
Resisting Resistance: Activism In/And the Political Economy of Intercollegiate Athletics

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Drawing from political economic analysis, this essay argues the structural and ideological function of college sport is to maintain hegemonic order in the face of athlete activism. Briefly outlining the political economy of college sport, the authors point to how this political economy actively constrains athlete activism as a counter-hegemonic challenge. The authors discuss implications in the context of scholarly activism and call for a more radical, integrative orientation to research and teaching in relation to sporting activism(s). In doing so, this essay argues there is potential to challenge hegemonic structures that minimize agency and ultimately reshape the political economy of college sport in a way that creates a more equitable and holistically generative set of relations.

Keywords: college sport, activism, hegemony, political economy, resistance

In recent years, several sport scholars have moved toward defining and categorizing distinctive forms of activism in and through sport (Cooper et al., 2019; Cooper et al., 2020; Crooks et al., 2022; Kluch, 2020). Cooper et al. (2019) operationally define activism as the “engagement in intentional actions that disrupt oppressive hegemonic systems by challenging a clearly defined opposition while simultaneously empowering individuals and groups disadvantaged by inequitable arrangements” (pp. 154-155). To date, scholars have outlined several types of sport activism: For example, Cooper and colleagues (2019) developed a typology consisting of *symbolic, scholarly, grassroots, sports-based, and economic* forms of activism. They later extended the typology to account for additional categories of sport activism: *media, political, legal, music and art, and military* activism (Cooper et al., 2020). Other scholars, such as Kluch (2020), looked at athlete activism at the collegiate level specifically to define activism in the context of U.S. college sport. Drawing from the experiences of 31 minoritized collegiate athlete activists, Kluch (2020) captured the activists’ own definitions of activism as *action for social justice purposes, mentorship, authenticity, intervention, and public acts of resistance*. While these definitions have their distinctive characteristics, each of these aspects are “intertwined and work towards the common goal of disrupting and eliminating oppressive hegemonic forces embedded within a society rooted in White racism, neoliberalism, and capitalism” (Cooper et al., 2020, p. 113).

In this general definition, the central notion of disrupting hegemonic structures brings with it several questions that are necessary for scholars of college sport activism to explore. What does the hegemonic order look like in the context of U.S. college sport? How does it manifest in the experiences of those navigating the intercollegiate athletics system? And, ultimately, what does developing a deeper understanding of hegemonic structures and processes mean for understanding and supporting activism as a counter-hegemonic challenge? To answer these questions, the goal of this essay is to (a) define hegemony in the context of college sport, (b) situate its manifestations by analyzing the political economy of intercollegiate athletics, and (c) map out ways for scholarly activism to support athlete activism in the billion-dollar arena that is college sport in the United States. Further exploring these aspects, we critically frame the material and ideological structure shaping and maintaining college sport – a key site through which much sport activism takes place. By drawing from political economic analysis, we briefly outline some of the ways college sport activism is structurally resisted and what this means for understanding and engaging with activism as a counter-hegemonic process, especially as it is related to scholarly activism (see Cooper et al., 2019). Our intention in this essay is not to provide a comprehensive analysis of the political economy of intercollegiate athletics, but rather to offer political economic analysis as an appropriate conceptual tool for understanding athlete activism and the constraints thereof.

In the latter part of the essay, we chose to focus on scholarly activism for four primary reasons. First, scholars have repeatedly called for researchers to utilize their platforms to support activist efforts – within the domains of sport (Darnell & Millington, 2019), higher education (Davis et al., 2019; Rose, 2017; Quaye et al., 2017) and beyond (Holmes, 2019). Second, Cooper et al. (2019) attribute a crucial role to scholars as educational agents, given that scholarly activism is focused on “the transmission of ideas *by* individuals and groups that enhance a person’s understanding of oppressive systems such as sport and mechanisms *through* which they can be deconstructed” (pp. 168-169, emphasis in original). Third, we believe that scholars have

unique institutional power (Jolly et al., 2021) to aid more vulnerable populations with potentially bigger platforms – such as collegiate athletes – in their activist pursuits to disrupt a status quo that *resists* their *resistance* in the first place. Lastly, sport scholars occupy unique positions within higher education to contribute to, or disrupt, oppressive structures, policies, and practices; a responsibility which is heightened with the burgeoning influence of neoliberalism over a variety of sport-related sub-disciplines (see Newman, 2014).

