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Abstract

This article examines the ways in which cultural and political intermediaries have endeavored to systematically reorganize the spectacles of North American stock car racing to reinscribe and re-present the hegemonic order of free-market capitalism. To this end, the authors draw from a complex synthesis of economic, social, and cultural theory to interrogate the political and corporate dimensions of "NASCAR Nation." More specifically, they offer a critical investigation of the dialectic relationship between the expanding regimes of capital accumulation brought forth by neoliberal economic policy, its political imperatives and operatives, and the cultural politics that actively shape consumer experiences within the sport. They likewise interpret how corporate capitalism acts as a prevailing fixture within these spectacular spaces and fan-spectator praxis. In sum, they argue that the commercial precepts of the National Association for Stock Car Auto Racing (NASCAR) present a twisted contradiction, whereby NASCAR fans laud the same neoliberal market forces that both mesmerize their consumer sensibilities and simultaneously decimate their own postindustrial labor conditions.

Keywords

NASCAR, neoliberalism, empire, consumption, spectacle

When we speak of confronting Empire, we need to identify what Empire means. Does it mean the US government (and its European satellites), the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, the World Trade Organization (WTO), and multinational corporations? Or is it something more than that?

—Arundhati Roy, 2003, p. 103

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As the sun began to set on their empire, the Roman multitude of the first and second centuries following Christ's death found themselves routinely assembled in the Colosseum to celebrate the "glorious conquests" of Titus, Trajan, Hadrian, and Marcus Aurelius—fantastically mesmerized by celebrations of corporeal carnage, state supremacy, and spectacular solidarity. The paradox of this Roman sporting spectacle—the visceral mélange of the bestial, theatric, gladiatorial, and political—transformed Vespasian's ancient arena into a multilayered signifying system of Roman supremacy. Meanwhile, the civilization's social and economic pillars were concurrently crumbling from beneath its proverbial grandstands (Lidz, 2001). By most accounts, these ostentatious sporting spectacles became mystifying physical, social, and ideological instruments for a regime struggling to maintain power amid a deteriorating market economy, a spreading pandemic of smallpox and/or measles, and the voracious labors to stretch the boundaries of its empire (Hopkins, 1983; Plass, 1995).

Set against a backdrop of the most grandiose cityscape the world had theretofore seen, this sport-specific interplay of idealized bodies, spectacularized sporting prowess, and parochial spectator pseudosolidarity became a reassuring—if not glorifying—ideological apparatus in the twilight of a bread-and-circuses-laden Roman empire that had already been stretched too thin to sustain itself. The unification of an adoration- and bread-starved throng (rulers and the ruled) was made even more powerful by the symbolic and political subnarrative that pervaded the arena, its pageantry, its warring and performative bodies, and the praxis of spectatorship itself: that of empire. Despite its inherent speciousness, the spectacle functioned as an instrument of consent and dominion—one part transcendental validating apparatus for the dominator, one part collective compensatory affirmation for those being dominated. To this end, the politics of the body and a prevailing expansionist body politic were woven into a symbiotic thread by which the fabric of empire was stitched. Put more simply, in ancient Rome, sport was indeed more than just an opiate of the masses.

In the centuries that succeeded the fall of Rome, sport persistently resurfaced as an important, if not imperative, cultural technology in both the advancing and advanced stages of various imperial regimes. For example, sport was an important part of life in the Dutch and Ottoman empires (Okay, 2002); in the imperialist designs of Adolf Hitler, especially as manifest in the corporeal solidarity of the 1936 Berlin Olympic Games (Hart-Davis, 1988; Schaap, 2007); and in the (sporting) vestiges of British colonialist endeavors still pervasive throughout the world (from the famed New Zealand All Blacks rugby team to the culturally creolized version of Trobriand Island cricket; cf. McDevitt, 2007).

In this article, we add to the intensifying critique of contemporary sport as a similarly important cultural technology of American-Western-global-neoliberal empire (Andrews, 2006; Falcous & Silk, 2006; Pope, 2007). Although the economic and social architecture of most ancient and early-modern empires was undergirded by a confluence of political subordination and a mass culture opiate-complex, we contend that the latest imperialist inculcations have been rearticulated under the logics of the market—namely, the dictums of profit maximization, commodity fetishism and hyperconsumerism,

submission to culture(s) of fear, and Third World labor exploitation, which define the present global economy. In this regard, former U.S. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld's claim that the U.S. government does not "seek empires. We're not imperialistic. We never have been" (as cited in Boot, 2003) *might* still hold some truth. What is hard to argue against, however, is that many operations of the American State have now fallen under the dominion of capital. And so although the notion of "American imperialism" has proven to be problematic, it has become increasingly clear that the American political system's primary purpose is advancing a modern-day, market-driven empire.

