A Critique of Neoliberalism in Sport: Towards Optimistic Sport in the Wake of the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has wreaked havoc on a global scale and is interconnected to society in many ways. Therefore, any study of sport that focuses on the pandemic, cannot ignore this interconnectivity. The 1980s witnessed the re-ascendancy of neoliberalism and since then many governments have adopted neoliberal policies. The effects of neoliberalism are felt in all spheres of social life including sport and consequently, neoliberal values are reflected in sport. What the COVID-19 pandemic has done is to lay bare the acute inequalities that exist in both global and South African societies, which are the effects of the erosion of the welfare state and the rise of neoliberal politics. In this chapter we provide a critique of neoliberalism, how the form and content of sport provide a particular lens on neoliberalism and how it intersects with the COVID-19 pandemic. Our analysis is informed by insights from critical studies on sport. We explore the neoliberal project at work in sport in two fundamental ways. First, we identify the social and cultural inequalities inherent in sport as is evident in recent literature. Second, we attempt to relate these inequalities to the current sport landscape. Finally, the authors present suggestions for possibilities in moving towards a sport practice that is critical, radical and optimistic for the period post the pandemic.

Keywords: COVID-19 pandemic, historical analysis, mega sports, neoliberalism, social justice

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1 Introduction

By way of introduction, we make known our positional standpoint about sport. As scholars of critical theories in education and sport studies we are aware of the tension in radical circles between elements that reject sport as a bourgeois capitalist plague and those who engage it to advance critical ideas in the academy and beyond. A popular perception exists which sees the revolutionary left dismiss sport as a site of, and for, excessive nationalism, sexism, racism, homophobia and class bias (Brohm 1978; Rigauer 1981; Beamish 1982). Nevertheless, there is another perspective which argues for the reclamation and reformation of sport (Dart 2012). We support this latter view. However, first a word on the COVID-19 pandemic and sport.

The global spread of COVID-19 has impacted on all spheres of social life including sport and recreation. At a local level we have seen the closure of gymnasia, swimming pools, training centres, downscaling of physical education programmes and in some countries, parks and playgrounds were declared off limits during lockdown periods. This has had an impact on the general well-being of people. The World Health Organisation (WHO) recommends 150 minutes of exercise of moderate-intensity or 75 minutes of vigorous-intensity per week for general well-being, but particularly in times of anxiety and fear (United Nations 2020). Due to the restriction of movement in public places many middle-class people have resorted to exercising at home using fitness demonstrations that are available on social and mainstream media (Stamatakis *et al.* 2020). Very little, if any, information about what working classes and the lumpen proletariat does for exercise and recreation is reported. Despite the ability of humans to adapt, it is unlikely that many would have retained their same level of activity during lockdown periods or the different levels of South Africa's risk-adjusted approach. At an international level we have seen major sport tournaments/events cancelled or postponed such as the Olympic and Paralympic Games, test cricket, Super Rugby, French Open and Wimbledon tennis tournaments, soccer tournaments across the globe, and so forth.

Needless to say, the closure of sport facilities has impacted on human lives; on physical well-being, psyches and livelihoods. Not only have professional sport persons been affected by the pandemic but also ordinary citizens who could no longer enjoy their pastimes of playing social sport or watching sport events on television. Moreover, many people's livelihoods have been affected by job losses in a global sport industry with an estimated annual

value of US$500 billion (Torrens University Australia 2020). Although there were no global or South African statistics available, by the end of May 2020, 1.3 million jobs in the sport industry in the United States of America had been adversely affected by the COVID-19 pandemic (Burrow 2020). On the positive side, we have also seen individual sport personalities and organisations rally to contribute, in material ways, to fighting the COVID-pandemic and thus contributing to humanitarian effects associated with the pandemic. Among many others, we have seen donations by individual sport persons such as Rodger Federer, Lionel Messi, Christiano Ronaldo, Siya Kolisi and organisations such as FIFA which teamed up with the WHO in a campaign aimed at spreading the message that people should follow the five steps[1] identified that would curb disease transmission. In its Policy Brief No73, the United Nations (2020:4) made recommendations vis-à-vis sport during the COVID-19 pandemic; one being the promotion of positive social attitudes and behaviour through sport education. It states:

> Sport education is a powerful means to foster physical fitness, mental well-being, as well as social attitudes and behaviour while populations are locked down. International rights and values-based sport education instruments and tools, such as the International Charter of Physical Education, Physical Activity and Sport, the Quality Physical Activity and Sport, the Quality Physical Education Policy package and the Values Education through Sport toolkit remain highly relevant references to ensure that many online physical activity modules that are being currently deployed comply, with gender equality, non-discrimination, safety and quality standards.

