The Case for Marxist–Leninist Sport: Going Beyond the Limitations of Western Liberalism

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The sociology of sport has developed within and been intricately involved in the critique of neoliberalism. While important, there are certain limitations to this scholarship that are related to the nature of Western liberalism and academia. This paper attempts to argue a role for Marxist–Leninist thought in the sociology of sport. Historically excluded from academia after World War II, this bias is part of what Gabriel Rockhill has described as the “Global Theory Industry,” that decries socialism while remaining favorable to Western liberal capitalism. The anti-communism of the theory industry means that much of the work on neoliberalism and Marxism in the sociology of sport has ignored the experiences and efforts of socialist countries, as well as theorists from the Global South. This article broadly critiques existing neoliberal and Marxist studies of sport while arguing that a Marxist–Leninist approach may give those in the field a better account of sport and its relationship to domestic and global politics.

What is now happening to Marx’s theory has, in the course of history, happened repeatedly to the theories of revolutionary thinkers and leaders of oppressed classes fighting for emancipation. During the lifetime of great revolutionaries, the opposing classes constantly hounded them, received their theories with the most savage malice, the most furious hatred, and the most unscrupulous campaigns of lies and slander. After their death, attempts are made to convert them into harmless icons, to canonize them, so to say, and to hallow their names to a certain extent for the “consolation” of the oppressed classes and with the object of duping the latter, while at the same time robbing the revolutionary theory of its substance, blunting its revolutionary edge and vulgarizing it. Today, the bourgeoisie and the opportunists within the labor movement concur in this doctoring of Marxism. They omit, obscure, or distort the revolutionary side of this theory, its revolutionary soul. They push to the foreground and extol what is or seems acceptable to the bourgeoisie. (Lenin, 1917/1992, p. 7, emphasis in original)

In the last analysis, in the sports world, as in the world as a whole, it will be socialism or fascism, global human liberation or barbarism. (Hoch, 1972, p. 212)

Critiques of neoliberalism throughout the field of sociology and the sociology of sport have been well founded and deserved. The neoliberal turn of the 1980s represented a significant global change in economic and political thought. It is within this era that a large portion of the development and sociological study of sport has taken place. While this was an important advance in understanding how neoliberalism transformed sport over the last 40 years, it is less clear that the result of this focus has provided a clear way forward—outside of general policy recommendations that would limit some of the excesses of neoliberalism. The point of this paper is to begin a conversation as to the limitations of the approach taken by sociologists of sport during the era of neoliberalism. As will be explained later, I find the approach to neoliberalism to be divorced from some of the more fundamental problems of U.S./Western liberal capitalism, imperialism, and settler-colonialism.

Academia today is often engaged in the latest buzzwords concerning various aspects of inequality—the most common seeming to be anti-racism, decolonization, diversity equity inclusion and belonging, justice equity diversity and inclusion, social justice, and intersectionality. As laudable as some of these efforts are, many of these approaches maintain the status quo and, implicitly or explicitly, ignore and/or erase intellectual histories and socialist movements that made real inroads into addressing different forms of inequality. On the international stage, the most successful of such efforts to address various forms of oppression have fallen under the banner of socialism using the ideology and method of Marxism and Marxism–Leninism. Yet, a Marxist–Leninist approach has been highly stigmatized due to the events of the Cold War and the general atmosphere of anti-Marxist/anti-communist thought in both popular culture and academia. The five governments today that claim a version of Marxist–Leninist thought (China, Cuba, Vietnam, Laos, and the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea) are often denounced by Western governments, Nongovernmental Organizations (NGOs), and media, and even by some on the Western “Left,” despite their successes and (current) histories fighting U.S./Western imperialism.

Marxist–Leninist thought will be discussed more later, but this paper will begin with a discussion on the limitations of liberal academia in general, before moving toward an application of that critique to the sociology of sport. From there, I will discuss some of the research concerning Marx in the sociology of sport before discussing Marxism–Leninism and how it might offer some ideas that could give the discipline and its students a more coherent understanding, if not framework, of the relationship of sport to larger (global) society. My argument is not to throw out the important research on sport and neoliberalism, but I believe we have reached a point where we must (a) better understand liberal academia, (b) go back and reckon with some of the more core elements of U.S./Western societies, and (c) name where we want to go and act toward it.
Liberal Academia

My interest in naming academia as “liberal” is because, for all of the use of neoliberalism, what liberalism is often goes unexplored or is perhaps assumed in the substitution of neoliberalism for capitalism. A “liberal” in our current (the United States) popular usage tends to refer to those who generally support the Democratic Party and engage with “progressive” politics. However, liberalism as a political ideology emerges out of the Enlightenment as the change from feudalism to capitalism is being fully realized in Western Europe and the English colonies that would become the United States and Canada. While liberalism has historically shrouded itself in the notion of “equality,” its main thrust was an emphasis on individualism and the rights of property. Thus, liberalism becomes dominant with the rise of capitalism and works to justify the excesses of capitalism under the banner of individualism and property rights and, for Marx, leads to the creation of the proletariat (Landa, 2010; Losurdo, 2011; Mills, 2008).

As liberal capitalism developed, it began displacing and impoverishing peasants in Europe, creating the conditions that would lead to White settler-colonialism (White supremacy), indigenous genocides, and the Atlantic slave trade (Mills, 1999, 2008; Robinson, 2000; Williams, 1994). These processes of never-ending capital accumulation were all legitimized under the ideology of liberalism and its ideas of rights of property and “equality.” The focus of liberalism on individualism and the rights of private property has meant that in practice liberalism has been and is profoundly anti-democratic—“democracy” for the privileged few—in that democracy for the masses (socialism) ends up being a threat to private property and the bourgeoisie (Landa, 2010; Losurdo, 2011). Thus, efforts to limit democracy and undermine the vote have been hallmarks of liberal capitalism (Taylor, 2016).