Hegemony and Political Economic Analysis

We start this section on a definition of hegemony with pointing to the fact that the term “hegemony” can be difficult to define. This is likely due to the early death of the principal intellectual who developed the Marxian-influenced concept, Antonio Gramsci. Still, there are defining aspects of hegemony that distinguish it from a purely material understanding of state domination. Gramsci’s conceptualization emphasized the politics beyond state coercion, namely by drawing attention to the function(s) of cultural formations and how these aspects contribute to the routine maintenance of elite domination (Bairner, 2009). In Gramscian terms, while hegemony is not a reference to brute force dominance, it is a form of dominance characterized by an arrangement of material structures and conditions, social forces, and other processes whereby a natural order of things is imposed and consent is gained by the masses that are subject to domination by the elite (Cox, 1981, 1994). Indeed, hegemony relies on the perception of the masses that the status quo is natural and cannot easily be changed – unjust power relations are disguised as common sense, thus publics inadvertently consent to their own domination (Croteau & Hoynes, 2000; Walker & Sartore-Baldwin, 2013). According to Cox (1981), the maintenance of hegemonic order (the supposedly natural set of relations) depends on the “coherent conjunction or fit between a configuration of material power, the prevalent collective image of world order (including certain norms) and a set of institutions which administer the order with a certain semblance of universality” (p. 139).

Developing a sustained focus on the capitalistic nature of the system governing the material and ideological formation of college sport (e.g., see Chen, 2022), we draw from political economic analysis. Gondwe (1992) characterized political economic analysis as being the “study of people in the social process of producing and distributing the means of their own reproduction, in a given social environment or geographical domain, under rules promulgated and enforced by a political state” (p. 12). From this perspective, economic and sociopolitical issues are considered intertwined and interdependent, necessitating that these domains be analyzed in conjunction with one another to understand how social relations are (re)produced. Furthermore, Sage (2000) added that “political economic analyses typically go beyond issues of efficiency to address basic moral issues of social justice, equity and the public good” (p. 261). With the emphasis in this special issue on activism and social change, political economy serves as a useful and adequate concept to further contextualize the structural and ideological operation of intercollegiate athletics as a domain in which sporting activism takes place.

Bairner (2009) opined for “counter-hegemonic struggle to be a strategic success, it had to be underpinned by a proper understanding of how consciousness is mediated by various elements of civil society” (p. 198). Therefore, we draw from Sage’s (2000) conceptualization of *radical political economy* – a Marxian approach where contemporary capitalism is viewed as subverting the interests of a theoretically democratic society – to call into question the foundational order of college sport as a primary space where resistance to hegemonic forces takes place (Agyemang et

al., 2020). In the following section, we provide a brief overview of the political economy of U.S. intercollegiate athletics followed by an exploration of how hegemony is maintained in the face of counter-hegemonic activism. Understanding our own positioning as sport scholars engaged in broader activist efforts (i.e., *scholar-activists*), we then reflect on what a radical understanding of the political economy of college sport means for scholarly activism.

The Political Economy of Intercollegiate Athletics

In this section, we briefly outline the political economy of college sport by focusing on issues at the macro-, meso-, and micro-levels. While this allows for a simpler articulation of the structural and ideological arrangement of college sport, it should be emphasized that these aspects are inter- and co-determinant. Moreover, we acknowledge this political and economic arrangement is more expansive than what is offered within the confines of this essay. We encourage scholars to build upon this work by further outlining the functions, tensions, and contradictions observed within the political economy of college sport. Following this description, we explore how the political economy of college sport maintains hegemonic stability despite broader resistance from college athlete-activists.

Macro-Level

At the societal or macro-level, several scholars have outlined the ways in which intercollegiate athletics fits within a predatory system accentuating the interlocked and interdependent nature of systemic classism (i.e., capitalism), systemic racism, and systemic sexism (including heterosexism) (Feagin & Ducey, 2017). As one example, Singer (2019) draws from the framework of the elite-white-male dominance system to better understand the context Black male college athletes navigate, arguing elite white men control the majority of institutions associated with college sport (e.g., the NCAA, athletic departments, corporate partners, etc.) and thus use college sport to serve their own classed, raced, and gendered interests. Similarly, Oshiro and colleagues (2020) outlined the role of college sport in a system of colonial extraction, pointing to how “interlocking systems of oppression coalesce in and around the athletics industrial complex” (p. 266) to extricate and capitalize on Black athletic talent as part of a broader conveyor belt system controlled by mostly elite white men. Other work has applied an internal colonial model to college athletics framing college sport at historically white institutions as plantation-like systems dependent on the exploitation of primarily Black athletic labor (Hawkins, 2010). At the societal level, research suggests college sport exists within a system of elite-white-male dominance while also working to reproduce the hegemonic order upon which it is built (see also, Fink, 2016; Hart-Nibbrig & Cottingham, 1986; Smith, 1988; Thelin, 2000).