It is, however, our contention that COVID-19 has also afforded us the opportunity to ask more deeper/critical questions about the role of sport in society as well as what is the purpose of sport. Some of the questions asked in the field of critical philosophy of sport are worth repeating here as they are apposite to our current situation. In his contribution on philosophy and sport in

[1] The five steps are: 1) supporting physical activity; 2) research and policy guidance; 3) technical cooperation and capacity development; 4) outreach and awareness raising; 5) promoting positive social attributes and behaviour.

the *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Hyland (1998) raised several critical questions including: whether sport teaches values and if so whether these values are desirable; why social problems such as racism manifest in sport, and why and how sport produces the phenomenon of the athlete as cultural hero? Concerning values, we suggest that the question of whose values sport produces should also be asked. In his book *A philosophy of Sport*, Connor (2011) raises a number of controversial questions as to whether playing sport is indeed ethical and whether it is a form of violence? Concerning the issue of ethics, Gibbons (2020:812) argues that the ethics of competition in sport needs to be subjected to critical scrutiny in particular, 'the epistemological chauvinisms that make it possible to think about winners and losers, competition and rivalry, in particular ways'. Moreover, Peters (2020) and Gibbons (2020) point out that attention needs to be given to the global sports economy and the effects of the marketisation of sport on society. As Peters (2020:809) writes: '… sports today cannot be separated from the capitalist market system for its contemporary form is determined by it and there is little chance that it is going to change any day soon'. Many more questions could be proliferated such as one recently asked by a radio presenter, 'Is sport the opium of the masses?' For example, does sport dupe the masses of Brazil into making them feel that they are all equally Brazilian when their national team plays soccer? And does the euphoria of winning a rugby world cup hoodwink South Africans into believing they are equally South African? In the absence of sport activity during COVID-19 these are questions worth reflecting on.

In this chapter we shall give particular attention to the relationship of sport and neoliberalism and explore how this theme could be used as a point of departure to reimagine the content of sport in troubled times. We do so because sport is entangled in the global neoliberal order as pointed out by Gibbons (2020) and Peters (2020). With many sports events cancelled or postponed because of the COVID-19 pandemic, it now is an opportune time to reflect on the role of sport in/on society. We use the present (COVID-19 pandemic) to reflect on the past so as to imagine a different future for sport post the pandemic. We do so by way of a historical analysis of neoliberalism and sport in South Africa, with a specific focus on mega sport events. The question guiding this chapter is: Could the current interregnum in sport caused by the COVID-19 pandemic be used to reflect on the role neoliberalism has played in the creation of elite sport, its negative impact on society, and how

such reflection could be used to imagine sport differently post the pandemic, free from the fetters of neoliberalism?

This chapter broadly framed within critical studies in sport, which is a description for all studies on sport underpinned within the critical paradigm. Le Grange (2000) argues that research conducted within the critical paradigm aims to detect and unmask beliefs and practices that limit human freedom, justice and democracy and also aim to take actions that will change the conditions of those who are marginalised. This chapter therefore lays bare the neoliberal influences on sport so as to open up a more inclusive and less exploitative culture of sport.

2 Neoliberalism and Sport

Neoliberalism can be traced back to liberal perspectives of the seventeenth century which became marginalised due to the rise of welfare state liberalism of the late nineteenth century and Keynesian economics of the twentieth century. Its revival in the late twentieth century is associated with the emergence of the `new right' in Europe and the United States of America, often referred to as Reaganism and Thatcherism, after two of its key proponents (Le Grange 2006). Although there are different strands of neoliberalism, all neoliberals embrace the following three principles: a commitment to individual liberty and a reduced state; a shift in policy and ideology against government intervention; and a belief that market forces should be allowed to be self-regulating (for a comprehensive discussion on the ascendancy of neoliberalism, see Olssen, Codd and O'Neill 2004). John and McDonald (2019) argue that neoliberalism should be understood as more than merely an economic policy model but a more broader project in which political, cultural and economic forces work together to 're-engineer' the state. The re-engineering of the state marks a shift away from it as welfare provider to being a facilitator of economic growth. John and Mc Donald (2019) also point out that neoliberalism involves the embossing of market-like mechanisms on everyday life whilst at the same time removing the safety-net of the welfare state.

