). **Le Monde diplomatique** (December). Available at: <http://mondediplo.com/1998/12/08bourdieu>. Accessed: Jan. 24, 2010.

BOURDIEU, P.; GÜNTER, G. (2003). The “progressive” restoration: a Franco-German dialogue. **New Left Review**, n. 14, March-April, pp. 63-77.

BRENNER, N.; THEODORE, N. eds. (2002a). **Space of neoliberalism: urban restructuring in North American & Western Europe**. Oxford: Blackwell.

BRENNER, N.; THEODORE, N. eds. (2002b). Cities and the geographies of 'actually existing neoliberalism. **Antipode**, n.34, v. 3, pp. 349-379.

BROWN, W. (2006). American nightmare: neoliberalism, neoconservatism, and de-democratization. **Political Theory**, n. 34, v. 6, pp. 690-714.

CAMPBELL, A. (2005). The birth of neoliberalism in the United States: A reorganization of capitalism. In SAAD-FILHO, A.; JOHNSTON, D. eds. **Neoliberalism: a critical reader**. London: Pluto Press.

CAMPBELL, A. (2010). Cuba: A project to build socialism in a neoliberal world. In: WESTRA, R. (ed.) **Confronting global neoliberalism: third world resistance and development strategies**. Atlanta, GA: Clarity Press.

COAKLEY, J. (2002). Using sports to control deviance and violence among youths: Let's be critical and cautious. In: GATZ, M.; MESSNER, M. A.; BALL-ROKEACH, S. J. eds. **Paradoxes of youth and sport**. Albany: State University of New York Press.

COAKLEY, J. (2011). Youth sports: What counts as “positive development”? **Journal of Sport and Social Issues**. Published online 9 August 2011; DOI: 10.1177/0193723511417311; Available at: <http://jss.sagepub.com/content/early/2011/08/09/0193723511417311>. Accessed: Aug. 10, 2011.

COALTER, F. (with J. Taylor). (2010). **Sport-for-development impact study: a research initiative funded by Comic Relief and UK Sport and managed by International Development through Sport**. Stirling, UK: University of Stirling.

DONNELLY, P.; COAKLEY, J. (2002). **The role of recreation in promoting social inclusion**. Monograph in the Working Paper Series on Social Inclusion. Toronto, Ontario: Laidlaw Foundation (www.laidlawfdn.org).

FLYVBJERG, B. (2005). Design by deception: The politics of megaproject approval. **Harvard Design Magazine** n. 22, pp. 50–59. Available at: <http://flyvbjerg.plan.aau.dk/HARVARDDESIGN63PRINT.pdf>. Accessed: Aug. 15, 2011.

FLYVBJERG, B.; BRUZELIUS, N.; ROTHENGATTER, W. (2003). **Megaprojects and risk**. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

GIROUX, H. (2004). **The terror of neoliberalism**. London: Paradigm.

GIROUX, H. (2011). Neoliberalism and the death of the social state: remembering Walter Benjamin's Angel of History. **Social Identities**, n. 17, v. 4, pp. 587-601.

GIROUX, H. A.; GIROUX, S. S. (2006). Challenging neoliberalism's new world order: The promise of critical pedagogy. **Cultural Studies ↔ Critical Methodologies**, n. 6, v. 1, pp. 21-32.

GLYNN, A. (2006). **Capitalism unleashed**. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

GRAMSCI, A. (1971). **Selections from the prison notebook** (Q. Hoare and G. N. Smith, trans). New York: International Publishers (original work published in 1947).

GRATTON, C.; SHIBLI, S.; COLEMAN, R. (2006). The economic impact of major sport events: A review of 10 events in the UK. In: HORNE, J. MANZENREITER, W. eds. **Sports mega-events**. Oxford: Blackwell.

HALL, C. M. (2001). Imaging, tourism and sports event fever: the Sydney Olympics and the need for a social charter for mega-events. In: GRATTON, C.; HENRY, I. eds. **Sport in the city: the role of sport in economic and social regeneration**. London: Routledge.

HALL, C. M. (2006). Urban entrepreneurship, corporate interests and sports mega-events: the thin policies of competitiveness within the hard outcomes of neoliberalism. In: HORNE, J. MANZENREITER, W. eds. **Sports mega-events**. Oxford: Blackwell.