These intertwining substructures underpinning “college sport” are important for understanding how college sport fits within a wider context that is both economic and political. As an economically generative enterprise, a predatory ethic governs intercollegiate athletics to protect public and private interests. Thus, powerful groups with capital interest in the exploitative nature of college sport such as the NCAA or transnational corporations often lobby for favorable legislation at federal, state, and local levels (e.g., see Smith, 2010). This cycle produces a political economy dependent upon elite control of/over college sport (including its sources of labor, capital, and methods of extraction). Collective culture then emerges out of and interacts with this political economy. However, in this process, the political-economic order of

college sport becomes legitimized as a cultural phenomenon. For example, Dittmore (2016) argued athletic departments can be viewed as media organizations in the effort to compete with larger media outlets to regulate the production of content. This may include limiting access to players, restricting information that can be reported, or producing their own unique content. The general mediatization of elite sport in North America locates intercollegiate athletics within a broader sports/media complex and culture production industry which functions to maintain political and economic order (see also Herman & Chomsky, 2010).

Through this capitalistic, racialized, and gendered media complex (Bruce, 2004; Jhally, 1984; Messner, 1988), college sport is leveraged to “transmit the ideology and worldview of the dominant elements in the increasingly anti-human society around us” (Hoch, 1972, p. 6). Hegemony at the macro level, then, becomes shaped in, through, and around the political economy of college sport. As such, political economic analysis provides a conceptual tool for critically interrogating the deep-rooted nature of college sport and offering opportunities for resistance against otherwise inequitable processes.

Meso-Level

Within this capitalistic system of domination at the macro-level, there are specific organizational structures that coalesce to create tangibly felt environments where the hegemonic order is produced and reproduced. Examples of these organizations include governmental entities, the NCAA, athletic conferences, athletic departments, sport media companies, corporate sponsors/partners (both of the NCAA and of individual colleges and universities), and others. These organizations operate as necessary structures through which the political economy of college sport is ordered. For example, Keaton and Cooper (2022) drew from racialized organization theory (Ray, 2019) to argue that the NCAA is a racialized organization that rewards whiteness and marginalizes Black athletes, coaches, and administrators. According to the authors, in the NCAA “marginalization is not simply an issue . . . , rather racial marginalization is of and how the NIF [NCAA institutional field] is maintained and sustained” (Keaton & Cooper, 2022, p. 191). One manifestation of the NCAA as a racialized organization is the supposedly race neutral Academic Progress Rate (APR) policies, which often distribute resources in favor of predominantly white institutions and disparately impact HBCUs and their athletes (Keaton & Cooper, 2022). Similarly, in a racialized organization whiteness becomes a credential (Ray, 2019), which can be seen in basketball and football facilities being named after individuals who promoted racist ideologies (Turick et al., 2021).

Centering this racialized and gendered system, a slew of organizations (co)operate with intercollegiate athletics to ultimately produce its political economy. These organizations include city councils, national media outlets such as ABC, Fox, CBS, and ESPN, local media entities, corporate partners (e.g., Capital One, Coca-Cola, AT&T), and more. These entities have a financial interest in the routine functioning of intercollegiate athletics, depending significantly on its classed, raced, and gendered sub-structures. Changes to the intercollegiate structure reverberate throughout this broader political economy, thus pointing to an elite-centered, collective stake in the hegemonic stability of college sport (i.e., elite control of and over intercollegiate athletics).

Micro-Level

Individuals and groups also play important roles in shaping and contesting the political economy of college sport. For example, the president of the NCAA is tasked with growing and maintaining the legitimacy of the college sport enterprise, particularly within an established political and economic landscape. Current president, Mark Emmert, was largely tasked with developing the economically generative aspects of NCAA athletics while maintaining “amateurism” (read: unpaid athletic labor). Following substantial legal challenges (e.g., *O’Bannon v. NCAA*, 2015; *NCAA v. Alston et al.*, 2021) and subsequent changes in rules surrounding athletes’ rights to their name, image, and likeness, Emmert announced that he would step down as president effective in the year 2023 (NCAA, 2022a).

In December of 2022, it was announced that the NCAA had selected Republican Governor from Massachusetts, Charlie Baker, to be its next leader. With no formal experience working in sport, Baker will step into the position as the NCAA seeks to reposition itself amid shifting labor policies, reorganizing commercial deals, and more: “NCAA member schools... are in the process of transforming the structure and mission to meet future needs” (NCAA, 2022a, para. 4). However, Baker’s background in politics is precisely what was emphasized as a preeminent qualification to lead the NCAA moving forward. The NCAA’s press release announcing the naming of Baker as the next president celebrated his “decades of experience spearheading transformations at high profile institutions in the private and public sectors” (NCAA, 2022b, para. 1) while repeatedly highlighting Baker’s ability to generate “bipartisan” consensus (a term that was used 5 times in the brief press release). Thus, Baker’s recognized ability to engage with both the political and the economic demonstrate the importance of drawing from political economic analysis to better understand intercollegiate athletics as a context where counter-hegemonic activism takes place.

