Thanksgiving: The relationship between sport, society, and oppression.

Today, the forth Thursday in November, millions of North Americans are celebrating Thanksgiving. Like many others around the world my thoughts and actions today are shaped by two spheres of American life. First, and as fans pour into stadiums in Dallas, Detroit, and Washington, I will be meeting with friends and watching a lot of American Football. Thanksgiving and American Football are inextricably entangled. Much like Association Football and Boxing Day (December 26th) in the UK, playing football on Thanksgiving is a tradition which extends back into the 19th century and the National Football League (NFL) has hosted games on Thanksgiving every year since the league was founded in 1920. Even as someone who supports the side that, last year, suffered 'the worst defeat in the history of sport' I find myself drawn back to this tradition.

Second, I will be thinking about colonialism. As Ashley Niccole McCray and Lawrence Ware say in their article for CounterPunch:

> 'Let's be honest. On the last [sic] Thursday of November, every year, we celebrate the beginning of an European invasion that ends with the death or relocation of millions of native people.'

McCray and Ware's piece is just one of many arguing that Thanksgiving needs to be radically rethought and decolonized. An acknowledgement that Thanksgiving is bound up with colonialism and genocide is not enough; the matter needs to be front and centre for, as Howard Zinn notes in his famed book *A People's History of the United States*:

> 'To emphasize the heroism of Columbus and his successors as navigators and discoverers, and to deemphasize their genocide, is not a technical necessity but an ideological choice. It serves – unwittingly – to justify what is done.' (Zinn 1980: 9)

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Under normal circumstances, colonialism and football would occupy different spaces in my mind. This year, however, things are quite different. In part, this is due to the fact that the Washington *Redskins* – the most brazen of all racist American team names – are playing this Thanksgiving. This coming together of sport, racism, and colonialism is also apparent, however, because of ongoing protests against police brutality made mainly, although not exclusively, by African-American athletes playing in the NFL.

As Rembert Browne writes for Bleacher Report these protests over police brutality came to international attention in August 2016 when it was noticed that then San Francisco 49ers (and now unemployed) quarterback Colin Kaepernick was sitting through the national anthem. (Kaepernick subsequently starting kneeling following conversations with ex-NFL player and military veteran Nate Boyer who suggested that kneeling was more respectful than sitting in a military context.) Over a year later, Kaepernick's protest continues to generate front page news, not least because of numerous and notable provocations and incidents. First, Donald Trump's repeated pronouncements on the protests. Second, star Seattle player Michael Bennett's apparent arrest and mistreatment by the Las Vegas Police Department. Third, mind blowingly offensive statements from NFL owners. And forth, Kaepernick's ongoing lawsuit which claims that

owners of NFL teams have colluded to keep him out of the league. All this, of course, has occurred against ongoing acts of violence which were the cause of protests in the first place. For the first time in a long time, those of us who watch the NFL are being *forced* to consider matters of race at the exact same moment that we are watching the sport.

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The links in the text above provide a good summary of the particularities of the Kaepernick case. The purpose of this blog, however, is to ask a slightly broader question into which the current case clearly fits: what is the relationship between oppression and sport? It seems to me that there are three answers generally proffered in relation to this question.

The first is to suggest that we need to keep politics out of sport. Like church and state, politics and sport need to be kept apart for the good of us all. Recent polls (discussed in the above link) suggest that the majority of Americans feel this way. The problem, of course, is that this is impossible. As the recent Oscar winning documentary OJ: Made in America made clear, politics and sport are absolutely intertwined. How could it be otherwise when there is an Alternative Soccer World Cup for peoples whose nations are not recognised by Soccer's world governing body, FIFA?

The second option is to consider sport as a mirror of society or broader social patterns. Perhaps the fact that female tennis players and academics are paid less than their male peers should be understood as part of the same patriarchal culture? Examples of this argument are widespread and well-founded. In his biography of Muhammed Ali, for example, David Remnick argues that 'Ali may not have read W.E.B. Du Bois, but he was a living example of the "two-ness," the "double-consciousness," described in *The Souls of Black Folk*' (Remnick 1999: 278). The implication here is that Ali, his views, and his treatment can be understood with reference to pre-existing social theories which are not concerned with the particularities of sport.