What is of specific concern here is that although American capitalist-politicos and their legion of bourgeois-nationalists compose only a modest and increasingly extraneous faction of the global brotherhood of market masters, they have nonetheless been unrivaled in their ability to author a political economy venerated by the prevailing cultural politics of America's working classes (those suffering most from the system's inherent exploitative schema). Many observers have suggested that this contextually unique, hegemonic congruence of corporate America's economic interests with the rightward shift in the country's sociopolitical platform is a product of the latter's ability to construct a *spectacle of solidarity* around the values, idioms, identities, and nationalism(s) from which the former's imperialist mettle has been forged (Giroux, 2004; Hardt & Negri, 2000; Harvey, 2005a). As others have made resoundingly clear (cf. Chomsky, 1999; Denzin & Giardina, 2007; Frank, 2004), this spectacle has been constituted by an assemblage of narratives, images, and cultural wares meant to capture, promote, and *be consumed as* a singular pedagogy of America's "great moving right show" (cf. Hall, 1984).

In the tradition of preceding empires, this authoritative logic is filtered and popularized through a multiplicity of cultural forms (Hall, 1992). During the Bush II era (and, really, since the Reagan revolution), this marketization of American culture and politics has matured through a vast array of social technologies—including, but not limited to, the prowar, anti-affirmative action, overtly Christian balladry of musicians ranging from Toby Keith to Creed; the hypernationalistic (and often xenophobic) cinematography of Mel Gibson and Clint Eastwood; the incendiary political stylings of cable news pundits Ann Coulter and Bill O'Reilly; and the now-normal fundamentalist credo proffered by televangelists Joel Osteen and Pat Robertson. And as was the case in many previous imperialist projects, *sport*—perhaps more so than any other cultural form in contemporary America—has been connectively used to galvanize this powerful ideological consonance.

In what follows, we draw from extensive ethnographic research gathered during a 2-year period at National Association for Stock Car Auto Racing (NASCAR) auto races throughout the United States to examine this collision of capitalism, politics, and consumer culture. By delving into the experiences, discourses, and practices of America's "fastest-growing," most overtly politicized, and stridently commercialized sport, we argue that the authority of Bush-era imperial strategies and consonance of free-market hegemony not only parallel, but also may be dialectic consequences of, the rise in

stock car racing's popularity in the United States and beyond. More specifically, we contend that NASCAR is at once the corporate sport organism that best exemplifies the principles of this burgeoning free-market empire and the archetypal, if not centrifugal, sporting apparatus orchestrated by political and corporate intermediaries in the manufacture of pedagogies of consent in an age of global capitalism.

Organizationally, we begin by offering a brief genealogy of neoliberalism and its inevitable impasse of overcapitalization in the age of laissez-faire economics. From there, we engage with a more detailed excavation of the dialectics of the "NASCAR empire" and examine how political and sporting intermediaries have concurrently labored to extract both value and consent from the stock car spectacle. We conclude with a brief discussion of the future of NASCAR's neoliberal dialectics in the age of evermore-desperate regimes of neoliberal capital accumulation.

Circuits of Neoliberalism

According to many scholars and political economists, the late-century fall of the leftist governments in South America, Europe, and East Asia signaled the pinnacle of a new form of empire (cf. Hardt & Negri, 2000; Harvey, 2005a). According to those theorists, the end of the Cold War ushered in a new macroeconomic hegemony—a new world order marshaled by leaders of Western capitalist nation-states (namely, Pinochet, Thatcher, Douglas, Goulart, Suharto, Xiaoping, and Reagan) who, in the years prior, had supplanted social welfare systems with the imperatives of profit-first, laissez-faire free marketization. By the time the last few pieces of the Berlin Wall were being carved into souvenir kitsch, a paradigm of deregulated, unfettered capital accumulation had emerged, giving rise to an ephemeral boon for a global capitalist class, particularly one with investments in the crude oil, biotechnology, digital communication, and mass entertainment sectors (Harvey, 2005b).

The early stages of this shift toward a neoliberal political economy can be traced back to John Locke's and Adam Smith's influential 18th century treatises promoting market freedom, self-regulation, and "invisible-hand" economic governance (Lal, 2006). Out of this framework, the centuries that followed—particularly in developed economies of the mid-20th century—saw an escalation of what David Harvey (2005b, 2007) refers to as "embedded liberal" modes of economic regulation. Drawing from the theoretical framework of John Maynard Keynes, many Western nations adopted a "balanced" approach to capitalism. Under Keynesianism, the United States in particular established economic policies that regulated growth, (unequally) attended to the social needs of its people, controlled the import and export of capital and goods, operated by way of moderately high taxation (weighted in favor of the working poor), and stimulated growth through investments in the public sector (Adamson, 1990; Leeson, 2000; Skocpol, 1985).

