Athletic Activism

Global Perspectives on Social Transformation

Edited by
Jeffrey Montez de Oca
Stanley Thangaraj

Research in the Sociology of Sport
VOL 17

ATHLETIC ACTIVISM

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RESEARCH IN THE SOCIOLOGY OF SPORT VOLUME 17

ATHLETIC ACTIVISM: GLOBAL PERSPECTIVES ON SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

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INTRODUCTION

Jeffrey Montez de Oca and Stanley Thangaraj

Athletes across the United States and around the world engaged in high-profile protests against state violence following the 2014 police killing of Michael Brown, a young Black man, in Ferguson, Missouri. Soon after the policing killing of Michael Brown, the protests by the National Football League (NFL) quarterback Colin Kaepernick engendered a space for athletic activism at all levels of sport in the United States and around the world (Thangaraj, 2019). His refusal to stand during the US national anthem in protest of state violence against Black communities sparked various forms of support and contempt from across the sporting and social divide. His knee became an important venue that opened up conservations to talk about power, anti-Black racism, and the demand for rights. His knee was a counterdiscourse to what we traditionally hear and think about in sport (Trimbur, 2019). As his knee in support of Black Lives Matters and ending police brutality took place, we saw athletes protesting state and white vigilante violence in the United States that reverberated with renewed urgency around the world in the summer of 2020 following the police killing of Black civilian George Floyd by white officer Derek Chauvin.

This series of athletic protests, at the professional and amateur levels, have invigorated progressive politics around the world and drawn attention to ongoing authoritarianism, state violence, and vigilante violence. The growing cadre of athletes protesting has challenged and reconfigured the 1980s and 1990s model of the apolitical athlete maximizing their brand value (Bryant, 2018). Importantly, the protests have shown that athletic activism can not only impact global discourse about race relations, but it can also foster institutional changes, such as professional sports franchises dropping their use of Indigenous names and mascots, European football showing a commitment to tackling racism on and off the pitch, NASCAR banning displays of the Confederate Flag at their events, and professional leagues around the world promoting social justice language in their events. Athletic activism opens discursive and material space to reimagine histories, spaces, and stakes to belonging (Burdsey, 2016).

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While nothing personifies contemporary protesting athletes in the United States more than the kneeling image of Colin Kaepernick, recentering the image of a US-born, heterosexual, cisgendered, mixed-race Black man as *the* icon of athletic protest narrows our field of vision and the political potential of athletic activism.[1] This collection of essays does *not* strive to displace the centrality of US-born Black men's athletic activism, but instead to expand the center by broadening the scope of athletic activism. Similarly, this collection does not aim to center the West and Western writing about athletic activism. Nor does this collection aim to be the cannon, but rather a window or door into pushing forward new ways of conceptualizing athletic activism. We use the term "athletic activism" to understand how athletes, coaches and sports professionals, fans, artists, and sporting institutions use sports and athletics to engage in conscious, concerted, and sustained efforts to transform the world they inhabit (Goodwin & Jasper, 2014).

The chapters address activism as a practice and a commitment to a certain futurity through the realm of sport. The chapters in this book also expand the focus beyond North America to emphasize perspectives on athletic activism from around the world in both traditional and non-traditional athletic settings. Colonialism and imperialism have often confined essentialized bodies (Montez de Oca, 2013), especially those from the Global South who are portrayed as not full citizens as a result of the sports they play (Davis, 2013; España-Maram, 2006). Moreover, the chapters take both historical and contemporary approaches to look at grassroots youth sports, quotidian sites of amateur sport, and mega-sporting events, such as the Olympics and Paralympics. By expanding the center of athletic activism, this volume theorizes the transformative potential of sport and sporting participants.

WHY A BOOK ON ATHLETIC ACTIVISM?

Far too often people relegate sport to the margins of social life. It is often conceptualized as something whimsical and liminal (Thangaraj, 2015). As a result, sport is located in dominant discourse as a space between the more important aspects of social lives. It is the games that children play during recess in between important academic topics. It is the leisure practices that provide consumerist escape in the spaces between the serious business of work and domestic life. Of course, these statements are true and incomplete as scholars of sport have shown for decades.