HARVEY, D. (2005). **A brief history of neoliberalism**. New York: Oxford University Press.

HARVEY, D. (2006). Neoliberalism as creative destruction. **Geograficka Annaler: Series B, Human Geography**, n. 88, v. 2, pp. 145-158.

HAYHURST, L. M. C; WILSON, B.; FRISBY, W. (2011). Navigating neoliberal networks: Transnational Internet platforms in sport for development and peace. **International Review for the Sociology of Sport**, n. 46, v. 3, pp. 315-329.

HICKS, A. (2009). Varieties of neoliberalization: Freeing the invisible hand of free markets and extending the visible hand of market power. **Contemporary Sociology**, v. 37, n. 1, pp. 13-17.

HILL, R. C. (2000). Review of The neoliberal city: Governance, ideology and development in American urbanism, by Jason Hackworth (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press). **Contemporary Sociology: a Journal of Reviews**, v. 37, n. 2, pp. 151-152. Available at: <https://www.msu.edu/user/hillrr/index.htm> Accessed: Aug. 7, 2011.

HILL, R. C. (2007). **Neoliberalism & developmentalism: the East Asian experience**. Paper presented at the Taipei Discussion Forum (December 20). Available at: <https://www.msu.edu/user/hillrr/Taipei%20Talk%20Neolib%20&%20Dev.htm>. Accessed: Aug. 7, 2011.

HORNE, J. (2006). **Sport in Consumer Culture**. Basingstoke: Palgrave.

HORNE, J.; MANZENREITER, W. eds. (2006). **Sports mega-events**. Oxford: Blackwell.

KLEIN, N. (2007). **The shock doctrine**: the rise of disaster capitalism. New York: Metropolitan Books.

MALCOLM, D. (2009). Malign or benign? English national identities and cricket. **Sport in Society**, v. 12, n. 4/5, pp. 613-628.

MARTINEZ, E.; GARCIA, A. (2000). What is neoliberalism? A brief definition for activists. **GlobalExchange.org**, Available at: www.globalexchange.org/campaigns/econ101/neoliberalDefined.html Accessed: June 24, 2011.

MCDONALD, I. (2007). **One dimensional sport**. www.idrottsforum.org. Available at: <http://www.idrottsforum.org/articles/mcdonald/mcdonald071212.pdf>.

ONG, A. (2006). **Neoliberalism as exception**: mutations in citizenship and sovereignty. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

PECK, J; TICKNELL, A. (2002). Neoliberalizing space. **Antipode**, v. 34, n. 3, pp. 380-404.

POULTON, E. (2004). Mediated patriot games: The construction and representation of national identities in the British television production of Euro '96. **International Review for the Sociology of Sport**, v. 39, n. 4, pp. 437-455.

PRASAD, M. (2006). **The politics of free markets**: The rise of neoliberal economic policies in Britain, France, Germany, and the United States. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

RAND, A. (1957). **Atlas shrugged**. New York: Random House.

SADER, E. (2008). The weakest link? Neoliberalism in Latin America. **New Left Review**, v. 52, July/August. Available at: <http://www.newleftreview.org/?issue=286>. Accessed: June 24, 2011.

SCHERER, J.; JACKSON, S. (2010). **Globalization, sport and corporate nationalism**: the new cultural economy of the New Zealand All Blacks. Oxford: Peter Lang Publishers.

SCHIMMEL, K. S. (2006). Deep play: Sports mega-events and urban social conditions in the USA. In: HORNE, J. MANZENREITER, W. eds. **Sports mega-events**. Oxford: Blackwell.

SEISDEDOS, P. C. (2010). "Late neoliberalism" in Brazil: Social and economic impacts of trade and financial liberalization. In: WESTRA, R. ed. **Confronting global neoliberalism**: third world resistance and development strategies. Atlanta, GA: Clarity Press.

TUCK, J. (2003a). Making sense of emerald commotion: Rugby Union, national identity and Ireland. **Identities**, v. 10, n. 4, pp. 495-515.

WESTRA, R. ed. (2010). **Confronting global neoliberalism**: third world resistance and development strategies. Atlanta, GA: Clarity Press.