As an institution that has developed within the liberal tradition, Western academia has been vulnerable to the needs of capitalism, perhaps the most obvious example being that of college athletics. The graduate level and professional level of higher education are no exception to this problem, even though many of us may feel that perhaps the most obvious example being that of college athletics.

The Sociology of Sport: Neoliberalism and Marxism

The sociology of sport is not exempt from these critiques. As mentioned previously, the sociology of sport has been interested in neoliberalism for quite some time. Perhaps the most prominent voices of this focus have been David Andrews and Michael Silk. Particularly, their edited book Sport and Neoliberalism (2012) is likely to pop up first on any search for “sport and neoliberalism” and contains the work of many prominent sociologists of sport. I do not take the book to be emblematic of all research on neoliberalism and sport, but it is 17 chapters of our best and brightest with an afterward from Norman Denzin—it is star-studded scholarship. Hence, my concern here is not with the scholarship but where it leaves us. Perhaps unsurprisingly then, “liberalism,” “fascism,” and “imperialism” are nonexistent except for one mention of “neo-imperialism.” “Capitalism” (mentioned 16 times—if you want to include “disaster capitalism,” that appears three times in one chapter) and “Marxism” (four) are mentioned but are concentrated into a few chapters. “Colonialism,” “postcolonial states,” and “decolonization” appear once each in the same chapter (pp. 23–37) that is also heavy with “capitalism” and “Marxism.” This is to say nothing about the context in which these terms were used. Obviously, this is a book about neoliberalism, but I would argue that retaining our scholarly work to some more fundamental concepts would make it easier to access a broader range of knowledge on the concepts mentioned that are relatively ignored—especially when our research ventures into global politics.

Yet in terms of where research on neoliberalism leaves us, it is difficult to read through some of the debates and arguments without getting the feeling that as sociologists of sport we have been spinning our wheels a bit. Throughout Sport and Neoliberalism, “class” and “inequality,” “democracy” (a term used too frequently and unproblematically in combination with bourgeois societies), “social justice,” and various forms of oppression are discussed in detail, but it seems the best we can hope for is minor change to the system. This harkens back to Rockhill’s comments on the compatible left that does not really challenge capitalism, imperialism, or settler-colonialism. Sometimes we are given examples of philosophy and sociology argued against anti-imperialist, anti-racist, or anti-capitalist projects during their time (e.g., Foucault had little to nothing to say about the Algerian struggle against France). Instead, there is a historical shift toward “cultural/Western Marxism” (I would include Cultural Studies here) that argues for a politics of reform and focuses on representation and cultural production removed from political struggles and organizing. This focus ends up reproducing liberalism in that it focuses on electoralism as a means for change, moves away from materialist class struggle, and attempts to equate communism with fascism—which was precisely the point of Hannah Arendt’s CIA funded work on totalitarianism (Saunders, 1999). That this way of thinking has become the norm in academia ends up being a check on the left and leftist critiques, ensuring that critiques of capitalism or imperialism only go so far or remain “compatible” with liberalism—Noam Chomsky is perhaps the best example of this tendency. Finally, since many of these theorists were also absurdly prolific, the insistence that students must learn them in order to say anything contributes to an “economy of time” that leaves out the possibility of learning much else. Hence, the status quo of academia works to ignore or crowd out Black/Brown, indigenous, and other radical theorists from the Global South (Rockhill, 2021a).
protests, or movements, or groups that are “anti-neoliberal,” but with little discussion as to the political ideology or viability of such groups/actions. This is a problem in liberal academia, but at times also in ostensibly “leftist” or critical takes on sport that end up reproducing and keeping us in a liberal capitalist bubble, unable to break out because socialism has been taken off the table. A good example of this is the work of David Zirin and Jules Boykoff.

Zirin and Boykoff

The work of Jules Boykoff and Dave Zirin is often emblematic of the problems discussed above and by Rockhill. Though Boykoff is a political scientist and Zirin is a journalist, their work has been prolific and influential in the sociology of sport for some time—Boykoff for his critiques of the Olympics and mega-events, and Zirin for his articles, books, the Edge of Sports podcast, and relatively recent “TV show.” Further, when it comes to critiques of the Olympics or mega-events, they often collaborate for Zirin’s various outlets, including The Nation. While both have their work disseminated popularly, Zirin’s work is especially notable because he is a significant contributor to the public critique of sport, and he has been embraced by sport sociologists—being a keynote speaker at the annual North American Society for the Sociology of Sport conference in 2007—who often appear on his platforms. There have been a couple of critiques of their work by anti-imperialists (Haiphong, 2022; Xu, 2022), but for the most part, their work seems to be accepted in academia.

Where their research and critiques fall short are intimately related to the issues above—they tend to flatten the geopolitical realities of U.S. imperialism, uncritically take Western news sources at their word, and thus inherently engage in anti-communist/socialist beliefs. I am interested in their work here because both have written about the Olympics in China (2008 and 2022) and because China is the only socialist country (more on this later) wealthy enough to have hosted the Olympics. Zirin begins writing about the Beijing Olympics in 2008, and Boykoff has extensive sections in his 2014/2016 books. Because of this, we can see some consistent, and overlapping, tendencies over time of each author and in their collaborations.