The upshot of the re-ascendancy of neoliberalism has resulted in widening inequalities globally (and within nations) as well as the seizing of social justice by individualism and economic growth. It is largely the wealthy class who are able to afford private healthcare, elite schooling and who gain

access to elite sport. The rest, are subjected to poor public schooling, poor public healthcare systems and limited opportunities to play sport due to lack of state funding. The inequalities in access to healthcare in South Africa is well documented (see Harris *et al.* 2011; Benatar 2013). The link between elite schooling and access to elite sport is demonstrated in a study by Noorbhai (2020) which shows that elite boy's schools still shape the South African national cricket team. He points out that South Africa's national cricketers come from fewer than 50 schools out of about 6000 high schools in the country. Poor healthcare and nutrition received by children as well as poorly resourced schools impact on the ability of a child to excel in sport. But, sport itself advances the project of neoliberalism. Miller (2012:24) has gone as far as stating that sport is neoliberalism's 'most spectacular embodiment, through the dual fetish of competition and control, individualism and government'. Coakley (2011) argues that sport often reaffirms a belief that competition is the principal basis for appraising merit and distributing rewards. Moreover, sport advances the myth that economic success is based on good choices and strong character, whereas economic failure on poor choices and weak character. The exorbitant income earned by elite sports persons promotes the idea that sport is the vehicle to wealth and prosperity and the sponsoring of elite athletes by companies manufacturing sport gear and equipment has contributed to a culture of consumerism in contemporary society. Coakley (2011) argues that sport reinforces neoliberal beliefs about individual responsibility, competition, market and consumerism, into popular consciousness. Moreover, John and McDonald (2019) as well as Andrews and Silk (2012) write about how elite sport fosters and helps to maintain a neoliberal culture through the transformation of cities into sport cities resulting in increased deregulation, privatization and liberalization. John and McDonald (2019) show how Melbourne Australia, which hosts the Formula 1 Grand Prix and a grand slam tennis tournament, has become a sport city and the epitome of urban enterpreneurialism.

The COVID-19 pandemic, which is itself a manifestation of the crisis of neoliberalism[2] provide us with an opportunity to explore the many faces of

[2] One of the reasons why the rapid spread of COVID-19 resulted in a public health crisis is because of underspending on healthcare by governments of many countries because they had adopted neoliberal policies. But, the COVID-19 crisis is also caused by neoliberal capitalist farming practices. McKinley

neoliberalism and whether there are vectors of escape for sport from the fetters of neoliberalism. The question that begs answering is whether sport can play a role in advancing social justice and make a positive contribution to the sustainability of all life on the planet? Although we shall not answer this question directly, we shall reflect on recent pedagogic and popular historical narratives that attempted to expose the underbelly of sport at a time when neoliberalism's multifaceted crisis has deepened. And by doing so we hope that sensibilities towards social justice and sustainability will be fostered.

3 The Neoliberalism Sport Project

Despite claims of creating sport opportunities for broader society, the neoliberal agenda of sport remains fixed around creating an environment conducive to commercial activity (John & Donald 2019). In the 20th and 21st centuries the major commercial activity around which the neoliberal sport agenda pivots, is the hosting of mega events, as was alluded to earlier in this chapter. The first major sport mega event hosted in South Africa in the 20th century was the 1995 Rugby World Cup tournament. It turned out to be an event where the new ruling political elite and previous ruling classes found common ground. This mixture was represented on 24 June 1995 at the much enamoured trophy presentation where Nelson Mandela, as president of the new post-apartheid government wore Francois Pienaar's (captain of a rugby team that previously symbolised apartheid hegemony) replacement rugby jersey. Mandela had thus became a sport hero for the new post-apartheid South Africa. His actions can best be explained by referring to the work of critical theorists who describe the making of sport heroes as being 'identified and promoted on the basis of their utility' (Hendricks 1995:120). Previously Mandela had made much effort in safeguarding the Springbok symbol for rugby against the virulent attacks by the National and Olympic Sports Congress (NOSC) youth