However, by the latter part of the 20th century, the embedded liberalism that had undergirded the era of implicit *pax Americana* was starting to languish amid the 1973 Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries oil crisis, the accumulating fiscal and social debt of the Vietnam War, the stagnation of the worker-empowered domestic

manufacturing sector, and the revolt of the capitalist class (whose profits had failed to grow at a rate investors had forecasted a decade earlier; Hetzel, 2007). At the impasse of this late-Keynesian malaise, an influential faction of bourgeois elites popularized an alternative neoliberal theory to what was perceived to be a failing, antiquated Keynesian model: It offered a return to flexible labor relations (and free of any union “interference”), high rates of unemployment (and thus more competition from the “bottom up”), government support of top-heavy economic growth, and a marketplace that empowered corporate growth (Nelson, 2007). This revolution was in large part guided by the theories of highly influential University of Chicago economics professor Milton Friedman and his “Chicago Boy” acolytes. Drawing on the rudiments of Smith’s self-regulating, invisible-hand doctrine, Friedman and his adherents implemented a series of measures intended to eliminate the regulatory mechanisms of the Keynesian welfare state (Hetzel, 2007). The core epistemology of this “correction” was the principal that individual liberty and freedom are the “high point of civilization” and that such an “individual freedom” can be preserved and nurtured only by an institutional structure committed to fostering private property rights, free markets, and free trade and by abolishing corporate tax and minimum wage (Friedman, 1962/2002, 1993).

By the end of the 20th century, Friedman’s neoliberalism held sway over nation-states where a legion of policy makers—including Pinochet, Thatcher, Reagan, and George H. W. and George W. Bush—had assumed power (cf. Nelson, 2007). Promulgating the idea that if the State could extricate its involvement in the economy, then wealth would soon “trickle down” to the working masses, these figures institutionalized a common polity that restructured the nation-state to use its power to preserve private property rights, nurture the institutions of free-market competition, and promote each on both the local and the global stages (Garrett, 1993; Newman, 2007).

Under these new regimes of neoliberalism, corporate America emerged as the dominant corporatist state of the now global economy. It was at once a contextually ironic tautology and a materially consequential confluence of unfettered profitability for the private sector and a realigned democracy at the service of global commerce. By containing expenditures through wage labor suppression and opening up emerging producer and global consumer markets, Friedman’s followers in the fields of banking, biotechnology, military and aerospace engineering, and (homeland) security had prospered from his profit-first regime of globe-trotting accumulation. When Friedman died in 2006, *National Review* columnist Larry Kudlow (2006) declared, “Milton’s mantra of free markets, free prices, consumer choice and economic liberty is responsible for the global prosperity we enjoy today” (p. 1).

In that same moment when these captains of the free market were relishing in the life’s work of their visionary “savior,” the rate of corporate expansion and growth brought about by his economic theories was proving unsustainable. As Friedman’s critics had predicted decades earlier, the sharp rise of private growth in the age of neoliberalism eventuated in a crisis of “over-capitalization” (Mandel, 1999, p. 378), whereby the system of stifling variable costs (wage labor in particular) and maximizing profits began to implode on itself. As the wage-laboring masses earned less on both

domestic and global scales, they were unable to sustain the rate of consumption needed to continue the exponential growth demanded by a deregulated marketplace.

All of the available data from the beginning of the Reagan administration to the end of George W. Bush's first term suggests that whereas corporations and their capitalist elites (the top 1%) grew their wealth more than 400%, during that same period, American workers saw their real wages reduced by more than 14% (*United States Bureau of Labor Statistics Report, 1970-2005, 2005*). To sustain corporate growth and the disparity between bourgeois and proletariat classes, American financial institutions began to increasingly subsidize consumption through a vast range of profitable, high-interest-rate debt programs, such as subprime lending. Today, this discordant distribution of capital has culminated in massive state- and consumer-based debt unparalleled in the history of the American economy. Moreover, working taxpayers have been forced to "support economic growth" and in recent years "bail out" the private sector through tax amnesty, corporate welfare, and various "stimulus packages." The huge deficits that the United States is now running are by most expert accounts (including International Monetary Fund [IMF] economists) a threat to global stability and sustainability; if it were any other country—or if any other government dictated international trade—the United States and its corporate actors would likely face serious sanctions from both the World Bank and the IMF (Lewis, 2005).

As Harvey (2006) has consistently argued, neoliberal states and corporate leviathans are now seeking "spatial-temporal fixes" to these crises—a term with double meaning that refers to both the historically stratified territorialization of capital and the globe-trotting "solutions" to crises of accumulation. Through what Abraham Lincoln centuries ago predicted would emerge as a series of antidemocratic political and social techniques (cf. Bakan, 2004), these actors have attempted to keep the global economy on life support by interceding on the inner workings of the free market.