First, a tendency to flatten the geopolitical realities of U.S. imperialism. For each author, it is far too common to see every dissent or protest at the Olympics (or World Cup) as equal, which makes every government and their position in the global economic order more or less the same. This happens because their point of analysis is the mega-event, various corporations, or the (international) governing bodies of sport, and not imperialism per se. This approach might work well when looking at protests in the West or countries with capitalist governments, but I would argue that a focus on imperialism would enrich this work by giving us a better understanding of the tensions and contradictions within those capitalist countries. For example (here just the events Boykoff and Zirin focus on outside of the West), the long history of U.S. military and economic interventions in Japan (Tokyo Olympics), South Korea (Pyeongchang Olympics), Brazil (World Cup), Qatar (World Cup), and Russia (Sochi Olympics). The emphasis too often locates the problems within these countries themselves and not the result of ongoing conflict with U.S. imperialism. Furthermore, while the International Olympic Committee, FIFA, and Western-based corporations are critiqued, it is far too possible to walk away thinking that the solution is to fix those bad actors rather than act toward socialism.

However, such an analysis begins to fall apart when we consider China, a government established with an explicitly Marxist–Leninist, dialectical analysis of material conditions and trying to manage the contradictions of creating and maintaining socialism in a capitalist world. While the countries listed in the previous paragraph have had their governments and leaders turned over to the interests of the United States/West at various points, China has been able to maintain adherence to Marxist–Leninist thought and resist U.S. government/corporate intervention into, and control of, its politics. This resistance has meant that the United States has continually tried to undermine the government of China in various ways, but most notably through supporting and then highly publicizing public protests to Western audiences. Often, these efforts take place through media with predictable actors behind the scenes such as the CIA, National Endowment for Democracy, and the various U.S./Western NGOs.

Such was the case with the 2019 Hong Kong protests, widely covered by Western media, as well as Boykoff and Zirin (Zirin, 2019; Zirin & Boykoff, 2021a, 2021b). The primary claim of Western news outlets was that university students faced intense police brutality for protesting the Chinese government—which is precisely the line Boykoff and Zirin took. Conversely, the extreme violence of the protestors went unreported, and it became increasingly obvious (if the U.S. flags and signs in English were not enough of a tip) that the protestors were receiving funding from U.S. agencies. In their (Boykoff and Zirin’s) reporting, there was also little consideration for the colonial history of Hong Kong, the event that sparked the protests (a pregnant woman was killed by her boyfriend in Taiwan, fled to Hong Kong where there was no extradition, and China attempted to fix the colonial era loophole), and how those contradictions represented an opportunity to make the Chinese government look bad by U.S. interests (Caines, 2019; Flounders, 2019; Lamb, 2019; Zeese et al., 2019).

These practices bring us to the second point of uncritically accepting Western news sources at their word. Throughout the work of Boykoff and Zirin, we are often told about the “atrocities” of the “authoritarian” Chinese government without any, or very little, criticism of the sources. Some recurring highlights include mention of Tiananmen Square, religious oppression (particularly of Falun Gong), ethnic oppression in Tibet and Xinjiang, “crackdowns” at the Hong Kong protests, and the general lack of “free speech” or “democracy.” (It is beyond the scope of this paper, but it is important to mention that all of the specific claims—e.g., with Xinjiang [Qiao Collective, 2020; Xinhua, 2021]—have been debunked or properly put into context outside of mainstream Western media and academia.)

One, however, is particularly interesting, that being the story of the “forced eviction” of 1.5 million Beijing residents in the lead-up to the 2008 Olympics, which is repeated throughout a near decade of Boykoff’s work (Boykoff, 2014, 2016, 2022c). The “forced eviction” narrative often ran as a striking headline throughout Western media aimed at invoking shock and outrage. Yet, the number of 1.5 million forcible evictions initially came from the Centre of Housing Rights and Evictions (COHRE, 2007), a Geneva-based NGO founded by Scott Leckie (Displacement Solutions, n.d.) who has a history of working with the United Nations, World Bank, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, as well as other international organizations. The number was immediately taken up by Western media and repeated as fact. However, as David Ferguson (2008) writes, that number represents nearly 10% of Beijing’s total population (at the time), it was a figure that was constructed using a 10-year timeframe, and it includes every single person who was rehoused during that time. A later report by COHRE (2008) admits that the number of those
forcibly evicted is unknown, and their insistence that thousands experienced a decline in living conditions is so full of qualifiers to the point of being useless. This intersection between the NGO “caring” industry and the Western press resulted in a fake story that regurgitates anti-China and Sinophobic tropes. For the sociology of sport, uncritically importing this Sinophobia and uncomplicatedly calling for solidarity with protestors in China (Zirin & Boykoff, 2020) is an unscientific analysis that reproduces liberalization and U.S. hegemony.

Taking Western sources at their word or as common sense leads to my next point, the inherent use of anti-communist/socialist rhetoric. Throughout the work of Zirin and Boykoff (Boykoff, 2014, 2016, 2022a, 2022b, 2022c; Zirin & Boykoff, 2020, 2021a, 2021b, 2022), China is “authoritarian,” “totalitarian,” or a “dystopia.” Often, Zirin links to articles published in The Nation, a liberal news organization where he works, and both rely heavily on reports from the Western NGOs Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International—two organizations with credibility issues when it comes to non-Western countries, such as Cuba, for example (Ludlam, 2012). This anti-communism/socialism is a serious problem among those in the West who otherwise consider themselves to be Marxists, radicals, or generally on the “Left” and refuse to see China as an ongoing and very successful socialist project despite its immense challenges internally and externally (U.S. imperialism and military encirclement). The authoritarian rhetoric flies in the face of everything China has accomplished with poverty reduction, education, life expectancy, quality of life, environmentalism, technological development, transportation and infrastructure (domestically and internationally), democracy, health care, and so forth all in the span of 70 years. There is also a blind spot in such an analysis that supposes that there will be a socialist revolution without a counterrevolution, which means asking the question of who socialists and socialist states have to fight—it is the capitalists, the international bourgeoisie, and domestic petite bourgeoisie that have overturned so many socialist revolutions and killed millions around the globe—questions answered by anti-colonial thinkers like Fanon (2005 [1961]). To willfully engage in that level of violence is not a part of Marxist–Leninist thought, nor or historically, but rather that of liberal capitalism.