(2020 n.p.) argues that, '… the increased occurrence of largely unknown and ever-more-virulent viruses is directly linked to the nature/character of land use and food production under the neo-liberal model of capitalism; to the contemporary dominance of an 'industrial model' of agriculture that is umbilically tied to the never-ending search for maximum profits, whatever the human, social and/or environmental consequences'.

who favoured the removal of it. Rugby remains the only major South African team sport to have retained the Springbok symbol in post-apartheid South Africa.

According to Penny Heyns, a South African Olympic swimming champion, she like many other sport persons of fame, fell under the spell of 'Madiba Magic' after that moment (Heyns & Lemke 2004). What the tournament did in effect do, was to 'drain South Africa from its history … and a week after the opening ceremony [in Cape Town] … many of the participating black youngsters from nearby townships complained bitterly that they were not compensated for their participation and threatened to disrupt further World Cup proceedings' (Grundlingh 2013:138, 140). The 1995 Springbok captain heralded the World Cup victory an event that helped development and that: 'rugby's image had never been better: the Springboks were well paid, safely contracted and winning' (Pienaar & Griffiths 1999:213). This tournament achieved two things. First, it piloted South African sport into the era of professionalism on the foundations of neoliberalism and second it set in motion a class alienation that was already in practice during the apartheid era. This was an alienation that was camouflaged by the much publicized words of Nelson Mandela that 'sport unites like nothing else can' while the majority of South Africans remain distant from the products, form and contents of sport itself. Conflict theorists would argue that the 1995 RWC was a classic example of how:

> sport perpetuates societal problems by providing people with a temporary high which diverts their attention from the real issues which impact upon their lives directly and by providing subalterns with a distorted frame of reference or identification which encourages them to look for salvation through patently false channels (Hendricks 1995:116).

A new sport elite, supported by the post-apartheid regime, was born in the 1990's and it operated on a class allegiance to the neoliberal logic that alienated working classes (schools and clubs) from their daily experiences. In this regard it is useful to quote a former apartheid proponent of cricket who was welcomed into the ranks of the new elite by the post-apartheid sport authorities: '… schools that are known for good coaching [meaning elite boys' schools] could identify (poor) talented cricketers [from materially poor black schools] and

sponsor their school fees' (translated from Afrikaans) (Die Burger 2011). No thought was given to developing infrastructure and coaching programmes at schools that were historically, materially poor. The 2019 Springbok rugby captain, Siya Kolisi, summed up his situation as follows: 'transformation should start at a grassroots level in township schools. Imagine if I did not go to an English school. I wouldn't have been eating properly, I wouldn't have grown properly, and I wouldn't have had the preparation that the other boys did' (in Mjo 2019 n.p). What the neoliberal sport project does is to re-invent 19th century professional sport that was firmly controlled by an aristocracy who made money from sport, but who could also afford to lose money and frequently did so (McIntosch 1963). As the 19th century sport historian, Joseph Strutt, mentioned that by 1801 there were 'rural exercises practised by Persons of Rank and those Generally Practiced' (Arlott & Daley 1968:14). After the 'success' of the 1995 RWC tournament in South Africa, the country was firmly in the market for hosting mega events, organised by neoliberal capitalist international sport federations. Not surprisingly FIFA courted the South African government successfully in an attempt to host mega events. This was done by utilising the Mandela image and person, in securing South African rights to host the 2010 World Cup soccer in South Africa (Jennings 2006:270). Substantive evidence- based work has since exposed the level of dishonesty and immoral business conduct of FIFA and its officials in organising mega-events (see Blake & Clavert 2016; Cottle 2013).