Two so-called fixes to this crisis have been categorized as *the privatization of the public good* (or the opening up of the public sector to the private sector, namely, in the fields of education, public works, medicine, and energy; Boyd, 2007) and the advancement of *disaster capitalism* (such as the profit-based privatization of reconstruction projects in New Orleans following Hurricane Katrina or in Baghdad following the U.S. invasion; Klein, 2007). However, a third, and ultimately tantamount, mechanism for sustaining this order has also emerged, one that suggests that dispossession of public property and a burgeoning military-industrial complex are abetted, if not made possible, by an overwhelming consent of the middle and working classes. And, as Noam Chomsky (1999) argues, in democracies, such as the United States, intermediaries indefatigably endeavoring to "manufacture consent" for this neoliberal empire are blurring the boundaries of "political politics" (Morris, 1988) and cultural politics. Jim McGuigan (2005) has similarly postulated that this working-class consent toward neoliberal hegemony is made meaningful by "distorted communication motivated by unequal power relations" whereby "ideological sway is greatest at the popular level" (pp. 232-233). In the first instance, consumer culture industry has been able to capitalize on individual needs, desires, and aspirations through the production of specific goods,

services, and experiences. In the second, the technologies of identity and subjectivity active within the machinations of the “global popular” (Kellner, 1995) have been equally powerful in subordinating spectator-consumers to the laws of the neoliberal market. In other words, public culture is being molded around the conventions of a neoliberalist hegemony, and consumers are often lining up to buy in (Adorno & Horkheimer, 2000; Baudrillard, 1999).

NASCAR as Product of Neoliberalism

Although the term *neoliberalism* itself might not flow freely from the mouths of “NASCAR Nation”—a double entendre that refers both to an imagined spectator community dominated by rural, working-class, small-town, mostly White, “Southern” fans of “America’s fastest growing spectator sport” (Derbyshire, 2003, p. 29) and to the broader configurations of neoliberal *communitas* under the George W. Bush presidency—the sport is both implicitly and explicitly bound to the fate of Friedman’s free-market prophecy. A sport that has historically been marginalized in the traditional media and popular sporting imaginary, NASCAR and its parent company, International Speedway Corporation (ISC), have emerged as a significant force in the highly competitive U.S. sport marketplace. Under the centralized stewardship of Bill France, stock car racing’s authoritative organizing body has guided the sport into the heights of corporate wealth and cultural import. In perfecting the “NASCAR Way,” as Robert Hagstrom (1998) observed more than a decade ago, NASCAR officials have been more successful than those of any other professional North American sport in transforming spectator allegiance into active forms of consumption. Such an intensive hypercommercialization led one *Sports Illustrated* writer to label NASCAR “the most commercially-saturated sport in the U.S.” (Hinton, 1999, p. 66): Membership in NASCAR Nation is signified by spectators’ adornment with the corporate logos of favorite driver-celebrity; tracks, events, and televisual texts bear the imprint of corporate “facilitators” through an omnipresent universe of symbolic, narrative, and imaged promotional technologies. This is especially true for the in-person fan experience, where on any given race weekend, spectators at NASCAR racetracks will be exposed to more than 40,000 corporate logos and intellectual properties (field notes September 9, 2006).

As NASCAR has moved from the periphery of sport and cultural relations in America to the center of SportsNationUSA, it has broadened its import through an assemblage of media discourses, celebrity intonations, and a harnessed, commercialized sense of collectivity among its spectatorship. However, the rise of NASCAR Nation is more than an emerging cultural destination in Friedman’s free-market utopia. The dialectic relationship between stock car racing and the market forces that have ushered in a new era of profitability is a consequence of a systematic triangulation of sport spectatorship, consumerism, and political economy grafted by top-ranking NASCAR officials, right-wing U.S. politicians, and corporate enterprise. NASCAR operates as the archetypal neoliberal corporate sport, with revenues coming primarily in the forms of (a) television rights fees from broadcasters eager to acquire highly-sought-after racing

content, (b) corporate sponsorship deals, (c) ticket sales to live events, and (d) merchandising of stock car-related intellectual properties.

Consider the numbers: By the 2000 season, ISC reported \$440 million in revenues—a number that at the time shocked analysts—and gradually increased to a reported \$817 million in earnings for the 2007 season (“International Speedway Reports,” 2008). When combined with profits generated by the individual teams that compete under the sanctioning body’s circuit, American stock car racing organizations reported a record \$3 billion profit for the 2007 fiscal year (Tuggle, 2008). On the basis of increased Nielsen ratings from 2000 to 2006, NASCAR recently completed an 8-year, \$4.48 billion television broadcasting rights agreement with ABC-ESPN, Fox-SPEED, and Turner networks (Lemke, 2005). These broadcasters have been willing to remunerate such large sums because advertisers who buy 30-second slots on their networks are well aware that NASCAR fans are the most brand loyal in all of professional North American sport (Hagstrom, 1998; Huff, 1997). Similarly, a study conducted for NASCAR by the market research firm Edgar, Dunn, and Company in 2000 and 2001 reported that a staggering 92% of “hardcore fans” and 89% of “casual fans” believed that “NASCAR drivers could not run their cars without sponsors’ support” (“NASCAR Brand Study,” 2001, p. 24). As a consequence of this commodity synergy resulting from increased media exposure and enhanced consumer awareness, Fortune 500 companies currently sponsor NASCAR more than any other sport (O’Keefe & Schlosser, 2007). In 2006, global brands, such as Anheuser-Busch, General Mills, and Home Depot, spent a total of \$650 million to sponsor the top 35 teams in NASCAR’s premier circuit (by way of comparison, North America’s most popular professional sports entity, the National Football League, commands in total only \$485 million in sponsorship revenues per season; Gage, 2006). Sprint, the title sponsor of the championship cup as of 2008, alone remunerated \$700 million in 2003 for 10 years’ worth of sponsorship rights (a significant increase from the \$200 million for 5 years paid by the previous sponsor; Elliott, 2004).