A final point of consideration here is that by failing to think with Marx, Zirin in particular ends up with a contradictory politics. Zirin has published sympathetic articles about Cuba (2016) and even the legacy of Hugo Chavez (2013) but then turns right around with the same charge of “human rights abuses” and “authoritarianism,” so often levied against Cuba (Castro) and Chavez, for China. Jones Manoel’s (2020) essay has called this tendency the “fetish for defeat” of Western Leftists/Markists—also worth noting is what Haiphong describes as the “China exception” (2022). The contradictory nature of this politics ultimately ends up reinforcing liberalization by keeping us from acknowledging existing alternatives to Western liberal politics while fetishizing those countries that struggle the most because of it—for example, Palestine and Cuba. Taken together, the four points brought up here not only reinforce the anti-communism/socialism of the liberal West but also contribute to Anti-Asian and Orientalist tropes—in particular, their article on the “disappearance” of Chinese tennis player Peng Shuai (Zirin & Boykoff, 2021b) is a good example of imperialist feminism (Abu-Lughod, 2013; Kumar, 2016). Again, even though Zirin and Boykoff often pay lip service to anti-imperialism, their work too often ends up recentering the United States/West as the site where truth is found and resistance will begin, which history has not proven to be accurate. It is fair to criticize China, but Western academics and journalists must be self-critical and recognize certain geopolitical histories and realities in which our work is embedded.

**Marxism and Sport**

As the nature of liberal academia distorts the revolutionary nature of Marxism and virtually ignores Lenin, “Leftist” (to be as broad as possible) takes on sports have generally been all over the place, reflecting the fractured nature of “Leftists” in our society today. Regardless, numerous scholars have addressed the position and role of sport in society over the years using an approach we might consider to be Marxist in some fashion. Some of the more significant highlights might include: Jean-Marie Brohm (1978), Sport, A Prison of Measured Time; Paul Hoch (1972), Rip Off the Big Game: The Exploitation of Sports by the Power Elite; William Morgan (1994), Leftist Theories of Sport: A Critique and Reconstruction; Bero Rigauer (1981), Sport and Work; Gabriel Kuhn (2011), Soccer vs. the State; Simon Kuper (2006), Soccer Against the Enemy; Marc Perelman (2012), Barbaric sport: A global plague; and McDonald and Carrington’s edited volume (2009), Marxism, Cultural Studies and Sport, and there are numerous articles discussing Marx(ism) and sport, Chris Bambury’s article “Marxism and Sport” (International Socialism, 1996; also worth noting is Terry Eagleton’s 2010 piece, “Football: A dear friend to capitalism,” published in The Guardian), and the work of Alan Bairner (2007, 2009) are notable.

The only one of the above texts that simply and explicitly ends with a call for a socialist revolution is Hoch’s Rip Off the Big Game, which seems like poor state of affairs. As the reader may also see, many of the “primary texts” of a “Marxist” analysis of sport are rather dated. More importantly, however, many engage in the same or similar problems discussed above, regardless of the quality of scholarship: Marx/Marxism is questioned as to its usefulness (McDonald and Carrington, depends on the author); there is a retreat from class and material struggle, and we are driven into liberal/neo-Marxist (Morgan, Rigauer) or anti-state/anarchist (Kuhn, Kuper) approaches; the critiques are self-contained or hesitant to name socialism; there is anti-Soviet/China/Cuba rhetoric (Brohm—his work aligns with Trotskyism); and/or sport is seen as irredeemable (Brohm, Perelman) or that the masses are “brainwashed” (Bambury, Eagleton). Again, this is not to say this work needs to be thrown out, as the analysis of sport under capitalism remains important, but rather to recognize certain limitations—some of which may have been driven by the very politics of academic knowledge production.

Perhaps the most explicit, relatively recent book on Marx and sport, Marxism, Cultural Studies and Sport (eds., Carrington & McDonald, 2009), has its positives and negatives depending on the author but ends up reproducing several problems that Rockhill’s work discusses. At the outset and in different points in the book, the validity of Marx is questioned, Marxism is at times seen as antiquated or deterministic, and the revolutionary ideology of Marxist–Leninist thought is treated as a perversion (“Stalinist Marxism”) that “buttresses reactionary regimes” (Carrington & McDonald, 2009, p. 34). Indeed, Lenin’s work (2010) on extending Marxist thought to Russia and his work on imperialism (the move from monopoly capitalism to imperialist capitalism) receives scant mention throughout the text, but there is also no significant work cited from Global South authors who have either analyzed their societies using the science of Marxism–Leninism (dialectical
materialism) or engaged in actual revolutions. It is this disregard for the history of Third World struggle—of which the Soviet Union played a defining role (Prashad, 2017)—that is, perhaps the most egregious error.

The authors of Marxism, Cultural Studies and Sport are worth quoting here in their introductory chapters, thus setting the stage for the book:

This, perhaps, is where those Cultural Studies scholars who would describe themselves as being on the left and most probably socialist would part company with those who would self-identify as Marxist and who believe that in the last instance all relevant theoretical work must ultimately lead to an increase in class consciousness, aimed at advancing political struggle and eventually revolutionary change. Anything short of that, however well intentioned, is at best reformist and at worst complicit with the very oppressive conditions of existence that capital produces. However, a truly revolutionary Marxism would seem, in the end, to have little need to study sport other than to expose it—in Jean Marie Brohm fashion—as a form of ideological manipulation. That is, sport is so complicit and devoid of any counter-cultural elements, let alone transformative potential, that it becomes pointless to study the content of particular sports formations. We may still need to show why sport is such a restricted popular cultural practice but once this is done the intellectual work is over. Popular culture in general and sport in particular are viewed in this context “either as politically irredeemable or as strategically irrelevant” (Gruneau, 1988: 14). Thus any radical Marxist theory of sport becomes at once redundant and eventually oxymoronic. (Carrington & McDonald, 2009, pp. 22, emphasis in original)

