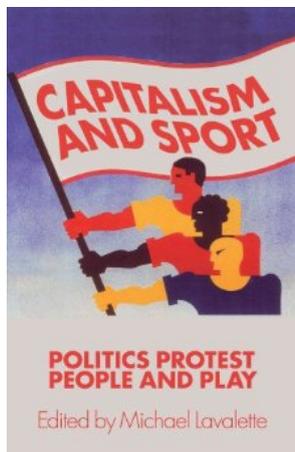


# Review: Michael Lavalette (Ed.), *Capitalism and Sport: Politics, Protest, People and Play*

John Lyons



Michael Lavalette (Ed.), *Capitalism and Sport: Politics, Protest, People and Play* Bookmarks 2013 €13.15

The world of sport? A world of mindless nationalism, sexism, homophobia and virulent racism; openly fascist managers, billionaire owners, millionaire professionals and underappreciated fans - and that's just football! No wonder, then, that many interested in changing the world for the better have a rather negative view of sports. But what a mistake!

Millions of working class people (present reviewer included), on every patch of the planet, participate in or watch sports every day of the week, experiencing the full gamut of human emotions - joy, elation, tragedy, despondency - alongside the physical and mental benefits enjoyed by those who participate in sports. It's also the world of Muhammad Ali fighting racism in the boxing ring, Billie Jean King serving a symbolic blow to sexism on the tennis court; it's a world that includes militant activists striking a blow against the apartheid regime in South Africa, a hunger-striking Palestinian footballer, USA medal winners John Carlos

and Tommie Smith giving the Black Power salute at the '68 Olympics; it's all this and more. And it matters.

It clearly matters to Michael Lavalette, who has edited *Capitalism and Sport: Politics, Protest, People And Play*, an excellent wide ranging collection of some 42 essays by over 30 different writers. The book examines the relationship between capitalism and sport by exploring the tensions that exist within sport from two distinct perspectives: the politics of sport and the politics in sport. These essays provide not only the context in which modern sports as we know them today arose under capitalism but also investigates the contradictions, conflicts and resistance that have emerged, time and again, within the world of sports and the roles played by fans, spectators, professional players, athletes and amateurs alike.

‘an activity involving physical exertion and skill in which an individual or team competes against another or others for entertainment.’ - Oxford Dictionary definition of sport

## The Politics of Sport

The first three sections examine the structural location of sport within capitalist societies, the impact of globalisation on professional football, cricket, cycling, rugby and jogging and the consequences for clubs, protestors, supporters and athletes when things go wrong. These sections comprise over half the book, and rightly so, for they provide a fascinating insight into 17th and 18th century indus-

trial capitalism in Britain, the emergence of a working class and the birth of the modern sports we know today. In his chapter 'Sport and Capitalism', Adrian Budd notes that: 'Emerging from and initially coexisting with earlier social practices and relations, capitalism gradually subordinated all of society to its own logic. The pastimes that the labouring classes had enjoyed during brief hours of leisure - at fetes, harvest time, etc - underwent processes of 'sportisation', a transformation that reflected the dominant characteristics of the wider social system.'<sup>1</sup>

As capitalism developed, working class leisure activities were subject to a variety of constraints becoming codified and bound together within tighter structures, rules and spaces, such as pitches and rings. 'There was also an economic imperative driving codification,' according to Gareth Edwards in his chapter 'Capitalism and the birth of modern sport': 'The popularity of the sport as a spectacle was clear as early as 1743 when 10,000 people attended a cricket match. Entrepreneurs were quick to spot this emerging market. Fences were erected around the ground and charged six pence for admission. Simultaneously people were excluded from the game and transformed into paying spectators.'<sup>2</sup>

So from the 18th century when 'bureaucrats, bookies and brewers combined to commercialise sport, turning pastimes into industries, to the billion dollar revenue generating global business that is the modern day sports industry, engagement with and participation in sports has been defined by the twin pillars of capitalist social relations - exploitation and competition'. These themes are explored in Section Two of the book through the prism of globaliza-

tion and its effects on the sports of football, cycling, cricket, jogging and sports and the role of the (Murdoch') media. It is a familiar story of exploitation, competition and alienation, with vulture capitalists buying football clubs, Nike selling running shoes made with the cheaply bought sweat of workers in China, Thailand and Indonesia and sports workers (cyclists, athletes, etc) driven to extremes in order to satisfy managers, teams and sponsors.

## The Politics In Sport

It is here however, as Lavalette contends, 'in the gap between the promise of sport playing and activity and the structural reality of the world of capitalist sport, conflict and contest the meaning of sport and its location in the world can develop.' And so we come to the most interesting part of the book, where sport is a scene of resistance and struggle by both participant and spectator alike. Under the headings 'People and Resistance', these sections cover individual stories of resistance, such as those of Muhammad Ali, Arthur Ashe, the Australian Olympic boxer of indigenous ancestry Damien Hooper and Sheila Coleman of the Justice for the '96 campaign. There are also stories of collective struggle and resistance such as those of the politically conscious and actively engaged football fans of Celtic's Green Brigade, England's traveling cricket fans, FC United of Manchester fans, the worker's sports movement and the cyclists of the Tour de France who, reacting to the ever-increasing demands to cycle faster and longer, have gone on strike, by engaging in a 'slow down'. Hugely enjoyable reading is to be found here.

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<sup>1</sup> Adrian Budd, 'Sport and Capitalism' in M. Lavalette (ed.), *Capitalism and Sport: Politics, Protest, People and Play*, (London, 2013), p.36.

<sup>2</sup>Gareth Edwards, 'Capitalism and the Birth of Modern Sports' in Lavalette (ed.), *Capitalism and Sport*, p. 26.

The book finishes by discussing ‘alternative futures’, in which ideas such as non-competitive sport and the class element of physical education in schools are explored. The debate in post-revolutionary Russia as to the place for sport in a socialist society is also aired. Finally, in ‘The Contradictions of Capitalist Sport’, the editor, Michael Lavalette, concludes: ‘For those of us on the political left it is vital that we can relate to those who love to watch and play sport, and that we always seek to infuse sport with politics. Above all, this means being aware of the vast inequities and huge profits that the sports capital-

ists make at our expense, to celebrate the sporting rebels and varying forms of resistance that exist within and around sport, and to demand a future where we will all be free to take part in social production in the morning, philosophise in the evening and play whenever we want.’<sup>3</sup>

*Capitalism And Sport* is highly recommended for any newcomer to the world of sports from a socialist perspective; for those with some knowledge of this world, this book is a must, packed full of interesting stories, sporting figures and facts: ever hear of left-wing football? No? Then check this out.

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<sup>3</sup>Michael Lavalette, ‘The Contradictions of Capitalist Sport’ in Lavalette (ed.), *Capitalism and Sport*, p.266.