Additionally, NASCAR fans extend their consumerism beyond the ticket booths and into the merchandising trailers in greater numbers than any other sport. According to industry analysts, NASCAR fans are 3 times more likely to purchase driver- or team-related merchandise than are fans of all other major North American sports (Tuggle, 2008). The gross revenue of NASCAR-related merchandise surpassed \$2 billion in 2004, an increase of 250% from a decade earlier (“With Jr. Leaving,” 2007). By late 2004, marketing firms Landor Associates and Penn, Schoen, and Berland projected NASCAR to be the second most important brand in the U.S. marketplace, trumping Apple, Wal-Mart, and Google (McCarthy, 2004). In short, in the past few years, the stock car racing business has been good—real good.

To maintain the exponential rate of growth NASCAR has realized during the age of Friedman-inspired neoliberalism, the organization and its officials have been forced to find new ways to enhance existing commodity streams and develop new forms of capital accumulation. Beyond the predictable modes of sport-based accumulation (e.g., raising ticket prices, increasing advertising and sponsorship saturation, continued

expansion of venue spaces, etc.), and to further realize their profit maximization strategy, NASCAR executives have begun to diversify their commodity wares and experiences beyond their traditional cultural and geographic boundaries (e.g., through the inclusion of celebrity-drivers, such as Dale Earnhardt Jr., in music videos, on TV shows such as *Cribs*, and in cameo roles on prime-time network fare; through production of its own TV broadcasts, such as *NASCAR in Primetime* and *NASCAR Now*; and through an increase in multiplatform exposure into satellite radio, the cable network Speed Channel, and various Internet sites). And under the direction of Bill France's son, Brian France, the "new-look" NASCAR has sought to expand its consumer markets both in the United States and abroad by opening new tracks, creating new events (e.g., Mexico City and Montreal), expanding international media coverage, and incorporating international celebrity-drivers (e.g., Franchitti, Montoya, etc.) into the stock car-icon universe.

NASCAR as Producer of Neoliberalism

The reciprocity between the political sphere and NASCAR's expansionist phase came into sharp relief during the run-up to the 2004 presidential election. As the Republican Party wrestled to regain its recently traditional red state voting bloc, President Bush and his high-profile cabinet members became public fixtures at NASCAR's weekly racing series: Administration stalwarts, such as Rumsfeld and Cheney, were deployed to races nationwide to create an identity for their political platform (often combined with military-themed extracurricular activities, including the U.S. Army's \$16 million sponsorship of the "Army of One" car in 2003). Offering preface declarations of Christian fundamentalism (the abolition of affirmative action, increased funding for homeland security, "support" for the troops, and a recentering of middle-class American "family values" [read: antigay, antichoice, anti-immigrant policies]), the Grand Old Party (GOP) effectively seized NASCAR Nation (and its citizenry) as a central territory in red state America. This successful synergy of the sport's cultural politics and political ideology led one analyst to proclaim, "Right now, Republicans rule. They control the White House, both houses of Congress and most state governments. The basis of the Republicans' ruling majority? NASCAR Nation" (Schneider, 2004).

No other sport and its fans experienced this type of overt political flirtation in 2004. In fact, no other spectator group has been courted with this much attention since governors of the South took to the midfield stumps of college football games in the era of desegregation. A cursory review of NASCAR events in the past decade, however, reveals a much broader politicization of NASCAR's imagined community. "NASCAR country," as is often recited during race weekends, "is the home track of the Republican Party" (field notes). "No other professional sport," wrote Mike Fish (2001),

brags of having *its* guy in the White House. And no other sport—from the offspring of late NASCAR founder Bill France Sr. to the big-name drivers to the wealthy track and team owners—comes down so staunchly on the less-government-is-better Republican side of the aisle. (p. 1)

As Fish further reported, nearly 90% of the money given to political campaigns by individuals affiliated with NASCAR has gone to the Republican Party. To wit: No other national political regime heretofore has prospered more from the cultural politics of sport than the Republican Party of George W. Bush through its relationship with NASCAR, and no other professional sport league has labored to partner itself with the political politics of a particular administration to the extent of the France family.

NASCAR is so transparent in its support of the Bush Republican regime that in 2004, it hosted a fund-raising luncheon at the Republican National Convention. The "Race to Victory"-themed gala featured prominent team owners and drivers pledging their unwavering support for President Bush's reelection bid. That support came not only in the form of maximal dollar donations but in public endorsements from NASCAR icons: "I was real excited to do it, I look at it as common sense," declared former driver Rusty Wallace:

The President came in with all the right things on his mind. He's a tough guy. I believe him. It's pulling for what you know is right and using some common sense about it. I know what I'm pulling for is the right thing to pull for. (as cited in Grant, 2004, p. 1)

Popular driver Bill Elliott was more emphatic in his use of a neoliberal lexicon: "The NASCAR market is a good market. The President has done a good job given the circumstances of what he's been through and in my mind his report card's been excellent" (as cited in Grant, 2004, p. 1).