Arguably the most damaging distortion was effected by the regime that emerged in the USSR out of the disintegration of the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917. Marxism, filtered through the realpolitik of the USSR, or Stalinism, slaughtered, persecuted and imprisoned millions of people all under the banner of Marxism. Socialist revolutions were no longer created by the self-emancipation of the working class, but could be imposed by the military power of tanks. While the catastrophic Soviet ideology of “Marxism–Leninism” (known as Stalinism) has crumbled, the legacy is still with us, because Stalinist Marxism with its crude economism and philosophical catechisms disoriented at least two generations of socialist activists. Stalinist Marxism also framed attempts by Marxists in more advanced capitalist societies of the West to rescue Marxian theory from its economistic and deterministic straitjacket by shifting to the analysis of ideology and culture (Anderson, 1976). This highlights the third aspect of what I am describing as a distortion of Marx’s revolutionary legacy: Western Marxism which is characterized by what I call academicism, or the non-dialectical privileging of ideas over action. (Carrington & McDonald, 2009)

Admittedly, these are perhaps the most provocative paragraphs from their otherwise decent chapters, but they also serve to confuse the most. It ends up being difficult to understand just what use Marxism and a focus on class analysis is within the sport context. Without speculating as to the experiences or relationships of the authors to self-identified “Marxists,” the authors set the stage to repeat the very errors they seemingly condemn—that is, an ideal/orthodox Marxism devoid of conflict (liberal nonviolence) or geopolitical realities. A very real problem in liberal academia is explicitly demonstrated by McDonald at the end of their paragraph above; they rightly criticize Western Marxism but then erase and demean the legacy of “actually existing socialism” and mistakenly conflate Marxism–Leninism with Stalinism.

Let us take the two claims by Carrington, in sum (a) that if theoretical work does not increase class consciousness, then it is reformist or complicit and (b) that a Marxist analysis views sport as so complicit and devoid of transformative potential that its analysis becomes redundant and oxymoronic. The first point partially gets at my argument in this paper. I have already stated that Cultural Studies is anti-Marxist or Western Marxist at best, but why should our work not be aimed at raising class consciousness? Why should we not make clear the viable alternative to capitalism and way forward for human development (perhaps survival)—socialism? Theory for the sake of theory? As argued previously, the structure of liberal academia has worked hard to move academics into the cultural/identity realm and away from class struggle. From a Marxist–Leninist perspective, workers either control the state or they do not, and workers either subsume capital to their own interests or they do not, but there is a host of academic research that does not even name the fundamental distinction and the role of the state in class dominance, much less the basic struggle between the bourgeoisie and proletariat.

Carrington’s second point is related to the first. I would agree that, and though there is a lot of debate historically, Western Marxists (I would not call them revolutionary) have viewed sport negatively. Carrington also seems to rely on orthodox Marxism, a kind of rigid, unchanging, and deterministic understanding of Marx, as a proxy to argue against. However, the science of dialectical materialism and Marxism–Leninism does not view society (or anything material) as static and sees socialism as a process toward communism, as there are always contradictions to be managed. As Sean Sayers (1990), pp. 165) writes, a key aspect of a dialectical approach, as opposed to analytical, mechanistic, or otherwise deterministic approaches, to historical materialism is that:

Social processes have their own internal dynamic, their own inner contradictions. The different aspects of society—forces and relations of production, base and superstructure—are aspects of a single whole, internally and organically related, in dialectical interaction and conflict. It is these interactions, these conflicts, these contradictions—which are internal to society—that lead to historical change. In the process, none of these aspects is inert or passive: the forces and relations of production and also the superstructure are all transformed and developed.

This approach applies to sport and has been borne out in the experiences of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), Cuba, China, and other socialist experiments and revolutions. To different degrees, the democratization of sport and access to physical activity (sport for all) have been a goal of socialist states and their ideas of human development—particularly in the Soviet Union (Article 119 of the USSR constitution explicitly defined the right to leisure and physical activity), Cuba, German Democratic Republic, Nicaragua, and China (Hampson, 1980; Jarvie et al., 2008; Motte & Green, 2018; Pettitavino & Pye, 1994; Pye, 1986; Whorton & Wagner, 1985). The research telling us how socialist states use(d) sport is there, but the anti-communism of academia limits its influence to the point where sport outside of capitalism becomes almost unimaginable. Carrington ends up calling for the
best of both Marxism and Cultural Studies, a “sport without final guarantees,” but his focus on Cultural Studies and the work of Stuart Hall keeps us without a definite goal to work toward, just a forever struggle in the cultural realm.

Let us turn toward McDonald’s paragraph, which makes the claims that Marxism–Leninism is actually “Stalinism” and is responsible for the deaths of millions, and thus was in part the reason for Western Marxism. I would argue that the truth of the matter is that Marxists and Marxist–Leninists can no longer hide from the legacy of Stalin or other socialist leaders the liberal West considers authoritarian, dictatorial, or totalitarian. Stalin’s decisions were made in a certain time and context in which the best outcome was the death of over 20–25 million Soviets in WWII fighting Nazi Germany and saving the world from German fascism. Even then, as Losurdo (2020) points out, the atrocities of the United States and the United Kingdom during the same time grossly outweigh anything Stalin did. Western foreign policy did not see Eastern Europeans as “White” (Hitler’s plan was to colonize Slavic peoples), the English killed over one hundred million people (Sullivan & Hickel, 2022) in preventable famines in India alone (to say nothing of the death tolls enacted by colonial powers in Africa, Asia, the Americas, or Ireland), and the United States was violently expanding its influence in the Western hemisphere along with its pogrom of White supremacist (Jim Crow) terror against Black Americans in the South. Even the Western-defined atrocities of the gulags of the USSR are no match to the experiences inflicted in U.S. prisons, in number or severity, today. It is also important to remember that the Soviets were fighting internal and external threats to their revolution, which puts the political purges of Stalin in a different picture than what the West has painted (Losurdo, 2020).