The third (and final?) option is that sport somehow shapes or modifies oppressions and plays a constitutive role in society. Sport here does not reflect society but, as Jelani Cobb puts it, 'refracts' (that is, modifies) national anxieties. This view is well articulated by the historian, journalist, and socialist CLR James. In *Beyond a Boundary*, often claimed to be the greatest sports book ever written, James discusses liberal and socialist histories of Victorian England. James is aghast that these histories do not include mention of W.G. Grace, one of cricket's most enduring icons and important players:

> 'I can no longer accept the system of values which could not find in these books a place for W.G. Grace… Between those who, writing about social life in Britain, can leave him out, and myself, there yawns a gulf deep and wide.' (James 1963/2005: 208)

For James, understanding society necessitates an understanding of sport – not as an epiphenomenon but as a constitutive element.

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For me, understanding the relationship between sport, society, and oppression is a fascinating and important area of sociological inquiry; albeit an area I am not qualified to contribute to. Fortunately, here at Leeds there are a number of scholars whose work entails a detailed understanding of the relationship between sport and society. This Thanksgiving, at a time when

colonialism and sport are to the front of so many minds, I asked scholars in our school a question which speaks to this matter:

> "How should we understand the role of sport within society, with particular reference to various oppressions?"

In answering this question there is first is a contribution Sonja Erikainen. Sonja (@SonjaErikainen on twitter) is a research fellow at The University of Edinburgh but, until recently, was a research student in the school. Sonja's PhD involved a genealogy of the female category in Olympic sport. The current piece engages extensively with Colin Kaepernick and the 'take a knee' movement.

Second, work from Hizer Mir. Hizer (@hizzy20) is a PhD researcher in the school. Hizer's work concerns matters of Islam, secularization, and understandings of the public sphere and last year Hizer discussed some of these issues in relation to 'Steph Curry's game winning shot' making his work particularly applicable to the current context.

Third, Phoenix Nacto. Phoenix is a PhD student in the school whose work engages with feminism, race, and popular culture. In this piece, Pheonix addresses another facet of the debate surrounding race and the NFL: the decision to invite Justin Timberlake to the superbowl in 2017 while ignoring Janet Jackson.

Fourth, a piece from Karen Throsby. Karen (@thelongswim) is Associate Professor within the school and has written extensively on gender and long distance swimming. It is from within this sporting arena that Karen situates her piece here.

Finally, the thoughts of Rodanthi Tzanelli, Associate Professor of Cultural Psychology. Rodanthi (@RodanthiPu) has written extensively on media, tourism, and globalization and this includes work examining recent Olympic ceremonies. The current piece, which Rodanthi has entitled 'football mobilities' examines oppression with a global focus very much in mind.

The answers below, ordered alphabetically, are thoughtful and diverse and I hope they make us all think about this matter a little more closely.

Greg Hollin.

Sonja Erikainen

After Colin Kaepernick 'took the knee' during the American national anthem at the 2016 NFL season to protest racial stereotyping and injustice in the US legal system, many athletes have embraced kneeling down during the American anthem as an anti-racist practice allied with the Black Lives Matter social movement. In response to this activism, US president Donald Trump used his notable social media presence to condemn such kneeling, declaring that "Courageous Patriots have fought and died for our great American Flag --- we MUST honor and respect it!"

Sport is often viewed as an apolitical sphere or, indeed, as a level playing field disconnected from broader social, cultural, and economic conditions, as success and excellence in sport should be determined based on performance alone. Yet, institutionalised competitive sport in America and elsewhere is a space where national and social identities, inequalities, and forms of oppression are highlighted, reproduced, and resisted. When 'taking the knee', athletes like Kaepernick contribute to a long history of political activism in sport that targets broader inequalities beyond the sporting world.

Benedict Anderson famously argued that nations, like other social communities, are 'imagined' in the sense that national identities, including 'American', are collectively created or constructed through a process of active imagination. National identities require a vision of a national community with shared attributes, values, and ideals that unite all of 'us' – the Americans. The idea of 'national sport' is particularly useful for creating a sense of shared national identity, as it allows 'us' to rally around 'our' national teams and 'our' sporting heroes and heroines. Indeed, athletes often come to symbolise or represent the national collective, and their bodies stand as symbols of the 'body politic'. Their victories are celebrated as a national accomplishment while their losses are suffered collectively.