At the level of athletic departments, a variety of individuals and groups are involved. For instance, athletic directors (ADs) play significant roles in capitulating to the capitalistic needs of contemporary college sport; so much so that research has found the most important set of skills for an ADs to be business, financial, and athletic fundraising skills (Kirkpatrick, 2018). These individuals often answer directly to university presidents, chancellors, and/or boards of regents, establishing a close relationship between athletic departments and groups with elite status in broader society (e.g., see Southall et al., 2002). ADs themselves often discuss the importance of synergy between them and university leadership (Belzer et al., n.d.), depending heavily on outside donors and boosters (Frey, 1982). Within their departments, ADs work with a variety of divisions and staff (including coaching staffs, NCAA compliance, legal consultants, academic advisors, and more) to produce athletic products that best represent and serve the mission of the university leadership.

Although there is differentiation here in terms of scope, each of the aspects discussed above operate in tandem with one another to function as a political economy of intercollegiate athletics. Thus, the capital structure of college sport is one that is necessarily designed to maintain elite-white-male dominance through a variety of organizational structures, spaces, and relationships including – but not limited to – governmental entities, public officials, the NCAA, athletic conferences, individual colleges and universities, athletic departments, media outlets, corporate partners, donors, and fan groups. This arrangement constitutes the material and ideological structure through which hegemonic order is maintained.

Constraining Athlete-Activism in and through Intercollegiate Athletics

Throughout the early history of intercollegiate athletics in the U.S., elite groups sought to create and maintain institutional control over the development of college sport (Oriard, 2012). In the early 1900s, college sport was in a state of crisis until the intervention of then President Roosevelt. Emerging from this intervention was a nationwide organization (later known as the National Collegiate Athletic Association) created to regulate college sport and suggest policy changes. In the several decades since then, the NCAA amassed institutional power and has regularly battled in court to maintain its control over the nature of “amateurism” in college athletics, often at the expense of athlete agency (e.g., see Sudia & Remis, 2001). This is not necessarily the outcome of poor management *per se*; but this minimization of athlete agency is built into the system-level structure of intercollegiate athletics through which hegemony is maintained. That is, the political economy of intercollegiate athletics is structurally designed to maintain social, political, and economic order upon which a variety of institutions are co-dependent and co-determinant. Since college sport is built upon an established order of capitalist logics, it is necessarily designed to resist radical challenges brought about by sport activism today.

Macro-Level

System- or macro-level factors that demonstrate how the political economy of college sport constrains athlete activism include federal and state legislation, university budget cuts, broader governance issues, and other related forms of macro-management. For example, in an effort to quell anti-racist protests during the national anthem, Republican lawmakers in the state of Tennessee publicly called on state universities to “... adopt policies within your respective athletic departments to *prohibit* any such actions moving forward” (Mojica, 2021, para. 3, italics added for emphasis). The letter, drafted and signed by Republican Senators, was published via Twitter and addressed to all state universities (see Bailey, 2021). Although there was some pushback on this sentiment when members of the Senate Democratic Caucus published a letter in support of students’ right to peacefully protest (Tennessee State Democrats, 2021), this extralegal approach by public officials from Tennessee demonstrates the power of macro punitive responses to athlete activism as public universities are significantly dependent on state funding. Furthermore, the authoring of a letter to state universities and the ensuing publishing of the letter to Twitter demonstrates how public officials (i.e., individuals contributing to the “political” side of political economy) can subject college sport to a broader struggle over the cultural aspects of hegemony by mediating politics.

Particularly for public universities who are often dependent on state officials for funding, budgetary changes can have strong ties to athlete activism and the constraint thereof, such as when Grambling State University football players decided to organize a protest on the heels of substantial budget cuts (McCoy et al., 2017). However, in this case, many other community members questioned the effectiveness of the players’ protest due to further budget cuts and financial penalties from the boycott that effected the entire campus community (Anderson, 2013; McCoy et al., 2017). Instances like this spotlight how athlete activism takes place within a political economy that has historically been dependent on unpaid athletic labor, but also how funding impacts college athletics at the structural level while shaping public perception of athlete activism as a challenge to hegemonic order.

Similarly, the operation of college sport – what has been referred to as the “intercollegiate athletic industrial complex” (Hawkins, 2010, p. 83) – constrains athletic agency while enforcing racial-capitalist hegemony. For example, athletes (as laborers) have faced significant constraint in their ability to choose when and where they would like to attend college and participate in a sport, especially with the (in)ability to transfer schools or eligibility restrictions upon transfer (e.g., see Logan et al., 2015). Despite decades of challenges to the NCAA and its transfer system, this *modus operandi* has historically functioned to restrict college athletes’ “human agency and self-determination” (Crooks et al., 2022, p. 8). While there have been some shifts in this system (particularly with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic), institutional actors are pushing back on athletes’ ability to exercise agency over their own athletic labor, with several top figures calling the situation “out of control” (The Associated Press, 2022, para. 3) and demonstrating a widespread desire to reassert top-down order. This is perhaps most evident in the persistent myth of sport as being apolitical (Coakley, 2015; Sage, 1998), a powerful construct that is often used to push back against athletes using the platform of sport to advocate for systemic change.