McDonald goes on to critique Western Marxism, and appropriately so, but, somewhat ironically in his call for a more revolutionary Marxism, he would basically have us reconstruct Marxist–Leninist thought without the “baggage” of the USSR. The anti-communist baggage of the Soviet Union, or Stalin, must now be seen in the proper context of what Michael Parenti (1997) called “siege socialism” (not a moment of peace from Western imperialism) and not some idealistic liberal approach to the gradual transfer of power from the elites to workers without violence or conflict. After the United States backed, undemocratic dismantling of the Soviet Union (Martínez, 2020), and the opening of the Soviet archives, there is a growing body of literature accessible in the West that has tried to better understand Stalin and has found that many of the assertions made against him were false. It is beyond this paper to fully explain the differences between state capitalism and (state) socialism, but I would direct readers to Lenin’s (1918/1972) “Left-Wing” Childishness, the words of Deng Xiaoping (1985a, 1985b) and Xi Jinping (2013), and others (Day, 2021a; Li, 2011; Losurdo, 2017) who understand that adopting (“neoliberal” capitalist policies) does not make a country capitalist/neoliberal. Poverty is not socialism—thus, the need to increase industrial and technological capabilities is necessary to ensure prosperity for all. Further, building socialism is very much a human process (experiment) in which mistakes will likely be made, but as long as the communist party holds power the path toward socialism and communism will continue. For Lenin, the arguments of the “Childish Leftists” inevitably led to the call for a petite bourgeois counterrevolution against the interests of the proletariat. For the sake of the argument here, efforts to say that China is neoliberal/capitalist would have to argue with the fact that the communist party has never lost power since the reforms of Deng and, despite Western media/academia’s insistence on its coming collapse, has shown remarkable progress under Xi Jinping against corruption, environmental degradation, poverty, and so forth.

Second, as mentioned previously, Manoel’s (2020) “fetish for defeat” of Western Marxists (relatedly, see Losurdo’s [1999] work on communist self-contempt) refers to the tendency of Western Marxists/Leftists to love revolutionaries or revolutions, but only in the case of their martyrdom. Hence, Western Marxists will love Che Guevara but not Fidel Castro, Salvador Allende but not Hugo Chavez, and Palestine but not North Korea. The move allows Western Marxists to maintain the purity of their Marxism without having to deal with the messiness of making history—they demand perfection. The anti-communism of the West often fails to consider what life was like for the masses before these revolutions and, again, fails to consider who socialists had/have to fight. In sum, these sections on liberal academia and Marxist academia are two sides of the same coin, and one may be a little further “left,” but they both stop their analysis at crucial points that would push us toward socialism.

Marxism–Leninism and Sport

Reclaiming Marxism–Leninism

Marxism–Leninism refers to the intellectual legacy of Marxism that was extended by Vladimir Lenin, the first leader of the Soviet Russia, to examine the class structure of his own country (then feudal Tsarist Russia) using Marx’s scientific method of dialectical materialism. For Marxists–Leninists, dialectical materialism means the examination of the material realities of a society in order to understand (a) which parts of that society are growing or progressing with revolutionary potential, (b) which parts of that society are in the decline, and (c) how the component parts of this society relate to the larger contextual and historical whole (society has not come out of nowhere). An analogy is often drawn with the natural sciences (evolution) and the notion that small quantitative changes eventually lead to qualitative (revolutionary) changes of the entire system. The dialectical method of Marx understands that nothing material is static and tries to identify which classes in society are capable of bringing about the required quantitative changes that would lead to socialist revolution. The major change here from power. Historically, the accusation of betrayal was levied at the Soviet Union, but it takes a new form today in claiming that China is not socialist (socialism with Chinese characteristics) but state capitalist. This is misleading at best, a lie at worst. There is not enough space in this paper to fully explain the differences between state capitalism and (state) socialism, but I would direct readers to Lenin’s (1918/1972) “Left-Wing” Childishness, the words of Deng Xiaoping (1985a, 1985b) and Xi Jinping (2013), and others (Day, 2021a; Li, 2011; Losurdo, 2017) who understand that adopting (“neoliberal” capitalist policies) does not make a country capitalist/neoliberal. Poverty is not socialism—thus, the need to increase industrial and technological capabilities is necessary to ensure prosperity for all. Further, building socialism is very much a human process (experiment) in which mistakes will likely be made, but as long as the communist party holds power the path toward socialism and communism will continue. For Lenin, the arguments of the “Childish Leftists” inevitably led to the call for a petite bourgeois counterrevolution against the interests of the proletariat. For the sake of the argument here, efforts to say that China is neoliberal/capitalist would have to argue with the fact that the communist party has never lost power since the reforms of Deng and, despite Western media/academia’s insistence on its coming collapse, has shown remarkable progress under Xi Jinping against corruption, environmental degradation, poverty, and so forth.

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previous uses of dialectics is in Marx’s advances on Hegel, by understanding that history is a history of real material class struggle (not the development of “great ideas”), and it is from that struggle that people come to understand and change themselves and society (Day, 2022; Engels, 2021; Stalin, 1907).