A closer look at the relationship between Bush and NASCAR suggests that it is more than a product of political zeal or conservative fervor. On February 15, 2004, George W. Bush made the 19th visit of his presidency to the state of Florida, site of the contested 2000 election returns. This visit would be like no other, however, as Bush was scheduled to headline the Daytona 500 NASCAR race, generally accepted as the most important and prestigious race of the stock car racing season. Like virtually all of his previous presidential appearances, this one was scripted to timeless perfection. Bush arrived on the scene in grand fashion, his motorcade driving once around the 2.5-mile racetrack and creeping slowly past the main grandstand to cheering, clapping, and flag waving from the majority of the 180,000 fans in attendance. Wearing a black Daytona 500 leather jacket covered with NASCAR insignia, Bush inspected cars and posed for pictures with various drivers. Country singer Lee Greenwood entertained fans with his well-known rendition of "God Bless the USA." Adding military flavor to the spectacle, two F-15s streaked by overhead, followed by another flyover from a B-2 stealth bomber flanked by fighter jet escorts. Air Force One, stationed at nearby Daytona Beach International Airport, was clearly visible to fans in the grandstands (Russell, 2004; Allen & Clark, 2004).

Addressing the crowd prior to the start of the race, Bush praised the sport and thanked the drivers and fans for their lavish support of the military, tacitly articulating the sport and its perceived patriotic undertones with his own religious-inflected political agenda. He stated in part,

Laura [Bush] and I are honored to be here for this fantastic spectacle. We ask God's blessings on the drivers, NASCAR fans, and on our great nation. Now it is my honor to start this race. Gentlemen, start you engines. (as cited in Allen & Clark, 2004, p. A1)

Then, during a televised interview later in the day, Bush reinforced this frame by stating,

One of the things about NASCAR and NASCAR fans is they support our military. We've got a lot of really good young men and women who are sacrificing for our country. . . I'm the Commander-in-Chief of a great group of people, and to know that citizens who support NASCAR support them makes me feel good. (as cited in Sanger, 2004, p. A17)

Fans in attendance were quick to voice support for Bush. Consider the following comments overheard at Daytona:

He's like me. His swagger, his confidence—I can relate to his thinking. (Allen & Clarke, 2004, p. A1)

One of the best presidents we had. He wasn't handed his career on a silver platter. And just compare him to past presidents, like Clinton . . . That's embarrassing. (Russell, 2004, p. 1)

I'd still vote for him even if he didn't back NASCAR. He freed a lot of people in Iraq from what they were under. It's just a shame we didn't finish it off 10 years ago. (Russell, 2004, p. 1)

These quotes are instructive, for they reveal the tripartite articulation of conservative personal beliefs, military/blue-collar background, and the masculinized iconicity of George W. Bush operative within NASCAR's popularly imagined fan base. In fact, no other demographic received as much attention in the 2004 presidential election cycle as this grouping, or what Washington pollsters, cable news pundits, and others took to calling the "NASCAR dad" constituency. Although numerous definitions abounded, the term was generally deployed as cultural shorthand to reference White middle-class family men with blue-collar jobs located in the South or bordering states (MacGregor, 2005). Although not viewed as overtly political (although they leaned Republican), this "branded media paternal" faction was considered intensely patriotic and tended to display very "traditional" (read: normative) values (Vavrus, 2007). In the yearlong run-up to the 2004 election, this group was likely to have been hurt by the economy, was likely to have witnessed manufacturing jobs outsourced to India or China, and may have had a family member serving in the military. The NASCAR dad, the narrative went, attended church, loved to hunt or fish, and considered himself to be part of the cultural mainstream (*ibid.*).

This is an important discursive characterization, for the sport-polity reciprocity between America's political elites and executives within the NASCAR organization has been effective at valorizing a Bush-era socioeconomic aesthetic. Much like other forms of politicized mass culture, the discursive stylings of these stock car intermediaries further normalizes a prevailing neoliberal logic in NASCAR Nation. And as both critics and pundits agree, NASCAR's Southern regional history and aesthetic; hypermasculine, heteronormative, almost exclusively White fan base; and celebrity-driver lexicon—situated in the rhetorical mores of a seemingly harmless (White) Southern “heritage culture”—position stock car racing as a sporting extension of what Jim Wright (2002) refers to as “traditional American virtues” (p. 162), or what Kyle Kusz (2007) more critically identifies as conservatives’ “interest in protecting White male privilege and cultural normativity” (p. 82).