Meso-Level

At the organizational level, structural barriers exist in college sport that can serve as strong barriers to activism. For example, researchers have shown that collegiate athletes are often isolated from the broader campus community (Bowen & Levin, 2003; Rubin & Moses, 2017), such as when universities have special academic centers that are only open to athletes, which can make it hard to utilize resources available for activist efforts or build collective solidarity. In addition, the demands of being a collegiate athlete can make it hard to develop an activist identity, which is often stigmatized in athletic organizational contexts (Kluch, 2023). Kluch (2023) has also found that the power imbalance between coaches and athletes (i.e., high levels of power afforded to coaches and low levels of power afforded to athletes in the organizational hierarchy) can serve as a tool to silence activist efforts – especially if the coach is unsupportive of such efforts. Moreover, the development and installation of policy has often sought to minimize athlete agency. Yan et al. (2018) showed how this could be seen from athletic departments designing policies and regulations to monitor and constrain athletes’ social media accounts and coaches’ attempts to influence the behavior of players during the national anthem. Not only are these attempts to control the agentic behavior of athletes, but these policy efforts specifically targeted anti-racist activism seeking to reinforce white structural homeostasis (Yan et al., 2018).

There are also times when athletic departments choose less confrontational approaches to *managing* athlete activism. Indeed, some athletic departments choose to work with their athletes to engage in “unifying” displays such as the Circle of Unity display at Old Dominion University (see O’Hallarn et al., 2021). However, in these scenarios, there is co-optation taking place wherein the potentially radical elements of protest are reined in by a coaching staff to come up with a more palatable display. Other examples of this approach include the NCAA putting “Black Lives Matter” signage on their March Madness courts, social justice statements on jerseys, unity walks, or hosting panel discussions that do not go beyond surface-level engagement with matters of social justice. From a critical race theory perspective, this is referred to as interest convergence; when progressive movement is curtailed to materially benefit the white capital structure in which the action is taking place (Singer et al., 2017). This co-opting

approach, giving the appearance of transformative change by supporting anti-racist activism on the mere surface, serves to maintain stability and keeps power in the hands of mostly white male capitalists. As such, it is a strategy for hegemonic forces to co-opt activist movements and, by doing so, slowing down the momentum of such movements.

Micro-Level

In addition to the myth of apolitical sport, which poses a particular threat to athletes finding their activist expression on college campuses given universities are focused on education (Kaufman & Wolff, 2010), scholars have also pointed to other micro-level barriers to activism in college sport. Among those barriers are the criticism college athlete activists face on social media (Frederick et al., 2017), the promotion of their athletic identity at the expense of activist identity development (Beachy et al., 2018), socialization into limited understandings of the systemic nature of racial and social inequities (Kluch et al., 2022), lack of support from administrators (Martin et al., 2022b) and social agents (Martin et al., 2022a); and athletes' vulnerable position at the mercy of coaches who can easily revoke a scholarship should an athlete decide to challenge the status quo (Staurowsky, 2014). In addition, Fuller and Agyemang (2018) found that Division III collegiate athletes may perceive their age, a lack of awareness and creativity, and the limited platform provided by Division III athletics as potential barriers to engaging in activism.

Local "consumer" markets also contribute to this constraint of athlete activists on an inter/personal basis by reinforcing the political-economic structure at large. For example, Oshiro et al. (2021) analyzed how members of the prolific online brand community, TexAgs, responded to former Texas A&M University football players who went on to the NFL and protested systemic racism. The authors show how TexAgs users responded by articulating a white-framed vision of nation and university rooted in anti-Blackness. Demonstrating how this type of communal backlash to athlete activism further shapes the political economy of college sport, a Texas A&M University administrator once spoke to the "value" of the TexAgs community:

[TexAgs is] important to me and my position because it allows me to see how others perceive our brand. And where they want it to go. So it's a good measuring tool for us. They also allow us to strategically reach our brand followers, right? So there's an importance of it. So, TexAgs is relevant [*sic*] because they have some level of impact on what we do. (as quoted in Bennett, 2017, p. 162)

This reflection on the TexAgs brand community by a university administrator demonstrates the capital value of local consumer markets to university and athletic leadership, particularly as these groups look to develop policy *in response to* athlete activism (e.g., Yan et al., 2018).

