

Riding the Lines: Academia, Public Intellectual Work, and Scholar-Activism

Jules Boykoff
Pacific University

This article expands a plenary lecture I delivered at the North American Society for the Sociology of Sport's 2017 conference in Windsor, Canada.¹ Windsor sits on the traditional territory of the Three Fires Confederacy of First Nations, comprised of the Ojibwa, the Odawa, and the Potawatomi peoples. Mentioning this fact is no mere historical courtesy; it is meant to acknowledge these groups' continued existence and resistance in the face of white supremacy today. "Imperialism," writes Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2012, p. 20), "still hurts, still destroys and is reforming itself constantly." The fightback against imperialism and colonialism is also ever-evolving, taking on new targets, including the Olympic Games. Across the continent from the territory of the Three Fires Confederacy, in British Columbia, First Nations peoples played a driving role in activist efforts challenging the 2010 Winter Olympics in Vancouver, an episode of contention I'll discuss in more detail.

In this article, I explore how, in my work on the politics of the Olympic Games, I press ahead, adhering to the methods and codes of rigorous scholarly work, while also trying to create space for vigorous activism with an ethical metric of social justice. I describe how in this ever-present and perpetually evolving effort to navigate academia, I often oscillate between public intellectual work and scholar-activism. Along the way, I will offer five lessons that I have learned through trial and error.

But first, I just want to start by noting what an extraordinary time it is to be doing sport sociology. After all, in the last few years we have witnessed a marked uptick in the willingness of high-profile athletes to take public stands on hot-button issues. WNBA players took the lead in the summer of 2016, speaking out on racial inequality and police brutality. For instance, in mid-July 2016, players on the Minnesota Lynx and New York Liberty wore Black Lives Matter t-shirts during warm-ups to honor Alton Sterling and Philando Castile, two African American men shot dead by police. When the league fined them, they didn't back down, and eventually the league rescinded the penalties.² Three days later, NBA stars Carmelo Anthony, LeBron James, Chris Paul, and Dwyane Wade took the stage at the ESPY Awards and encouraged athletes to engage in social activism.³ Of course, there's Colin Kaepernick's well-known decision to take a knee, beginning in fall 2016 when he was the quarterback of the San Francisco 49ers of the NFL, in order to make a stand against racialized police violence and generalized inequality. He also pledged to donate \$1 million to organizations fighting oppression, and he followed through, doling out significant chunks of money to groups like Mothers Against Police Brutality, Coalition for the Homeless, and the Mni Wiconi Health Clinic Partnership at Standing Rock.⁴

In fall 2017, athlete activism continued in the NFL, throwing a spotlight on police brutality and persistent racism, even as Kaepernick was out of a job. No team had hired the free agent, despite the clear need many teams exhibited for an experienced quarterback like Kaepernick who had earned solid numbers playing for a below-par team. Yet, Kaepernick's banishment wasn't enough for US President Donald Trump, not when protest continued. During a speech in Alabama he unleashed a vitriolic fusillade targeting athlete activists: "Wouldn't you love to see one of these NFL owners, when somebody disrespects our flag, to say, 'Get that son of a bitch off the field right now'?"⁵ Two days later a wave of dissent engulfed the league, players taking knees, sitting, and linking arms, sometimes even with team owners.⁶ At one point, the digital front page of the *New York Times* was comprised entirely of sports stories on athletes, activism, and the politics of sport.⁷

This electrifying outburst of activism harkens the words of Native Hawaiian political scientist Noenoe Silva (2004, p. 163), who wrote, "But as power persists so does resistance, finding its way like water slowly carving crevices into and through rock." If nothing else, what's recently unfolded should carve crevices into the rock-like myth that sports and politics don't mix. "Sticking to sports" now means consigning oneself to irrelevance.

Yet there are significant counter-currents at work. In October 2017, US Supreme Court Chief Justice John Roberts glibly dismissed an explanation of partisan gerrymandering as mere "sociological gobbledygook."⁸ To be sure this was a cynical rhetorical strategy: anti-intellectualism intertwined with political posturing. And yet it is something we must take seriously, and I will return to this point later.

Supreme Court shenanigans aside, sociologist Douglas Hartmann (2017, p. 2) has dubbed our current moment "a new, golden age of sociological engagement, visibility, and influence" and I think he's quite right. After all, scholars of sport sociology are perfectly positioned to intervene in the public sphere. Sports banter is the lingua franca of culture talk. And as the brilliant Stuart Hall (2016, p. 190) wrote, "Cultural politics and ideological struggle are the necessary conditions for forms of social and political struggle." In this article I reflect on how I have embraced our "golden age of sociological engagement," and discuss how I have engaged in "social and political struggle" through forays into public-intellectual work that spring from my academic research on the Olympic Games.

We are in the midst of a zeitgeist some call the rise of the "neoliberal university" whereby higher education is "a market-driven system, which employs modes of governance based on a corporate model" (Enright, Alfrey, & Rynne, 2017, p. 1; see also

King-White, 2018). This involves attempts to vocationalize higher education, whereby the immediate use value of knowledge is at a premium and a well-rounded liberal-arts education—let alone the notion of knowledge for the sake of knowledge—is deemed less necessary. To be sure, disdain for academics who are perceived to be toiling away in their ivory towers with little care for the so-called real world is not new. Anti-intellectualism has deep roots (Hofstadter, 1966). And it does not derive only from the conservative side of the political spectrum, which has long railed against academia as an hermetic enclave of rabid leftists. Decades ago, noted progressive activist Saul Alinsky (1969, p. ix) wrote, “the word ‘academic’ is a synonym for irrelevant.”

