

ON ISSUE

THE NEW INTERNATIONAL DIVISION OF SPORTING LABOR

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A new international division of sporting labor, or NISL, is upon us. The concept of NISL derives from revisions to 1960s *dependencia* theories of underdevelopment. As you will recall, those theories originated in Latin America and spread throughout the Second World and Third World. They argued that less-developed countries were unable to grow industrially and improve their economic circumstances because they were dominated by multinational corporations (MNCs) and foreign governments that exploited others' natural and human resources to expropriate profit. By the mid-1970s, it was clear that this thesis, attractive though it was, failed to account for the emergence of local bourgeoisies in a number of places, notably Japan and the newly industrializing countries of Southeast Asia. As manufacturing fled the North for the South in search of lenient labor and environmental laws as well as tax breaks, it became apparent that regardless of where a multinational was geographically headquartered, its true patrimony lay in current-account columns. The attempt to theorize this came in the notion of a new international division of labor (NIDL) (Fröbel, Heinrichs, & Kreye, 1980). Instead of assuming comprehensive coordination between First World governments and firms, the NIDL suggests that MNCs go wherever the conditions are ripe for success, even if this leads to increased unemployment and *immiseration* (in Marxist discourse, the process whereby people become financially strapped and placed in an untenable economic position) in the First World. The integrated enterprise frequently is said to be a thing of the past; production, management, and consumption may be separated.

Is this splitting of Fordist production line unity also happening in the area of culture? If we have a new international division of cultural labor and an NISL within it, then what are the likely effects on the ability of culture to represent nations and their peoples in plural, demographically credible, and democratically accountable ways (Miège, 1989; Miller, 1997)? The trend in film and television is toward coproductions, offshore investment, and cheap shooting locations around the world. The global trade in soccer players, formal European-wide athletic markets, international sports sponsors, the commodification of all aspects of the Olympics, and linkages between, for example, U.S. and Australian pro baseball leagues amount to

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something similar. What are the implications for the role of sport as an aspect of regional and national identity? It has been argued, for instance, that media coverage of African American sportsmen is a crucial cultural component of the new world order, with Black men identified as generically incompetent other than these few physically agile exceptions (Page, 1997).

As with the displacement of *dependencia* by the NIDL, a 1960s and 1970s cultural imperialism discourse about unequal textual trade, which was said to transfer taste but not wealth from the First World to the Third World, has been supplanted by a recognition that audiences and other actors are capable of customizing imported culture. Yet, although this may be the case, U.S. multinationals dominate both screen exports and the global telecommunications infrastructure (Mattelart & Mattelart, 1992; Reeves, 1993). This leaves us in a quandary; even as we now accept that spectators/readers/viewers make their own meanings from texts rather than being "cultural dopes" whose interpretations are engineered by textual design (Garfinkel, 1967), the very infrastructure of cultural provision is owned and operated by a small number of monopoly capitalists, minimizing access and concentrating control.

The United States normally is quite sanguine about this, at least until other bourgeoisies invade its space. In sport, the most spectacular instance I know of was the xenophobia, racism, and denial of Asian Americanness evident during the ownership debate in the early 1990s over the Seattle Mariners baseball team (Ono, 1997). The big-ticket item for media mavens on this score obviously is Rupert Murdoch, naturalized as a U.S. citizen but with "alien" eternally etched on his subjectivity in American public discourse. By the time you read this, the matter may well be resolved another way, but at the moment of writing, my once-and-perhaps-future fellow citizen is expressing interest in buying the Los Angeles Dodgers baseball team. The Dodgers embody two moments in the transformation of U.S. sporting capitalism. First, in the 1950s, they left the passionate working-class organicism of Brooklyn, New York, for fresh broadcasting markets in California. Now, the family business that "betrayed" the fans is putting the team up for possible sale to an international media monopolist, a world oligarch if ever there was one. Whether he takes over the team now, later, or never, I think we need to analyze this move with great care.

Here is why. Murdoch's avowed goal is for News Corporation "to own every form of programming—news, sports, films, and children's shows—and beam them via satellite or TV stations to homes in the United States, Europe, Asia, and South America." Aided by a huge injection of equity capital from Concert (the former MCI) in 1995, this expansion is continuing (Herman & McChesney, 1997, pp. 70-71). Now, most of the big moves Murdoch has made in the United States in terms of political deals, technological innovation, tabloid journalism, anti-union activity, cross-media ownership, and commodity coordination were tested out in Australia and the United Kingdom between the 1960s and the present. So, when it comes to sport, the chances are that he will replicate and develop previous efforts. Given that

sport on television is cheap to produce, he may try to bring the two culture industries together managerially. This tactic has seen him take over entire sports; rugby union and rugby league were corporatized in the mid-1990s by News Limited as institutions, not just individually franchised clubs. Similar practices in Australian rules football (not undertaken by Murdoch) have been remarkably destructive of inner-city spirit (Pascoe, 1997). Despite the huge disparity in salaries between those codes of football and their American counterparts, something similar may occur in this country, for Murdoch's Australian-based model of entrepreneurial sport involves exactly the Dodger idea: Deracinate inner-city teams by selling them to large firms and then transform the very sport itself into a profit center.

Do not get me wrong here. I always doubt any nostalgic call for the good old days of uncommodified sport and its holy ties to the spirit of a suburb or people; we all know the racist and sexist exclusions, and the exploitation of working-class men, that generally accompany that line. As Nancy Spencer's article in this issue illustrates, with subtle ambivalence, feminist changes in women's tennis were directly related to profit opportunities. The transnationalization of sport has delivered some good public policies and programs; the year 1997 has been Europe's Year Against Racism, which generated the *Racism and Xenophobia in European Football* study (Merkel & Tokarski, 1996). It proposes four levels to analyze the problem: the macrosetting of prevailing social and economic conditions across the European Community, racial representations in soccer and their reception (see also David McCarthy and Robyn Jones's article in this issue), the nature of antiracist activities in the sport, and prospects for integration (here conceived as a public good) (Merkel, 1996, p. 5). The book makes telling critiques, shuttling between the issue of how the populist press covers race and the specifics of White working-class masculinity in public places, in both racist and counterracist manifestations (Fleming & Tomlinson, 1996). This level of cooperation to deal with common problems makes sense. On the business side, commodifying the lifeworld of sport can be a truly revolutionary activity that frees us from a decadent and self-serving "gentlemen's" managerialism. At other times, it delivers veteran Watergator George Steinbrenner and pro-Nazi Marge Schott, their bizarre conduct virtually sanctioned by fellow owners.

Maybe Murdoch will not move the way in which I am suggesting. Maybe he will. Or perhaps someone else will try. Watch and wait to be surprised. It is time to be developing some good responses.

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