Yet, when it comes to athletes who embody identities that occupy a marginalised position in the cultural and political life of the nation – such as African American identities and bodies in the hegemonic white culture of the US – their ability to represent the nation ('correctly') is not clear cut. The bodies and identities of African American athletes evoke not only contemporary debates about the status of 'race' in American society, but they also evoke related colonial legacies that have long portrayed black subjects as uncivilised, uncultured, deviant, child-like at best and animal-like at worst. Exemplary is the imaginary of the 'natural black athlete', which represents black athletes' sporting achievements as a side-product of natural (animal-like) vigour of black bodies, contrasted against white athletes' sporting accomplishments represented to be a cultural attainment achieved through refined skill and technique. Viewed through this lens, the success of black athletes in the sphere of sports appears as the result of their perceived natural aptitude for hard bodily labour (recalling justifications for slavery), contrasted against white subjects' perceived aptitude for cultural and intellectual endeavours.

African American anti-racist sport activism has always taken place in the context of these broader socio-historical, cultural and political circumstances through which black subjects have been systematically denied access to American cultural life and political power. Athletic participation and excellence has served as one of the few avenues through which cultural legitimacy and recognition has historically been awarded to black communities under conditions of white supremacy. From riots to protests and boycotts to dashikis, large afros, and raised fists as a challenge to dominant white norms and white supremacy, African American athletes have used a myriad of strategies to resist, challenge, and change oppressive social structures. Such activism has overwhelmingly been condemned and demonised as anti-American by defenders of the 'American dream' because it poses a threat to the national ethos of American society, imagined as a liberal sphere where prosperity and success are attainable for all, if one only works hard.

The sphere of sport, and the identities and bodies of athletes who occupy this sphere at the highest competitive level, have great symbolic power when it comes to reproducing as well as

resisting the nation's image of itself. When Trump condemned 'taking the knee' as disrespectful and dishonourable anti-patriotism, he stood as a champion of American nationalist imaginaries within which national unity is created by suppressing alternative visions of cultural and political life. Kaepernick and others' act of kneeling is dangerous to this vision of unity, because it poses a symbolic challenge and a threat to American racial hierarchies within which black lives have not, and are not taken to matter as white lives do.

Hizer Mir

The role of sport in society has undergone a transformation in the past two years or so, ever since Colin Kaepernick decided to take a knee during his country's national anthem. Perhaps, however, this story would be slightly misleading as Mahmoud Abdul Rauf protested during the American national anthem well before Kaepernick took a knee. Who did what first does not concern us however. What does concern us is what both events show. What both instances show us is that sport can go far beyond being the "bread and circuses" of modern society. Perhaps what marks Kaepernick's experience off from Abdul Rauf's is the election of Donald Trump. The election of Donald Trump has led to the politicisation of sport on an hitherto unprecedented scale. The list of incidences are endless: Trump's SoB comment, the withdrawing of an invite to the Golden State Warriors, the far right boycotting of the NFL and embracing of the NHL and so on.

So what does this mean for the role of sport in today's society? Whilst sport has not become as politicised in the UK as in the US (yet) we can draw some general points from occurrences in the US.

The first, and most important, role sports play is that of a mirror to society. It reflects who we are and if we don't like it then something must change. We can either change ourselves or we can look away. Perhaps a comparison can be made between a disfigured person looking in the mirror and turning away and the far right turning from the NFL to the NHL.

The second role is new to sports. It is as a gateway to the political. The political has infiltrated sports thus leading to a politicisation of sports. This can be seen quite clearly in the sports talk shows in the US (especially First Take and Undisputed). This role is perhaps the most controversial as it has led to a backlash in which people claim politics should be kept out of sport. This should be seen as a cry to place sport within the category of a distraction from the "real" world. This role can be seen more in the US than the UK at the present time.

The third role is that of a mediator between the political class and a (significantly large) portion of the electorate. This role comes as a direct result of the second. When Kaepernick took a knee he was doing so on the basis of thoughts and actions of people far less famous and far less able to capture the spotlight. Thus Kaepernick, and now others, have become a vehicle through which the demands of the often overlooked can be voiced on a national stage. The implications of this are grave. The implication of this is the failure of the current political order to adequately represent everyone. Thus, for some, sports more adequately represents them than do their politicians.

Pheonix Nacto

On October 23, 2017 Justin Timberlake (with the assistance of his friend and entertainer Jimmy Fallon) announced that he will be performing at the upcoming Super Bowl Halftime show. One question began to circulate social media and many conversations surrounding the upcoming game: what about Janet Jackson?