This war of position led (and has continued to lead) a horde of Republican politicians to the racetrack on Sundays. Adhering to the spectacular methods employed by their commander in chief, senators, representatives, governors, and local politicians have canvassed NASCAR Nation and integrated the stock car spectacular as a significant part of their campaign strategies.¹ To give but one example, prior to unveiling the racist subnarrative of his agenda in 2006, George Allen (R-VA) had all but secured his reelection to the U.S. Senate by routinely brandishing the microphone at races in his home state and emphatically declaring that NASCAR fans were “his people.” As an encounter at a late-summer race illustrates,

In the opening moments of today's race, a local minister evoked the “Lord's prayer,” through which he called on “Jesus our savior” to “protect our American way of life.” Then, a “special guest,” Sen. Allen, took the microphone. He applauded the sea of “patriots” present at the event, and called on those same NASCAR fans to hold fast to their “patriotism” by “supporting our troops, staying together, and fighting the war of [*sic*] terrorism.” Allen then turned to his own political future, and rallied “his people” by saying “If the folks voting in the election were the folks at this race, I'd be in great shape!” (field notes)

Under this discursive convergence of God, GOP, and “git-r-done” populism, these Southern sporting places have been transformed into festivals of hyper-White, neoconservative patriarchy: *Being* in these spaces has been co-opted to mean *identifying* with the tropes of a hyper-Christian neoconservatism that organizes and manages the bodies and minds operating therein. According to the recurring themes of the “gospel according to NASCAR” (Newman & Giardina, 2009), NASCAR fans—conceived of as American citizens—are (positioned) to be “*thankful* for the leadership of President Bush” and for the “freedoms we have thanks to homeland security” and are to pray for the continued luxuries afforded by this “American way of life” without ever questioning it (field notes). Under the reign of this “American theocracy,” as Kevin Phillips (2006) contends, blatant business cronyism now adjudicates both state interests and the moral referents from which the polity is constructed.

Correlatively, these new articulations of spectator identity politics are often framed around a campaign of fear and/or resentment situated over and against easily consumed political narratives “that makes clear whom to love and whom to love, who is weak and who is strong” (Bageant, 2006, p. 68). Arlie Hochschild (2003) chronicled one particular iteration of this discourse that emerged during the Bush presidential campaign, writing, “Instead of appealing, as [President Richard] Nixon did, to anger at economic decline, Bush is appealing to fear of economic *displacement*. . . offering the NASCAR Dads a set of villains to blame, and a hero to thank,” in effect “strip-mining the emotional responses of blue-collar men to the problems his own administration is so intent on causing” (p. 1). Thus, for the dominant White male faction of NASCAR Nation, the patriarchal hegemony of evangelical Christianity and the mythologized return to “traditional American values” offers salvation from the material and ideological longings of a post-1960s public sphere that has given increased (albeit strikingly inadequate) credence to the feminist movement, antiwar protests (particularly those following the loss in Vietnam), the early styling of queer activism, and the civil rights movement. As one outspoken race fan we interviewed stated,

God made men for sport and made women to support. I mean, it's right there in the Bible. If he wanted women to be in charge, he would have said so. . . but that's not the way it is; there's reason all the folks you see here ain't on welfare, ain't beggin' for money, and there ain't no hookers running around. Because we all believe in what's right. (personal interview, October 22, 2006)

Although rife with a number of problematic assumptions, this quote, and a similar hegemonic accord within NASCAR spaces, echoes the recuperative calling of many within America's “Moral Majority.” Here, then, do we find ourselves mired in a space for collective consumer experience that has been formed by the collision of *active* consumerism, an ether of political ideology, and the adornment of corporatized badges of citizenship—all of which are validated through the communal exaltation of a political economy that goes against most fans' own self-interests.

Consider: Recent NASCAR marketing research suggests that most stock car racing fans live in households with less than \$40,000 annual income, with the most over-represented household earning category being that of the \$20,000-to-\$39,000 range (“Loyal and Ready,” 2000). And although a majority of NASCAR fans draw employ from the expanding universe of low-paying, service-sector jobs and increase their substantial consumer debt on holidays spent in NASCAR Nation, they in the same gesture applaud corporate fixtures, such as Exxon, Wal-Mart, and McDonalds, and politicians, such as George W. Bush, through participation in the NASCAR spectacular. Thus does the illusion of social freedom as performed in and through the body transmute the oppressed into the oppressor, as the unifying nature of the (seemingly) consumer-driven spectacle blurs consumer and consumed: The schisms of capital freely intercept the human condition by way of the symbolic and material violences of neoliberalism.

In these weekly spectacles of capital, allegiances to driver, team, sport, and the intense corporate presence “needed to make it all happen” are blurred—infused with,

and within, the hegemonic structures working against the individuals they always already interpellate. As such, the commercial precepts of NASCAR present a twisted contradiction whereby the consumer-driven thrusts of NASCAR's neoliberal super-structure separate the individual as spectator from individual as laborer, all the while availing their complicity in the *Gesellschaft* of the economic base (see Giulianotti, 2005). In return, many NASCAR fans laud the same commercial marketplaces that mesmerize their consumer sensibilities while simultaneously decimating their everyday lives under the dominion of an expansive neoliberal empire.