Sport holds a key place in social life across the globe. Just look at the excitement over the Summer and Winter Olympics. Check out the enthusiasm for the Men's and Women's football/soccer World Cup. Sport bleeds into, sutures, and connects so much of social life. Stadium construction, whether in downtowns or suburbs, and development are central to urban planning that impact transportation, housing, and businesses. Policy decisions about the construction of sport, athletic, and fitness resources in city parks or open spaces within or outside of the city transform the urban landscape. The siting of public or private

gymnasiums impacts the distribution of health resources within a community. Building golf courses and ski resorts have tremendous ecological impacts. Constructing baseball fields, basketball courts, and skate parks in municipal parks impacts quality of life and policing decisions (Boessen & Hipp, 2018; Shepley, Sachs, Sadatsafavi, Fournier, & Peditto, 2019; Williams, Logan, Zuo, Liberman, & Guikema, 2020). People's fandom forms in relation to athletes or teams at the local or nation-state scales and is central to their identity formation (Carter, 2008). Physical education exists as a mandatory part of the curriculum in schools across the United States (Montez de Oca, 2013). The creation of sports academies, twenty-four-hour sport networks, news media, sporting goods chain stores and so forth has turned sport into big business. And the list can go on.

With the tremendous financial, emotional, and temporal investments that people make in sport, it is anything but marginal. Instead, it is at the center of contemporary social and economic life. Moreover, sport is highly mediated and creates massively popular spectacular events. The confluence of sport's popularity, its financial importance, and its political power means that athletes' action speak beyond the confines of the sporting pitch. Athletic activism addresses and reveals profound cleavages and contradictions embedded within the circuits of speaking out while pointing to the connections of activism with nation-states, global movements of capital, racial exclusion, and gender politics. Therefore, this collection of essays focuses on many of the less recognized ways in which sport fosters context for meaningful political action beyond what is typically covered in popular and academic texts. The collection opens a venue to athletic activism that is not monolithic, essentialized, and singular. It is a call against one-dimensional understandings of society and politics (Ferguson, 2018).

PROTEST DURING THE US NATIONAL ANTHEM

We want to begin to expand thinking about athletic activism by focusing on the moment that has drawn the most attention in recent years, athletes protesting during the US national anthem, but provide a deeper historiography that is not consumed into the nation's telling of sport and resistance. The dominant image of Black male athletes in the media constructs a lineage of protest from John Carlos and Tommie Smith at the 1968 Olympics in Mexico City to Kaepernick more recently. This lineage, or heritage, of Black male athletic protest challenges the idea of a gulf between Kaepernick and an activist Golden Age in the 1960s. The limitation of this lineage is what gets left out of the frame, especially the activism of Black women, athletes beyond the Global North, and nonelite athletes (Yearwood, 2021). A brief history of athletic protest involving the national anthem allows us to understand the profound impact of athletic activism and consider some of the less well-known stories in this history.

On the evening of March 8, 1973, eight African American cheerleaders from Brown University triggered a firestorm in Providence, Rhode Island, before a basketball game by refusing to stand during the national anthem. Throughout that season, these young women had refused to stand for the anthem and were

often joined by other Black students. Reaction to the cheerleaders' protest for racial justice anticipated many aspects of the debates we have seen in recent years. The primary response was to condemn the cheerleaders and refute their right to protest. The Providence City Council unanimously passed a resolution condemning the protest and called for an investigation that could lead to sanctions against the cheerleaders. Councilman Edward Xavier, cosponsor of the resolution, wanted to see if they received any public funds that could be sanctioned, "The Civic Center was built by Americans for Americans. If they are not going to act like Americans, we don't want them in there" (Boucher, 2017). The limiting and diametric construction of US citizenship in nationalist discourse leads to an American/un-American binary where anyone who challenges simple patriotism is branded un-American and outside of the nation. The un-American framing supports a denial of people's rights, as, "A Brown student wrote that the cheerleaders did not have the right to make individual protests because 'when they put on a uniform and are representing Brown University... they lose some of their individual freedom'..." ("Cheerleaders," 1973).