At the same time that the “neoliberal university” has become an ingrained feature of modern-day intellectual life, we have also seen a major—and sometimes overlapping—push across academic disciplines for scholars to engage with the general public. In 2010, for instance, a mainline political-science journal—*PS: Political Science and Politics*—published a symposium on public intellectuals⁹ where Theodore Lowi (2010, p. 680) made the bold assertion that, “Every political scientist should be a public intellectual.” Other scholars have called for academics across all fields to consider “blending our scholar and activist identities,” while being mindful of the fact that in doing so scholars of color will be forced to navigate racial microaggressions and full-throttle racism (Quaye, Shaw, & Hill, 2017, p. 14). Within sociology, Michael Burawoy (2005, p. 7) has been a major advocate for public sociology, differentiating between “traditional public sociology”—involving op-ed writing, commenting as a source in a news segment, or translating academic work into more comprehensible chunks—and “organic public sociology” whereby “the sociologist works in close connection with a visible, thick active, local and often counter-public.” These two modes of sociology, he asserts, can complement and inflect each other. Sport sociologists have taken up the mantle of public sociology, and not without adding a critical twist. Hartmann (2017, p. 4) urges us to not box policy sociologists out of discussions of public sociology, “relegating them to a status of ‘mere policy’ work.” Peter Donnelly and Michael Atkinson (2015, p. 380) also stress the importance of converting sociological knowledge into public policy changes and urge public sport sociology to emphasize the “materially based and culturally mediated” elements of extant social issues embedded in the global sportscape.

At the 2016 NASSS meetings in Tampa, Cheryl Cooky (2017, p. 7) made a rousing “call for a public sociology of sport.” I have long aspired to meet this call, sometimes with glimmers of success and other times not so much. In doing so I have often adopted what John Sugden and Alan Tomlinson (1999, p. 386) have called “the investigative tradition for the sociology of sport.” This approach blends ethnography, comparative methods, the rigorous reporting of history, and a notable critical thrust. The idea is to create a “sociology of the present” that ripples with urgency and import (Sugden & Tomlinson, 2002, p. 10). As someone who has both carried out scholarly research on the Olympics and engaged with the general public on the topic through my writing and commentary, I have had a front-row seat for the remarkable transformation in the way that sports mega-events are discussed in the public sphere.

When it comes to the Olympics, here’s the scoop: in the last decade, social scientists of all stripes have boldly confronted the legends that long buoyed the Olympic Movement. In their heyday, luminaries from the International Olympic Committee could trot out a trusty cluster of cookie-cut promises about surefire upticks in tourism, jobs, environmental benefit, and economic growth. But

in recent years most of these assurances have been debunked by sociologically minded academics coming from numerous angles. Sociologists at the intersection of sport and race have examined how athletes of color have fomented critical political engagement (Carrington, 2010; Burdsey, 2016). Sport historians have shined a spotlight on the asymmetrical relationship between indigenous peoples and the Games (O’Bonsawin, 2010; Forsyth, 2002). Researchers have charted the chasm between environmental promises and green follow through (Hayes and Horne, 2011; Gaffney, 2013). Sports economists have debunked fictitious promises of host-city fiscal nirvana (Zimbalist, 2015; Baade & Matheson, 2016). Scholars have demonstrated that despite gains made by women athletes over the years within the Olympics, there remain significant advances still to be made in terms of gender and sexuality (Delorme & Pressland, 2016; Lenskyj, 2013; Gusmão de Oliveira, 2015; Sykes, 2016a, 2016b). This critical research has caught up with Olympic myth-making and, in turn, has deeply affected wider public discussions. These days, outlets like *Five-ThirtyEight* are publishing articles with titles like “Hosting the Olympics Is a Terrible Investment.”¹⁰

The result? In the 21st century fewer and fewer cities are game to host the Games. Nowadays, activist movements crop up in pretty much every aspiring host city, leaning on academic research to make their case. Referenda have become civic brickbats for anti-Olympics activists. It is fair to say that the Olympic movement has descended into a bit of a slow-motion crisis. Activism, academia, movements, and math help explain why.

Public Intellectual Work, Scholar Activism, and My Personal Road

Many academics have ramped up their interventions in the public sphere, moving toward what Edward Said (1994, p. 11) described as the public intellectual, a role that “has an edge to it,” and must be played by “someone whose place it is publicly to raise embarrassing questions, to confront orthodoxy and dogma (rather than to produce them).” For me, scholarly social-science research is the necessary bedrock upon which effective public-intellectual work is built. There are no shortcuts. The hitch is ping-pong the scholarship. My efforts on that front include three recent books on the politics and economics of the Olympics (Boykoff, 2016, 2014, 2013) as well as a number of peer-review articles and book chapters.

Pierre Bourdieu (2002, p. 3), in his essay “The Role of Intellectuals Today,” encouraged us to rupture the dichotomy between “the pure intellectual and the engaged intellectual,” challenging us to establish standing within the halls of academia before vaulting ourselves into the realm of real-world politics. He embedded an interventionary element into his very definition of an intellectual, writing, “Very plainly, the intellectual is a writer, an artist, a scientist, who, strengthened by the competence and the authority acquired in his field, intervenes in the political arena.” Bourdieu (1991, p. 656) described the intellectual as a “*bidimensional being*” who must stay true to the codes of intellectual work while being ready to code-shift, springing into political action when the time is right. All this runs parallel to Ian McDonald’s (2002, p. 107) assertion that “it is important that researchers do not undermine the academic integrity of the research process by adopting speaking positions out of political expediency.” But what sort of action exactly? What types of “speaking positions”?

This takes us to the distinction I would like to draw between the public intellectual—whose interventions inhabit the