Although not meant to be an exhaustive list, these examples demonstrate the function of college sport as a political economy in *resisting* resistance. In other words, college sport is economically, politically, and culturally situated to maintain hegemonic homeostasis. While sport activism can (and does) present significant challenges to the status quo, it also becomes limited in and within college sport. Therefore, it is critical that sport scholars continue to develop more radical understandings of intercollegiate athletics as many of the systems challenged by sport activism over the course of decades have remained substantially stable. This stability is not necessarily a failure of activism efforts. Rather, it demonstrates the power and utility of college

sport as a vehicle for (re)enforcing hegemonic power. Below, we outline ways in which scholars can support activist efforts in the context of U.S. college sport. Given the proximity of many college sport scholars to this institutional context, we hold that sport scholars have a unique role in maintaining or resisting college sport hegemony.

Implications for Scholarly Activism in and through College Sport

In his foundational work, Antonio Gramsci emphasized the key role of intellectuals in creating and resisting hegemony (Bates, 1975). Gramsci (1971) knew of the power of activist scholars to produce knowledge that countered hegemony. Such counter-hegemonic scholarship, Davis et al. (2019) argue, “explicitly confronts, challenges, and critiques hegemonic epistemologies, practices, research paradigms, and worldviews” (p. 92). In line with Gramsci’s weightage, foregrounding the counter-hegemonic nature of college sport activism yields several important implications for counter-hegemonic scholar activism, the aim of which is to increase understanding of how oppressive systems operate and how such systems can be deconstructed toward a more equitable future (Cooper et al., 2019). In fact, some scholars have argued that scholarship and activism should not be separated (Quaye et al., 2017). Rather than ignoring how their research relates to the social world, “any realistic social scientist should ask herself what purpose her latest paper serves – other than her own career and travel ambitions” (Oslender & Reiter, 2015, p. xii). As scholar-activists, then, it is axiomatic to utilize our professional privilege as creators of knowledge to “enact an activist agenda” (Quaye et al., 2017, p. 383).

These points are particularly emphasized for sport scholars, who often occupy unique positions within colleges and universities to be able to critically engage with college sport scholarship, advise athletic departments, work directly with college athletes, prepare students for careers in and around intercollegiate athletics, and more. The field of “sport management”, for example, is generally centered on taken-for-granted assumptions about the capitalistic nature of sport, even as the field increasingly subsumes other sport-related subdisciplines (Newman, 2014). However, in line with Chen’s (2022) argument, recognizing and challenging these foundations within a variety of academic disciplines (e.g., sport management, sport studies, and sociology of sport) is critical to making the college sport’s classist, sexist, heterosexist, racist, and ableist substructures analyzable. Accordingly, we argue that sport scholars play existential roles in substantiating or disrupting the political economy of intercollegiate athletics through scholarly activism. In their typology of activism, Cooper and colleagues (2019) delineated two types of scholarly activism – research activism and teaching activism – that often interplay with one another. Thus, it is through these modes of engagement that contemporary sport scholars are in a position to radically resist hegemonic dominance in and through intercollegiate athletics.

Research Activism

Davis and colleagues (2019) posit several interpretive criteria for research to be activist. As the first criterion, they state that activist research needs to be “transformative in worldview and explicit in intention” (Davis et al., 2019, p. 98). Radical political economic analysis gives sport scholars a framework through which the boundaries of hegemonic processes can be defined, contested, and ultimately transformed. Hegemony can be (and is) challenged through activist efforts, especially in relation to recent challenges to the NCAA’s cartelization of intercollegiate athletics. However, there remains a broader question about whether the political-

economic order of intercollegiate athletics is being transformed or if there is merely a reformation in elite control over said order. Critically interrogating intercollegiate athletics and/as a political economy provides a frame of reference for looking beyond any individual program or governing body, instead allowing scholars to understand how structural and ideological order is maintained while opening up avenues for new forms of inquiry to more radically engage with activist efforts and the systems that are being challenged.

Further, activist research must divest from the normative assumptions of the academy, and “producers of activist scholarship should *publicly* wrestle with the tension between engaging in and divesting from the intellectual and professional validation offered by a neoliberal, white supremacist cis-heteropatriarchal academy” (Davis et al., 2019, p. 102, italics in original). Indeed, developing a critique of the political economy of college sport, along with how this relates to activism taking place within and beyond its boundaries, imparts a “new” ethical responsibility with which scholars must grapple. As Kuntz (2021) argues, inquiry itself must become new in response to contemporary neoliberalism and thus transgressive to a past (current) way of engaging. Due to the constitutive logics of neoliberalism, established methods of critical engagement are often not enough to deconstruct hegemonic structures. Issues arise due to the unintended consequences of critique wherein the process of focusing on “the ‘limits’ of the market necessarily highlights possible new objects for government. More than once [under neoliberalism], the limit became the new frontier of government. Critique alters and shapes the topology of government in often unforeseen ways” (Folkers, 2016, p. 16). In the context of this essay, sport activism itself becomes the new frontier for governance within the political economy of intercollegiate athletics. Thus, scholars must perpetually engage with new(er) ways of conducting research that necessarily challenge hegemonic order as opposed to passively studying activism in ways that create avenues for the reassertion of that order.