In the traditional academic teaching of Marx, we often learn that Marx believed that a socialist revolution would only come from well-developed capitalist nations, where the proletariat had reached a certain level of consciousness and would take control of the state. The intervention of Lenin and the Bolshevik revolution, however, turned some of these understandings on their head, in that capitalism was only semideveloped in Tsarist Russia and there was still a large peasant class (traditionally thought of as reactionary) at the time of the revolution. What the extension of Lenin’s thought meant for Marxism then was that colonized and otherwise exploited nations throughout the world learned that they could use Marxist–Leninist thought to understand their own situations and push for national liberation, with many revolutions happening in the late 20th century. Hence, one of the main emphases of Marxist–Leninist thought is a recognition and respect for national struggle against settler-colonialism/imperialism and the sovereignty of nations and peoples (Lenin, 1914/1972; Ofari, 1972). (A noteworthy secondary emphasis of Marxism–Leninist thought is that of “socialism in one country” vs. Trotsky’s “permanent revolution,” in which the latter often criticizes socialist countries for the “betrayal of socialism” if they are not exporting revolution to other countries.)

It is this emphasis on national sovereignty that has routinely drawn the ire of Western liberal capitalism, particularly in cases where valuable resources are nationalized by the state for the benefit of the people. The interference by U.S./Western imperialism into socialist projects goes back (at the very least) to the Bolshevik revolution itself. Subsequently, it has meant the murder of millions of innocent (often indigenous) people and communists, and dozens of regime changes, all in the name of protecting private property and U.S./Western business interests (Bevins, 2020; Gonzalez, 2011; Immerwahr, 2020; Prashad, 2020). The history of U.S./Western regime change and policies of racial control have historically served as inspiration for fascist projects. Let us forget, both Hitler and South Africa drew inspiration from how the United States dealt with African Americans and Indigenous peoples (Mamdani, 2020; Whitman, 2017).

Conversely, Third World revolutions took seriously Marxist–Leninist thought and tried to apply it to their unique situations. Vijay Prashad’s work Red Star Over the Third World and Walter Rodney’s The Russian Revolution: A View from the Third World are excellent introductions to this history. Academia often marginalizes the importance of the legacy of Marxist–Leninist thought throughout the Third World but also ignores the efforts of socialist states to address issues of race/ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and disability because of the stigma against Marxism–Leninism.

Marxism–Leninism for Sport

So, how might we approach sport a little differently? As an institution that developed rapidly throughout the 20th century due to advances in technology, sport, liberalism, and capitalism spread during the era of Western colonialism and imperialism. Sport was an integral part of imperialism and the civilizing mission, and it is a core reason why we have the globalized corporate sports that we have today (Gems, 2005). What is also important to understand is the precise role that sport played in promoting Western imperialism. The rise of sport in English boys’ schools was in part to teach masculinity and prepare young men for the imperial mission. In the absence of war, sport became the battlefield in preparation for war. This imperial mission was also justified through Social Darwinism, which promoted the notion that the White race needed to stay strong through militarily oppressing all others. Thus, while sport in the colonies was used to “civilize” the native, in the imperial core, it developed to promote and maintain White heterosexual male supremacy (Mangan, 2012).

Sport has not stopped fulfilling this role. In the United States, it is common to see taxpayer funded military displays, the playing of the national anthem, and other days/ nights devoted to the military or police (Scott, 2016). Athletes who have resisted this dominant version of sport have often had their careers cut short or negatively impacted in some way, the more obvious examples being Paul Robeson, Tommy Smith, John Carlos, Muhammad Ali, Colin Kaepernick, and Mahmoud Abdul Rauf. Further, the industry constantly seeks to pacify us with representation and philanthropy in the guise of anti-racism or “creating opportunities.” Such an end goal has long been criticized by radical theorists for the aforementioned problems, that a liberal capitalist system is inherently racist, sexist, heteronormative, and cannot be simply reformed through policy. In sport, this tendency is particularly problematic in that it is perhaps one of the most exploitative institutions we have—as it directly targets children for the material benefit of adults. Various efforts to “end” or “kickout” racism/sexism also fail to convincingly articulate a way out of our current predicament other than “education.”

Part of the problem with taking Marxist–Leninist thought off the table is that it significantly hampers our future possibilities, precisely because it is that ideology that has provided the theory and praxis for the most successful revolutions around the world, lifted hundreds of millions out of poverty and illiteracy, and worked to enshrine the rights of racial/ethnic minorities, women, and LGBTQ communities (Prashad, 2017). If we want to move forward, we must begin engaging actual radicals, revolutionaries, and communists—such as Frantz Fanon, Aimé Césaire, Assata Shakur, Claudia Jones, Walter Rodney, Kwame Nkrumah, Eduardo Galeano, Amilcar Cabral, Gerald Horne, Charisse Burden-Stelly, Che Guevara, Fidel Castro, Mao Zedong, Ho Chi Minh, Dominico Losurdo, Thomas Sankara, Huey P. Newton, Kwame Ture, Vijay Prashad, and others, but also of course Marx, Engels, and Lenin. In fact, because the North American Society for the Sociology of Sport is situated on stolen land, it might be more beneficial to read anti-colonial scholars like Gerald Horne, Sylvia Wynter, Frantz Fanon, and Mahmoud Mamdani, before Marx/Lenin.

Further, the inability or unwillingness to consider what revolutionary and socialist states thought and tried to do concerning sport, leisure, and physical activity only demonstrates Western chauvinism, not the limitations of Marx or Marxism–Leninism. For example, Cuba under Fidel undertook a policy of mass sport participation and the development of elite sport (modified from the Soviet model) to work toward their socialist goals of human development but also to create athletes who could be role models for the population and demonstrate the superiority of socialism/communism on the international sporting stage. Marxist–Leninist thought was used by the Soviets, and then the Cubans, to interpret and use sport/leisure (what they termed “physical culture”) for the educational and cultural development of a new communist society (Pettavino & Pye, 1994). The Cuban system, despite a relatively small population and the U.S. embargo, has had great success at the international level in the Olympics (when they did not boycott), Pan-American games, and, of course, baseball, but they credit the success to their fundamental commitment to mass participation.
Contrary to the idea that a Marxist analysis of sport would find sport useless and reactionary, Marxist–Leninist socialist experiments have found sport a useful tool in the fight for socialism (Chappell, 2004; Pettavino & Pye, 2022, pp. 10). I would argue that instead of wiping away the history of socialist struggles, assuming they did not consider this or that oppression (when they often did) or “betrayed” socialism, that we instead engage in, learn from, and adapt the various ideas, practices, and policies that they worked toward.