February 1st 2004, the Super Bowl XXXVIII Halftime show would change lives and the internet drastically. Janet and Justin put on a show that was both entertaining and memorable but would become infamous for all the wrong reasons. Somewhere amid the performance Justin accidently revealed Janet's breast and the *wardrobe malfunction* (a phrase which was introduced to the pop-culture vernacular because of what happened) would not only be recorded, but replayed, and reviewed on a mass scale due to TiVo, which changed the way people watching tv at home. It would also be the reason that YouTube was created. Jawed Karim (one the 3 founders) has stated in many interviews that his idea for what became YouTube sprang from two very different events in 2004: Janet Jackson's "wardrobe malfunction," during a Super Bowl show, and the Asian tsunami.

The broadcasted incident garnered CBS a fine from the FCC and backlash for Justin. More importantly, the Grammy revoked privileges for Janet that year, as well as a series of events that some would call a blackballing within the entertainment industry. *Nipplegate* became the coin phrase for situation because everyone wanted to know, "whose fault was it really?"

Janet Jackson is a multiplatinum selling artist. She is an icon. She is a part of the Jackson family legacy. She is a black body performing in front of the white dominated male world.

When thinking about bodies, materiality comes to mind, but it is not that simple. The body is subjected to perception. The body is raced, gendered, and classed. This intersection and the body's intersectional existance is why one body appears as more important than another. For instance, the ways black women's bodies are viewed as spectacles in the public is rooted in the intersections of power, privilege, and oppression. Black bodies suffer from both invisibility and hypervisibility and it was ever so present during the unpacking of the halftime show.

Janet's body was replayed and dissected on both live TV and in private homes, just as the body of Sara Baartman, a South African woman who lived in the 1800s, was in public arenas and private hospital rooms. There is no doubt that Janet has agency over her body, but there is much to be said about the blame that was placed on her at the time, and how it was claimed that the "accident" was a stunt that she created to get attention. Her music, her platform, and her image changed. Black female bodies have always been at the pleasure of the public and that mean they can be policed and controlled. As with women who have been sexually assaulted there tends to be a spotlight on what she was wearing, what did she do to bring the unwanted attention, how could she have avoided the situation.

The very idea about invisibility and hypervisibility is what made Colin Kaepernick take a knee. He highlighted the injustices of black bodies regarding police brutality, in return his own black body has become a target for multiple conversations surrounding sports and politics. The Super Bowl Halftime show might seem trivial in comparison, but it is relevant nonetheless. Perhaps amid Justin's performance, Janet may show up and that could be a small means of reparation for

what happened back in 2004. However, it will not be a conclusion to the necessary, although often silenced, ongoing conversation about whose body matters.

Karen Throsby

Sport, or at least some sports, enjoy extraordinarily privileged status. At the level of elite sport, national pride, vast sums of money, the passionate belonging of team loyalties and the spectacular feats of extraordinary bodies create a privileged domain which can dictate TV schedules, mark holidays and capture national headlines. At the amateur level, sport provides a means of demonstrating bodily discipline through practices normatively coded as healthy and is a source of pleasure to many; the sporting subject is the good citizen *par excellence*.

But the public endorsement of sport and its subjects is also premised on exclusions that should give us pause for thought. Sport remains determinedly demarcated on gendered lines, with men and women rarely allowed to compete directly with each other. The boundaries between men and women's sport are closely regulated and policed, with women at risk of exclusion if their hormonal or genetic profiles exceed arbitrarily defined boundaries of acceptable femininity. And even when women can compete, they still experience systematic exclusion and discrimination: women's sport receives only a tiny fraction of the media coverage that men enjoy, women are frequently limited to fewer and shorter events and they receive lower rewards in prize money and sponsorship. Other exclusions persist alongside the rigorous and hierarchical gendering of sport: sporting participation is constrained for many by lack of access to facilities, prohibitive costs, the absence of childcare or the failure to accommodate the needs of disabled athletes. And for some, participation in sport is simply too shaming a possibility to face; it is hard to be a fat body, for example, in an environment so strongly oriented towards the elimination of fatness, and where access to size-appropriate equipment and clothing may not be available. Race also serves as an axis along which discrimination persists, with ideas of sporting 'fit' closing off opportunities and limiting choice. For example, the whiteness of my own sport of swimming remains mired in notions of the incompatibility of blackness and swimming, and in particular, the myth of higher bone density as a precluding factor; it is a prejudice of significant consequence when we realise that young black boys are far more likely to drown than their white peers.