The new sport elite stretched across the race divide of the 'new South Africa' and alienated working classes not only from professional sport but also from history. Thus, Martin Meredith, could claim in Nelson Mandela's biography that: '[During apartheid] the black population generally ignored rugby, their passion being soccer. Rugby was regarded as a boer game' (Meredith 2014:525). This is of course false and numerous scholars and amateur historians have shown that blacks have played the game from the very start of its public appearance in the media (Odendaal 1995; Booley 1998; Snyders 2015; Nongogo & Toriola 2014). In this way a historical alienation was invented that continues till the present where the current (2020) Springbok captain, Siya Kolisi is championed as the first black captain of a South African national team, ignoring the anti-apartheid history.

But this elitist take off was visible in the last decade of the 20th century already. A post-apartheid state emerged from a negotiated settlement between two key role players, the National Party (NP) on the one hand and the African

National Congress (ANC) on the other. This negotiated settlement facilitated South Africa's entry into international sport. The role of the then existing non-racial sport movement under the direction of the South African Council on Sport (SACOS - an organisation that was a home to all liberation movements) was downplayed as the sports wing of the liberation movement because it resisted the terms for lifting the sports moratorium and it kept to its non-aligned stance towards any political tendency (Brown 2006). Instead, a hastily formed NOSC in opposition to the SACOS, became the preferred negotiating partner for the NP. This enabled the ANC (with the support of the NP) to advise international sport federations to lift any sport moratoriums against apartheid sport federations (Du Preez 2001:65). The NOSC demanded sport development projects in terms of financial, coaching and infrastructure. This was not what big businesses, who started playing an increasingly important role in professional sport through sponsoring mega events, wanted. Yet, according to Paul Hendricks, big business, played an instrumental role in facilitating sport unification (Hendricks 2021:118). Not surprisingly these unification talks were rushed and decades of black marginalisation in sport was 'settled' in a few months.

It was also a decade when two countries, Russia and South Africa, underwent major political and economic changes that was part of a new world order of capitalism. Both countries were led to this order by leaders who became iconic figures. In Russia, it was Mikhail Gorbachev, in South Africa, it was Nelson Mandela. South Africa became the only country in the world to host three world championship sport tournaments in a space of 20 years, including bidding for the Olympic Games. These exclude other continental events it hosted. Shortly after De Klerk's famous 1990 speech, the retail magnate, Raymond Ackerman, visited Manchester University's School of Business in mid-1990, where the idea of Cape Town bidding to host the 2004 Olympic Games was raised for the first time. A bid committee was established, with Ackerman donating R15 million, and losing half after the bid failed (Ackerman 2001:263, 303). This is one example of the intimate relations between sport and capital.

Organisations affiliated to the apartheid regime structures demanded the lifting of the sport boycott by various international sport federations. When the IOC declared South Africa eligible to participate in the 1992 Barcelona Olympics, most international federations had already declared that the boycott had worked and sport had triumphed over racism (Hendricks 2021:119). South

Africa competed in this mega event (Olympic Games) without a national flag. A similar development of hasty sport unification, where big capital was central, occurred in cricket. On 29 June 1991 the United Cricket Board of South Africa (UCBSA) was established and this paved the way for South Africa's membership to the International Cricket Council (ICC) (Bryden 1996:13). The *Rapport* newspaper announced that the official unification process took 37 minutes and opened the doors for:

> South Africa's re-entry into international cricket and a sponsorship worth R8 million has been obtained … Geoff Dakin stated that the Basil D' Oliveira storm in 1968 made South Africans realize what Apartheid was doing to cricket … development on all levels is a priority even more than test cricket (Rapport 1991:25, 27).

On 10 November 1991 South Africa played its first ever international cricket match in India at the Kolkata Stadium while the huge divide between elite cricket playing schools (mainly white) and poor township schools (all black) remained underdeveloped (Petersen 2006:131). Schooling became the new gatekeeping instrument for entry into the national rugby and cricket teams. The majority of players in the national 1991 cricket and 1995 rugby were drawn from the previous all-white high schools during the Apartheid era and remain so into the present (Cleophas 2019). These high fee-paying schools have accumulated cultural and material capital during colonial, segregation and Apartheid eras that became sought after commodities after 1994 (Cleophas 2018). Graduates from these schools become 'clear leaders in whatever situation they happen to find themselves in' (Gouws 2000:65).