Montez de Oca calls the negative reaction to the cheerleaders "patriarchal patriotism" since it performs an authoritarian form of patriotism that demands unquestioning fealty to white male authority in the form of state institutions, especially the police and the military, and the symbols of those institutions (Chaplin & Montez de Oca, 2019; Montez de Oca & Suh, 2020). The obligation to respect and honor those institutions through acts of allegiance is especially strong for minoritized people who are expected to demonstrate fealty to, and thus reify, white male authority since their place within the nation is already marginalized and suspected. It is an ironic response since, according to Brown's Athletic Director, the cheerleaders had not broken any laws and had voluntarily created the cheer squad themselves, including their own uniforms ("Cheerleaders," 1973). Further, the patriarchal response abrogates their freedom of speech, which is a primary basis for love of nation.

As opposed to patriarchal patriots, Montez de Oca shows that constructive patriots strike a conciliatory, patriotic position through the claim that *protest is patriotic* (Chaplin & Montez de Oca, 2019; Montez de Oca & Suh, 2020), which allows them to shift focus away from the symbols and institutions of the racial state onto abstract concepts like social justice. It is the expansion of the landscape of patriotism that is not limited to just the institutions and arm of the state. For instance, one response in recent years to the charge that kneeling during the anthem is unpatriotic was that just as Rosa Parks was protesting racial injustice not the buses, NFL players are not protesting the flag, the anthem, or the military. The women at Brown in 1973 took a stronger position and made clear they were protesting the anthem and the flag as one of the women said, the anthem "does not express ideas we agree with" ("Cheerleaders," 1973). More recently, one of the cheerleaders clarified, "The phrase in the anthem that irked African Americans at the time was the 'land of the free', which many blacks believed to be untrue, given the legacy of slavery" (Boucher, 2017). In other words, they criticized the symbols of the nation since they symbolize imperialism and white supremacy, and not a color-blind, benign state.

The Brown cheerleaders' protest occurred within the context of larger political movements such as the counterculture movements, the anti-Vietnam War Movements, and especially the Black Power Movement that were peaking at the time. In this context, their protest did not seem exceptional to them since they saw other students around the country sitting during the anthem (Boucher, 2017). In fact, in the 1970–1971 season, cheerleaders at both Creighton University and Northern Illinois either sat or left the court during the anthem in protest of the Vietnam War (Kennedy, 2016). Although Creighton disbanded its cheer squad until 1973, Northern Illinois and Brown stopped playing the anthem before home games rather than punish the cheerleaders (Schmeltzer, 1971). The Brown Athletic Director stated, "It is, after all, possible to play basketball without hearing 'The Star Spangled Banner' first" ("Cheerleaders," 1973). Similarly, when Black University of New Mexico students at a basketball game against Brigham Young University in 1969 organized a multiracial anthem protest against the Latter-Day Saints (LDS) church's policy that barred African Americans from becoming priests, it angered and offended many whites. To which an op-ed responded, "It is perhaps easier for unsympathetic whites to rage over the imagined disrespect to our flag or our anthem, than face their own racism" (cited in Lisk, 2017). Richard A. Nurse, an associate director of admission, who is also an African American, wrote in the *Providence Journal* that, "I chose to stand for the national anthem at the civic center on the night the Brown cheerleaders chose to sit. Their choice was not against the law and did not abridge my choice... Sadly, the council's sorry decision has drained me of a little more faith in this country. I have decided that I will no longer stand for the national anthem in this city until the resolution is rescinded and real meaning is restored to the song" (Boucher, 2017). Nurse's statement is reminiscent of Jackie Robinson's refusal to stand for the anthem later in his life (Calcaterra, 2016) except Nurse was not an iconic athlete. More importantly, it demonstrates how ongoing realities of racial oppression create barriers to the ways and opportunities communities of color could demonstrate their love for the nation, which is a racial state (Goldberg, 2008).

Whether discontinuing to play the national anthem or disbanding a cheer squad, the response to protest we have seen so far does not involve direct coercion. However, athletic activism can and does trigger violent state actions. The case of the Chester 16 demonstrates that the racial state will react violently against relatively powerless anthem protesters. In October 1968, a group of Black high-school students in Chester, PA, staged a sit-down protest during the national anthem before a football game. After halftime, there were fights between Black students and white students who apparently were angered by the protest. Although there were no serious injuries resulting from the fighting, 16 Black youth were charged with riot, conspiracy to riot, aggravated assault, and other charges related to the incident (Kilpack, 1976; Lisk, 2017). The racial discourse of Black masculinity as dangerous and a threat was part of the state's justification for its violent and legal action against these young Black men. These 16 youth were sentenced to 4½–11 years in prison.