In sum, sporting, corporate, and political intermediaries have successfully structured both discourse and experience around what Raymond Williams (1981) might refer to as a *preferred* knowledge of the corporation as *natural* extension of an all-American, values-based political regime while discounting the relationship between an oppressive neoliberal economic structure and the disproportionate capital accumulation afforded these capitalist-politicos at the expense of worker-spectators' social and human capital (cf. Denzin & Giardina, 2007; Giroux, 2004; Harvey, 2005a).

Conclusion

It can be argued that at best, the France family has cloaked a sport and its spaces of fandom with what Jean Baudrillard (1983) might refer to as an "ideological blanket" of neoliberalism. At worst, NASCAR officials have attempted to transform sporting spaces into politically meaningful, economically mandated spaces of consumption under which the league, and its corporate and political partners, can best do business. NASCAR officials are selling the spectacle of myths: the myth of infinite growth under neoliberalism, the myth of an endless "American century," the myth of a commitment to [Southern] cultural heritage, the myth of "NASCAR dad" social conservatism, the myth of Mitt Romney's "conservative" economy, and the myth of the free market's individual freedoms. Much like their Roman predecessors, the rulers of this (NASCAR) empire use the sport spectacle to subject their fans to the "mystifications" (Freire, 1970/2006) of a faltering neoliberal empire.

In this way, the racetrack is more than a sporting metaphor for the rotational counterbalance of welfare state economics and toward laissez-faire market economies (and perhaps back again)—a back-and-forth history of economic stimulation and perpetual stagnation counterbalanced by state spending and private enterprise. As the welfare state had stretched itself too far in the direction of empowered labor in the 1970s, neoliberalism offered a detour to ease the tension and reverse the economic course. Thus the Thatcher-Reagan turn toward Friedman's neoliberalism brought about a transient (albeit unsustainable) global stimulation to the stagnating marketplace. And NASCAR, more than any other American sporting enterprise, has been able to grow, and help facilitate growth, under the throws of this neoliberal economy. However, as Vladimir Lenin (1916/1969) predicted would be the case nearly a century ago, the recent accelerated economic and cultural globalization of capitalist enterprises, such as NASCAR—those that prosper and serve the auspices of neoliberal empire—have reached the "highest stage" of expansionist capital.

Just as oil has served as the lubricant of late industrialism, the sport most dependent on petrol empires (both on the track and in the Oval Office) has served as the *cultural* lubricant of Romanesque celebration of free-market politics. And as neoliberalism rounds a proverbial “turn four” (i.e., a new era of global conquest at the behest of *Syriana*-style oil speculators and a growing military-industrial-media complex, a backlash among American voters toward the Republican policy-making regimes, etc.), a return to embedded forms of economic growth might also mean the demise of cultural commodities that have been so closely aligned with the political and cultural politics of neoliberalism. NASCAR, as both a product and producer of such a hegemonic order, will inevitably attempt to continue expanding its empire—searching both local and global markets for new forms of surplus value—but it will be doing so under the auspices of a faltering (if not failing) regime of unfettered accumulation. As ticket prices rise, media saturation of NASCAR celebrities continues, and sporting entrepreneurs strive to maintain the delicate balance of (mass-) culturalized “Southern tradition” twinned to the market-driven aspirations for “goin’ global,” NASCAR Nation is starting to crumble beneath its proverbial superspeedways: The consuming masses can no longer afford neoliberalism’s most heralded sporting spectacle.

And although there is no guarantee of any sort of counterrevolution, the ancillary signs are there. For an entity that has hitched its soul to neoliberal politics, walking hand-in-hand down the aisle with them may prove out to be a risky business plan: NASCAR’s attendance numbers and television ratings have paralleled the falling approval ratings of Bush and his administration (while also coming under heavy public scrutiny for a racist business culture [see “Former NASCAR Official Files,” 2008] and wasteful environmental practices) at the same moment the political left has featured a reenergized and youth-oriented center-left coalition. The sport’s failing business plan is now the open talk of sports journalists and pundits (cf. Massaro, 2008), and failing teams have even looked to the political left for sponsorship dollars to help balance their budgets. In the last analysis, although NASCAR’s Southern, working-class, White resonance still echoes through the Daytona and Talladega infields, the seeds of resistance through nonconsumption, and through the engines of a transformational consumer shift (e.g., green consumerism, etc.), are warming up.

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1. Democratic politicians of the centrist mold (read: neoliberals with a moderate social agenda) have found but only minor successes in NASCAR Nation, as Senator Bob Graham (D-FL), Representative Heath Shuler (D-NC), and Governor Mark Warner (D-VA) each ingratiated themselves to the National Association for Stock Car Auto Racing faithful in the lead-up to their

respective elections. However, as the 2008 elections approached, pundits predicted that the likes of Hillary Clinton “would be booed, no doubt about it” (Clarke & Steinberg, 2004, p. A01).

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