Included in the South African team were 'four development players who… would not actually play but would participate in all other activities and functions in order to get a feel for conditions in India in preparation for future tours of the Indian sub-continent' (Oosthuizen & Tinkler 2001: 49-50). This type of token representation became part and parcel of neoliberal sport that was driven by powerful commercial interests of multi-national corporations who professed an involvement with a desire to develop communities but with an ultimate objective to utilize the best talent to bolster maximum profit (Ebrahim 2006:175). The core of South African cricket and sport centred around neoliberal economic business practices in the sphere of the politics of globalization (Naidoo 2010:260). In this sphere, black sports people expe-

rienced two options: either keep quiet, conform and possibly become successful or rebel and become an outcast. The account of the African American Wimbledon tennis player, Zina Garrison who defeated Monica Seles in the quarter-finals in 1990 is illuminating and pertinent to our discussion:

> 'For five years, even when I made it to top four in the world, I still had no deal', says Garrison. 'I was very aware of what was going on and I was always told: "If you make it to this ranking, you'll get a deal. If you make it to this [round]", you know? You had white girls behind me, they're making way more money and their ranking or consistency wasn't even there …. Being a black player in the 80s meant that and more. To [me] it was being constantly described as the African-American player rather than one of the many Americans on tour. It was agents who would reason the lack of contracts away by implying she didn't have "the look" (in Carayol 2020: n.p.).

To return to rugby. What happened in rugby is a reflection of other sport codes as well. Transformation of the game in the 1990's and thereafter was largely squandered because of administrative inability to grasp the intricacies of the post-apartheid project and a failure to connect the operations of the South African Rugby Football Union with national imperatives, including issues of demographic transformation, the search for new national symbols and initiatives to reconfigure the heritage and commemorative landscape (Snyders n.d.).

By the turn of the 21st century, sport had become a corporate affair. The culture of community support for national teams in the former anti-apartheid sport structures was something of the past. Natalie du Toit, for example, a South African Olympic swimmer, remarks how she had to pay R8 000 out of her pocket for competing in the national championships (Hawthorne 2006:193). Financial concerns, regardless of talent, have become the overriding factor for parents when encouraging their children to pursue a sport (Heyns & Lemke 2004:177). Many sport administrators and officials would agree with this. What fewer would venture to speak about publicly is that financial scandals are part of the DNA of sport and in particular within neoliberal settings. It is true that corruption and scandal in sport is not limited to the neoliberal period under discussion in this chapter. As early as 1817, William Lambert, the leading cricket professional in England at the time, was

accused of throwing a match and banned from Lord's for life (Oosthuizen & Tinkler 2001:17). But it was since the last quarter of the 20th century that cricket and match-fixing reached pandemic proportions (Oosthuizen & Tinkler 2001:17).

By the second decade of the 21st century South African sport was riddled with financial corruption scandals. Besides the well documented Hansie Cronje corruption scandal, there was also the Majola affair in 2011 where the president of Cricket South Africa (CSA), Mtutzeli Nyoka, was dismissed from his position after a protracted battle with the governing board. However, he continued to call for a commission of inquiry into irregularities in CSA. When the retired judge Chris Nicholson conducted an investigation into CSA, his findings on the corruption and maladministration in the game were damning (Nyoka 2015). When the South African based investment company, Steinhoff, was hit by a financial scandal in December 2017, it was revealed how the Chief Executive Officer (CEO), Markus Jooste, used his horse racing business empire to deceive creditors (Stayn 2018:151). Steinhoff of course also sponsored sport such as Maties sport, the Varsity Cup rugby tournament and the Blitzboks (SA's sevens rugby team). But, accounting irregularities at the firm also affected many South Africans who were members of the Government Employees Pension Fund (GEPF), which had lost R24 billion by end of November 2017 as a consequence of the Steinhoff scandal (Ensor 2018). These, alongside features such as democracy abuse, increase in crime and food insecurity, failed economy, rising levels of unemployment and inequality have become consistencies in the period leading up to the first reported case of COVID -19 in South Africa in March 2020 (Johnson 2015:239).