The sentencing of the Chester 16 is tied to its social and historical context. In the 1960s, Chester was a deindustrializing town where 43% of the population was

Black and the unemployment rate was double among Blacks compared to whites ("Riots Mar Peace," 1964). Moreover, it had a long history of racial antagonisms including the infamous 1917 Chester Race Riot (Smith, 2008) and racially charged uprisings in the 1960s ("Riots Mar Peace," 1964). What was happening in Chester was part of a larger national phenomenon of urban uprisings over racial-economic inequalities across the United States. Not only was Chester an economically declining town with a history of racial violence, 1968 was both the year of popular uprisings that followed the assassination of Martin Luther King and the height of the Black Power Movement and the anti-Vietnam War Movements (Hartmann, 2003). Within this politically and racially charged context, the Chester 16 were accused of antagonizing the police in order to "set off a full scale race riot in the city of Chester" and the lower court that convicted the boys accused them of "terrorizing during the national anthem" (Lisk, 2017). We should emphasize that these were not Ivy League cheerleaders who had authored their own cheer squad, but they were poor Black boys in a deindustrializing city. As a result, patriotism was employed to construct them as unpatriotic terrorist others whereby making the protest of the high schoolers a justification for incarceration (Puar, 2018; Thangaraj, 2015).

We have seen so far how a range of contextual factors impact athletic activism during the US anthem and the varying patriotic reactions to it. Specifically, how race and class emboldened patriarchal patriots in Providence and Chester. The identities and social status of the protestors, however, can also mitigate anti-protest reactions as well. This was made clear in 1974 when, prior to a basketball game, a group of veterans at Harper College in Palatine, IL, planned to sit during the anthem to protest President Gerald Ford's decision to veto increased benefits for veterans. The protest was circumvented when Harper College chose not to play the anthem. In response, the veterans lowered an American flag on campus and then raised it to half-staff upside down. Initially, the veterans' action triggered a standard patriotic reaction. A headline on the front page of the student newspaper immediately after the action occurred read, "Our flag violated" (Kelly, 1974, p. 1). An editorial in the same issue chided the veterans for such an immature act and stated, "There are other ways of getting your message across... you have alienated people who otherwise would have supported your cause" (Berth, 1974, p. 2). Another student argued that the protesters are a vocal minority of veterans on campus angry with the president and do not represent the majority of veterans who support the president (Anonymous, 1974, p. 2). A former Marine who did not realize the protest was conducted by veterans accused them of being un-American and stated, "If they do not appreciate the benefits provided to an American citizen, let them find a better country!" (McEnroe, 1974). All of these responses were as typical in the late 1960s and early 1970s as they are today (see Montez de Oca & Suh, 2020).

Unlike in Providence and, especially, Chester, the reaction of patriarchal patriots was strongly contested. Constructive patriots used the student paper to mobilize the veterans' achieved status as war heroes who sacrificed for the nation to counter the critics. One student wrote that the only thing "violated" by the protest was a symbol of one of the nation's key values: freedom. She went on to

argue that the veterans had earned the right to protest that symbol through sacrifice in war and condemning their act violates the very value that the flag symbolizes (Leighton, 1974, p. 3). The president of the Veterans Club responded by explaining the protest's meaning, "flying the flag upside down is an international signal of distress [and] flying the flag at half-mast is merely a sign of mourning" (Karaffa, 1974, p. 3). He then argued that no one complained when the flags were flown at half-mast to mourn President Kennedy's assassination because they understood its meaning. Another veteran was enraged that he had been accused of disrespecting the flag by people who had never experienced the horrors of war. Ultimately, he argued that soldiers are sacrificed in war for other people's greed and benefit, but the so-called patriots incensed by the protest are actually protecting the greedy against the victims (Hofherr, 1974, p. 3). In the end, the college president and faculty senate committed to writing letters on behalf of the veterans. And when campus security investigated the protest as a crime, the administration quickly apologized and called it the work of "over-zealous civil servants" (Lisk, 2017). The voice of the veterans and the institutional support they received provides a striking contrast to when Black athletes, cheerleaders, and poor youth used the symbols and rituals of nation to stage protests.