In addition, activist scholarship must embrace what Davis et al. (2019) call a “radical imagination” (p. 103), which prompts scholars to move from abstract ideas to “some provision of practically useful insights and recommendations that aid individuals and institutions toward continually *enacting* social justice, not merely as a philosophy but as the ultimate reality” (Davis et al., 2019, p. 104, italics in original). It is important to note here that most research *on* activism in college sport is not activist *in itself*, because it rarely achieves the degree of political intention needed for transformative change (see Davis et al., 2019). As junior scholars who have written about college sport, we are the first to admit that some of our own early works on activism in (college) sport fall short of this criterion. For example, in Kluch (2020) and Kluch (2021), the second author examined the experiences of collegiate athlete activists in the post-Ferguson era; however, both of those works fall short of situating these experiences sufficiently within the broader systemic injustices that led to the experiences in the first place. Targeting such systems is crucial for the production of counter-hegemonic knowledge needed to transform the intercollegiate sport system in the U.S. Rather than covering systemic inequities in the margins, such foci need to be centered in activist scholarship in and on college sport.

The proliferation of capitalism as a primary way of structuring and serving intercollegiate athletes is borne, to a substantial degree, of dominant ontological, epistemological, axiological, and teleological assumptions of the world (e.g., see Newman, 2014); thus, “there needs to be a means of invention that creates the space for alternative practices not dependent on normalized logic formations for their creation and sustainability” (Kuntz, 2021, p. 500). Engaging with “new” orientations to inquiry (ontologically, teleologically, methodologically) becomes necessary for challenging the present while creating a “new” future for college sport. Stated

differently, the political economy of intercollegiate athletics necessitates activist scholars move beyond descriptive orientations of activism and instead become co-conspirators in the act; to engage with research and teaching in a way that fundamentally challenges the very system in which they are produced (e.g., see Jolly, et al., 2021). Embracing this shift would enable scholars to contextualize activist politics more appropriately as taking place within the collective and intergenerational struggle against capitalistic domination and exploitation. So as not to limit what this shift could look like in the future, we intentionally refrain from outlining specific research methods, theories, and approaches that could accomplish this. However, there is much critical work currently being done from which to draw inspiration and move us collectively in this direction (e.g., see Cooper & Newton, 2021; Cooper et al., 2020; Ferguson et al., 2021; Ferguson & Davis, 2019; Jolly et al., 2021; Keaton, 2020; Kluch et al, 2022; Singer, 2019).

Teaching Activism

The classroom with all its limitations remains a location of possibility. In that field of possibility, we have the opportunity to labour for freedom, to demand of ourselves and our comrades, an openness of mind and heart that allows us to face reality even as we collectively imagine ways to move beyond boundaries, to transgress. This is education as the practice of freedom. (hooks, 1994, as quoted in Specia & Osman, 2015, p. 196)

What does a transgressive form of teaching look like in the context of college sport activism? Picower (2012) pointed to three overarching commitments made by teacher activists: reconciliation of a teacher's vision for justice with the realities of injustice around them, working within their classrooms to create liberatory spaces, and working collectively against oppression as activists. Although Picower's research findings did not emanate from a sporting context, they can provide a foundation from which we can better understand how to work toward creating liberatory spaces for teaching activism.

The first commitment, reconciliation of the vision for justice, not only grounded the educators' understanding of oppression within the context in which they were embedded but also highlighted how teacher activists articulate "a clear vision of an alternative world in which social justice is possible" (Picower, 2012, p. 565). By drawing from radical political economy, sport educators can accomplish both; critically articulating the oppressive system(s) through which hegemony is maintained in the face of activism while simultaneously articulating a vision of the future in which those systems are transformed. As public educational spaces around the country continue to face substantial restrictions on topics relating to racism, sexism, heterosexism, and more (e.g., see Anderson & Svrluga, 2022; Carrasco, 2022), a transformative orientation to the political-economic realities of college sport becomes a necessity for sporting educators. However, this may not be enough on its own.

The second commitment, working to create classrooms as liberatory spaces, refers to teacher activists' commitment to developing critical consciousness within students and imparting a sense of agency so students understand how they, too, can contribute to social change. In line with much of bell hooks's work on love and education as acts of resistance (Monahan, 2011), Luguetti and colleagues (2019) argue for a pedagogy of love in developing and implementing an activist sport model. The authors argue that a pedagogy of love is based on "the courage to not only help young people imagine better futures but act on those futures" (p. 643). Scholars could look to apply this model to educational spaces with proximity to college sport to further unpack

how cultivating classrooms as spaces for love, understanding, and transformation fits within a broader challenge to hegemonic structures in and through college sport (for more on the activist sport model, see Luguetti et al., 2017a, 2017b).