Finally, a Marxist–Leninist approach to sport can give us better, deeper, historical insights into many of the problems in sport today but can also be used to give us direction forward, or at least a more coherent politics. For example, many liberal academics were thrilled with the election of Barack Obama, but sociologist Eduardo Bonilla-Silva sounded the alarm early that his politics were neoliberal (to paraphrase his words later, we found out that neoliberalism worked very well in blackface [Bonilla-Silva, 2015]). Obama’s (neo)liberalism was on full display when, reportedly (McMenamin, 2020), Chris Paul and LeBron James called him concerning the police shooting of Jacob Blake in Wisconsin and what NBA players should do, as there was concern that they might not play during the National Basketball Association (NBA) playoffs. Obama’s answer was to build something more lasting that would make the Blake shooting less likely, to which NBA players and the NBA eventually agreed to form a “social justice coalition” aimed at “increasing access to voting, promoting civic engagements, and advocating meaningful police and criminal justice reform.” Fine, but none of these solutions get at the class struggle that Black Americans endure. Similarly, these issues were an enduring problem of the #BLM movement (along with an easily corruptible slogan, “Black Lives Matter”) that at least appeared to get funneled into the (neo)liberal Democratic Party.

This is why Fanon’s (2005) very brief section on sport and the need to create politically conscious athletes is so important, because liberals have for so long been and seen themselves as the default for social change. Hence, despite Obama’s identity, or rather because of it, he was effectively able to curtail a protest that might have raised much more interesting questions and possibilities, demonstrating why a politics of representation is, ultimately, a dead end. Parallels here could also easily be linked with black struggle, liberal appropriation or co-optation, and the relationship between liberalism and fascism. Such insights could help us understand the role of liberals and the Democratic Party in the struggle, liberal appropriation or co-optation, and the relationship between liberalism and fascism. Such insights could help us understand the role of liberals and the Democratic Party in the United States, constantly talking about bipartisanship, when it is already here (Burden-Stelley, 2021; Day, 2021b; Horne, 1994; Jackson, 1972; Rockhill, 2020a, 2020b; Shakur, 1988). If we fail to recognize and teach for this context, then we are reproducing the liberal academic status quo. Through a Marxist–Leninist approach to sport, we can hopefully avoid the pitfalls of liberalism and begin turning over these billion-dollar stadiums to the people who worked for them.

Conclusions

My purpose in this article is to begin a conversation and a shift in our relationship to Marxist and Marxist–Leninist thought. Far from being dated, irrelevant, deterministic, or “authoritarian,” the tradition of Marxist–Leninist thought as a science has proven to be extremely flexible and invested in full human development. I would also ask that we begin to understand as a discipline that the information coming out of U.S. media and various U.S./Western (state/NGO-funded) organizations is not to be trusted at face value, but neither is a lot of (state/NGO-funded) academia. If we are to have any use as academics, it means that we need to develop, educate, and press for the form of sport, but also theory (as well as praxis) of sport, that Frantz Fanon (1961/2005) envisioned—to create socially conscious political actors.

Moreover, the link between liberalism and fascism is necessary to understand our current political moment. I would, perhaps too simply, make a very sharp divide between capitalist and socialist societies. The left/right binary in liberal capitalism (including social democrats) is still capitalist, and so I would not consider the “Left” to be anything but advocating for worker control of the state. Liberal capitalism is always right wing and engaged in various fascist practices. Fascism is not a mistake of capitalism, rather a certain mode of appropriation (primitive accumulation of labor and natural resources). These forms of appropriation include the use of slave labor (U.S. prisons), unwarranted detention (immigration detention centers), and ongoing genocide (concerning Native Americans—missing women and land—and the police murders of Black/Brown people). Hoch (1972) is correct to point out that it will be socialism or fascism, because the divide between liberalism and fascism is very blurry in the last instance. Liberals are continually amazed that their institutions are not the bulwark against extreme oppression that they think, because they do not understand that the basis of their ideology is inherently amenable to fascism (Day, 2021b; Landa, 2010; Losurdo, 2011). It is no mistake that liberal anti-communism has long been used to attack various anti-oppression efforts in the United States, whether they were communist or not (Burden-Stelley, 2021; Horne, 1994).

Revolutionary class struggle is and should be fundamental to how we approach sport within our research, including research that may focus on other forms of oppression as well. In sport, the work of Bairner stands out in its arguments for a fundamental class analysis of sport, and the recent work of Chen Chen aligns with this paper for calling out the need to recenter the concepts of capitalism (2022), colonialism (Chen & Mason, 2019), and imperialism (2023). The work of fully reclaiming and learning from historical and present-day projects of socialist countries has yet to be done, and thus, the ways that sport can contribute toward ending capitalism have not either—or at least not in the mainstream. Our work needs to begin more forcefully stressing, as Black radicals in the 20th century knew, that fascism is not around some never-ending corner, it is already here (Burden-Stelley, 2021; Day, 2021b; Horne, 1994; Jackson, 1972; Rockhill, 2020a, 2020b; Shakur, 1988). If we fail to recognize and teach for this context, then we are reproducing the liberal academic status quo. Through a Marxist–Leninist approach to sport, we can hopefully avoid the pitfalls of liberalism and begin turning over these billion-dollar stadiums to the people who worked for them.

References