Sport, then, can be understood both as a mirror of the social and a means of its reproduction. Attempts to figure sport as outside of politics (for example, in the Olympic movement, or in recent debates about 'taking a knee') obscure its status as an intensely political site, not only in national and international settings, but also at the level of individual bodies as they variously challenge and sustain what counts as the 'good body' in contemporary society.

Rodanthi Tzanelli

Football mobilities: Between the Scylla of ethno-racism and the Charybdis of neoliberalism

Football rituals are embedded in contemporary *Gesellshaft* structures (a-la Tőnnies), constantly updating the mechanisms with which societies change from within and without. Football is the maiden of globalisation: it instigates multiple mobilities of ideas, humans, emotions and technologies. This becomes even more evident when we look closer at the ways individuals and whole imagined communities use the sport to negotiate their place in globalised ethno-racist contexts.

It was football the ensured black migrants' upward social mobility in postcolonial contexts such as those of Brazil, where originally black workers were seen as less human than white populations (hence not suitable to become professional players). Notably, their professional entry into the sport was equated with an entry into civilised Western modernity, thus bringing together questions of global class and racial hierarchies. Today famous players such as Pelé embody the Brazilian nation's participation in Western and European mobilities, now supported by global corporations and international organisations. At the same time, such football 'tokens' of civility fuel nationalist clashes to promote individual nations in regional contexts – take for example how conflicts between Argentinian and Brazilian fans during matches are filtered through the worship of national players (Pelé vs. Maradona – Carmo, July 7, 2014).

If historically football is an aspect of soft colonialism (the English invented and imported the sport in the 'developed' world), its contemporary role in world societies as an arbitrator of (in)justice is far more ambivalent. As a technology of the body, it 'flags' the player's (and his nation's) ethno-phenotypical fixities, but as a technology represented, interpellated or simply mediated by other technologies (TV and internet industries), it places players and their nations on a global neoliberal map. And there is more: in more recent decades, players such as Pelé, used the power of neoliberal mobilities to also turn themselves into independent brands, thus allegedly escaping harmful ethno-racial stereotyping (as cosmopolitan professionals).[1] It seems that at least for black football players, the sport offers an either-or interpellation of agency: ethno-racialized or neoliberal.

Such interpellations have serious consequences in ritualist terms, both liberating and fettering. Take for example the loud disapproval of Colin Kaepernick's 'taking to one knee' during the national anthem when he played for the San Francisco 49ers, in protest of police brutality against black Americans. Likewise, at the day's first football game at Wembley Stadium this year, twenty-seven players from the Jacksonville Jaguars and the Baltimore Ravens dropped down and took a knee on the field to the sounds of the anthem (St. Félix, September 24, 2017). This ritualised performance, which both negates and worships the 'nation', transfixes audiences and fans: as a

[1] 'Pelé is known in print-capitalist circuits through his best-selling autobiographies, his starring in several successful documentary and semi-documentary films, and his composition of numerous musical pieces, including the soundtrack for the film *Pelé* (1977). In 2009 he cooperated with Ubisoft on arcade football game *Academy of Champions*: *Soccer* for the Wii in which he voiced-over the coach (Scullion, 2 June 2009). His sign value in global industrial systems makes him both a national and a transnational good – a new cosmopolitan subject' (Tzanelli, 2013: 116).

transgressive act in front of the camera, it asserts the players' individualistic identity vis-à-vis that of a national collectivity. Note the tweet by Trump (ironically, a proponent of neoliberal risqué individualism) about the 'son of a bitch' N.F.L. players who 'disrespect' the 'Flag (or Country)' (ibid.) with their bizarre genuflection. This reaction missed the point: 'there did not appear to be any white players taking a knee' (Ingle, September 24, 2017). Hence, such defiance could also be read as a sign of deep respect to the 'nation', despite its historical and contemporary contributions to racial inequality – a need to both be a cosmopolitan individual and belong. It is as if, on and off the field, football's ritualist ambivalence bears the mark of black strangerhood (a-la Simmel): never accepted entirely as part of the imagined community, it allows the player to move across semantic fields as a stranger or citizen, who, during the process is often appropriated by global audio-visual markets and turned into a mobility token.

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