The third and final commitment found in Picower's (2012) research on teacher activists shed light on how educator activists value "(1) working collectively in groups and (2) getting teachers' voices into the policy arena" (p. 569). This collective action and subsequent desire to impact policy highlights an important aspect of teacher activism: hegemonic transgression takes place beyond the classroom setting. That is, "teaching" becomes something more than the unidirectional education model traditionally valued in higher education spaces. One powerful conceptualization of this comes from Spencer et al.'s (2016) work on athlete activism. Drawing from performance ethnography as a methodological orientation and teach-ins as an educational form of protest, the authors argue for the value of "*embodied and performative* involvement of alliances to advocate for progressive social justice movements" (p. 509, italics in original). In other words, teaching activism can – and perhaps should – become something that transcends traditional classroom spaces, is performed in collaboration with other forms of activism, and can contribute to substantive change by directly challenging the political economy of college sport.

An Integrated Approach to Scholar Activism and College Sport

With these foundational components of scholarly activism briefly described, we argue that sport scholars should embrace an integrated approach to activism in such a way that we rethink and challenge the end-goals of traditionally accepted modes of teaching and doing research – job tasks substantially shaped by the same political economy structuring college sport. There are both rich historical efforts and contemporary initiatives from which to draw inspiration for critically integrating scholarly activism with a variety of sporting activisms. Offering one type of approach to this, Agyemang and colleagues (2020) pointed to the work of Dave Zirin and his book with Michael Bennett, suggesting critical journalists and scholars "should collaborate across and within their respective networks of athletes, coaches, and leaders in sport organizations to produce... knowledge" (p. 963). Organized examples of this critical, integrative approach include the Olympic Project for Human Rights organized by Dr. Harry Edwards, the Institute for the Study of Sport, Society, and Social Change previously led by Dr. Akilah Carter-Francique at San Jose State University, The Institute for Diversity and Ethics in Sport led by Dr. Richard Lapchick at the University of Central Florida, and Collective Uplift organized by Dr. Joseph Cooper (see Cooper et al., 2019). In addition, critically engaged podcasts such as *Burn It All Down*, *End of Sport*, and *Creative Native* provide important tools for consciousness-raising and transformational critique of the institution of sport in general – and college sport in particular – and its role in perpetuating systemic inequities.

Each of these modes of engagement represent instances where research, teaching, and activism were/are strategically melded together to amplify systemically marginalized voices and explicitly challenge (college) sport hegemony. These examples are not necessarily offered as finite goals to which we all should aspire, but to show *it can be done* by creatively engaging college sport and the context(s) in which we all exist. By conducting research that continues to challenge hegemony within and beyond the political economy of college athletics and creating learning environments that enable the transgression of dominator boundaries, scholars assume both agency and responsibility in co-creating the future of sport activism. Future work on

scholarly activism should continue to explore the power and possibilities of organizing for liberation within and beyond college sport.

We also want to reiterate that the trend of athletes' activism to target the systemic shortfalls of college sport through legal and political efforts (see Crooks et al., 2022) needs to be reflected by scholar activism in the domain of college sport. In other words, scholar-activists committed to social justice need to utilize their institutional power to assist lawmakers in creating more equitable laws for college athletes, especially those belonging to minoritized communities. For instance, scholars can and should connect with lawmakers to create laws and achieve political gains that eliminate the exploitation of Black labor (e.g., NIL laws) and the marginalization and exclusion of transgender athletes in college sport. Similarly, scholars must hold college sport entities (including but not limited to the NCAA and its member institutions) accountable in demonstrating a sincere commitment to diversity, equity, inclusion, and (perhaps most importantly) justice – much like the TIDES report cards have done when it comes to diversity alone.

Often, the intercollegiate context in which sporting activism takes place is naturalized in the process of conducting research *on* activism. Such a position, however, is not neutral. Reorienting discussions of activism as taking place within a political economy fundamentally designed to diminish, co-opt, or put more plainly, to *resist* resistance, puts into perspective the (im)practicality of liberalized approaches to description and reform, instead pointing to the need for broader organization with and around scholarly activism as hegemonic transgression. By drawing from radical understandings of the political economy of intercollegiate athletes, scholars, practitioners, and activists are both empowered and encouraged to exercise their own agency as politicking bodies. In doing so, there is potential to challenge hegemonic structures that minimize agency and ultimately reshape the political economy of college sport in a way that creates a more equitable and holistically generative set of relations. While we refrain from articulating a vision of how these relations might operate in a “better” system, we invite scholar-educators, athletes, athletic administrators, university leadership, and community stakeholders to engage in critical dialogue and transformative action around the nature of sport in the intercollegiate context as a necessary starting point.

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