When we look at the veterans' protest in comparison to the others, two things especially stand out: (1) The seriousness of the act: rather than silently sitting, leaving the court, or raising a fist as in the other protests, the veterans laid hands on the flag and repurposed it in act of protest against a sitting United States president. This is of utmost importance as the flag and military are intimately linked in life and death. For instance, when members of the military die, it is the flag that is carefully wrapped and given to family members. (2) They faced relatively little vitriol and far greater institutional support for a materially and symbolically more serious protest act. It is possible, although not stated in news coverage, that the veterans were predominately or entirely white, and so race may have had a mediating effect on the support they received for their more serious act. At the same time, veterans hold a special status within the United States that is upheld by patriarchal and constructive patriots alike. Their identities are already tied in with respectable, patriotic national masculinity. Playing the national anthem is a strategic moment for athletic protest because it creates a static, formulaic performance that forms a homogenous moment in time and materializes the space of the nation for participants through the ritual process. However, the solemn seemingly timeless flag ceremony is, in fact, highly volatile (Schuessler, 2016). People use the song and its performance for a range of political acts, but mostly to advance their specific version of patriotism and politics (Robin, 2016). This is important because rituals do not simply reference a previously existing social order, but they performatively bring a social order into existence (Geertz, 1973; Jay, 1992). The words of the *Star-Spangled Banner* celebrate soldiers' sacrifice in battle (Schuessler, 2016). Playing of the anthem is a ritual of sacrifice with the connotation of salvation. As the average soldier is made sacred for their sacrifice in battle, they are transformed into "heroes." The

ritual thus produces a transcendent salvation within nationalist discourse while underscoring the cherished, valued national masculinity (Lockwood, n.d.).

As heroes they represent not just the nation but its ideals and moral identity. Further, their loss of life purifies and regenerates the existing order (Denton-Borhaug, n.d.). What would otherwise be viewed simply as tragedy and loss (i.e., the deaths of individual young people) becomes a net positive to the nation (Strenski, n.d.). In this way, the tremendous human, environmental, and financial costs of war become positive gains for the nation. However, for the social magic to work, the ritual must be performed correctly. As Nancy Jay states, "It is not enough to do the ritual just well enough to produce some separate effect. There is no separate effect, it is all in the doing" (Jay, 1992, p. 1). Therefore, it is not the act in itself that makes it a protest, such as flying flags at half-mast for President Kennedy. Whether one stands with their hand on their heart or kneels with their head bowed, the action must be legible as a protest by standing outside of the scripted ritual with an alternative to the state's intended performative meaning. Recognition of protest during the performance of banal nationalism, or the mundane and unnoted acts of nation (Billig, 1995), shifts the ritual moment from banality to deep play or a ritual performance overflowing with symbolic meaning (Geertz, 1973). But once the banality of the ritual is broken, it triggers powerful emotional reactions by drawing attention to the constructedness and contradictions of the nation itself.

When patriarchal patriots at Harper College attempted to obscure the contradictions revealed by the veterans inverting the symbols of nation, the veterans then turned their criticism on its head by making claims to sacrifice and an achieved status of heroes. Their critics, the veterans claimed, had not sacrificed for the nation and therefore had no right to challenge their protests since veterans had paid for their rights with blood (Hofherr, 1974). The veterans might or might not have intentionally foregrounded white military masculinity as the vaulted status in the process. A veterans stated, "Politicians are bought and sold like cattle, the environment is decaying right in front of your noses, yet you have the audacity to get upset over a symbolic gesture like this!" (Karaffa, 1974, p. 2). Constructive patriots supported the veterans by arguing their protest was restoring the nation and its sacred values. As one student stated, "The veterans, of all people, know about American ideals – they spent time in Vietnam and elsewhere 'preserving our ideals'..." (Leighton, 1974).

It is not our point to take sides with the veterans, instead we argue that despite their differences and debates, patriarchal and constructive patriots work from opposing political positions to collectively reify the racial state. While patriarchal patriots want to impose a law of the father that demands unquestioning respect for and loyalty to authoritative state institutions and constructive patriots criticize those institutions in order to make the nation achieve its promises for everyone, both construct soldiers as heroes and place them above other citizens. The military then becomes central to "American exceptionalism" and the US's unique mission in the world remains based on military power rather than democratic institutions (Denton-Borhaug, n.d.). Activists that want to advance social justice must also reveal the operation of US imperialism both domestically (e.g.,