4 Parting Thoughts

This chapter showed how the neoliberal project had infiltrated the social and political fabric of post-apartheid society and sport. The project had also produced sport cultural heroes who keep the neoliberal project firmly intact through displays of political neutrality. A case in point is that of disgraced cricket captain, Hansie Cronje who was 'carelessy naïve of the intricate designs of National Party [racist] politics … he had no inkling of the cause and effects of apartheid and of the international outcry it gave rise to' (Hartman 1997:13). Cronje is not alone in confessing to political naivety regarding apartheid and

an admission in this regard was also made by the 2007 champion Rugby World Cup Springbok coach, Jake White (White & Ray 2007:18). Other South African international sport persons' (who were bestowed with iconic status) biographies reveal an absence of political conviction. Amongst them are Penny Heyns, South African swimming Olympic gold medalist (Heyns & Lemke 2004) and the South African rugby captain of the winning RWC tournament in 1995, Francois Pienaar (Pienaar & Griffiths 1999). Hopefully, a new generation of South African sport activists will emerge that could become part of the few voices of dissent against injustices. Here, for example, we refer to the American athletes Megan Rapinoe and Colin Kaepernick's outspokenness against social injustices that are inherent to the neoliberal system (*The New York Times* 2020). Given the pervasiveness of the neoliberal economy in South African sport that was preceded by three centuries of white settlement – phased by colonial wars, expropriation of tribal lands, slavery, forced labour and industrialism (Simons & Simons 1983:7), any hope for a social revolutionary shift away from the neoliberal sport project after the COVID-19 pandemic seems utopian if not impossible.

The COVID-19 pandemic revealed a brutal, structural, social and economic inequality, with callous indifference to suffering (Roy 2020). In many countries, government bailouts have largely gone to corporations and the bosses are already trying to make workers pay for the crisis (*Socialist Worker* 2020). However, the pandemic, with all the tragedy of loss of human life, offers revolutionary minded scholars an opportunity to reflect on the abusive role that sport played through the ages but in particular, in the South African context, in the name of democracy since 1994. Yet, things can be different. We are in agreement with the author Graeme Joffe who makes 5 suggestions for envisaging a corrupt free sport world: A better future and fair chance for all South African sportsmen and women; Justice and an end to the gravy train; sending out messages of never giving up and standing up for truth; a culture of investigative sports journalism in South Africa and finally vindication and closure for victims of exploitation and corruption (Joffee 2019:411). We have to forego a longing for a return to a neoliberal economic world order, we call 'normal'. As we have seen, the 'normal' was plagued by festering corruption and inequalities that bred social viruses in sport and beyond, bursting open in times of crisis. In the context of sport, we can avoid this by pointing out the need for athletes to speak up and to educate themselves about South Africa's sport liberation history and to gain insights from witnessing the anger seen in

the #BlackLivesMatter protests that have swept across the United States of America and the rest of world. In imitation of Henry Giroux (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EpRjHfDXMmY) speaking on an informal social media platform recently, we should be determined to fight harder if we want to remain optimistic about sport after the COVID-19 pandemic. Roy (2020: n.p.) has argued that 'historically, pandemics have forced humans to break with the past and imagine their world anew. This one is no different. It is a portal, a gateway between one world and the next'.

This gateway, we suggest, must be a fundamental shift, by sport federations (local, national and international) and the scientific community, away from sport as a market driven product. We call for new ways of looking at sport where the human body is at the centre of practice. Such practices must not be reliant on expensive scientific gadgets that the capitalist system offers the world of sport to measure bodies that spew out results and that portray black bodies as different to white bodies; male bodies as different to female bodies; middle class bodies as different to working class bodies and so forth (Cleophas 2020). We also suggest that governments should commit to increasing funding for the development of parks and open spaces where sport communities can engage with nature in uncompetitive ways. In turn, university curricula should give more attention to physical education, physical culture[3] and social studies of sport. As scholars of sport studies, we concur with Richard Pringle, who calls for a new materialist approach to sport research that concerns itself with 'epistemologies, ethics and politics …that promotes innovate ways of seeing, thinking and doing research, all of which promote fresh means of understanding existing social issues and the potential for social/material changes' (Pringle 2020:323). We are optimistic of the COVID-19 pandemic serving as a portal to a reimagined sport enterprise, liberated from the shackles of neoliberalism.

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