

## Sports Commentators and Late Monopoly Capitalist Indoctrination in the United States

Kirk Packwood  
*University of North Texas*

**ABSTRACT:** This ideological study describes how sports commentary ‘layered’ on top of team sporting events serves as a late monopoly capitalist mass indoctrination method in the United States of America. Despite a general consensus to the contrary, popular team sporting events which employ sports commentators are not politically, economically, or socially neutral events. The mass media and semi-monopolistic oligarchic corporate structures use sports commentators to politically charge sporting events in order to subtly program the viewing population to accept late monopoly capitalist ideological tenets and norms, including the illusion that social mobility, wealth, status, and power are open to all who choose to compete and are victorious over their peers within a fair and level competitive playing field which represents the “free” marketplace. In an ideological distortion of fundamental material reality, late monopoly capitalistic norms and ideas are superimposed over events occurring on the field of play or in the news to teach viewers how they should act and what they should believe. Late monopoly capitalist indoctrination embedded within modern sports commentary and the news is particularly effective because of its subtle nature.

**Keywords:** ideology, media, augmented social reality, Gramscianism, commentators, sports, sports commentary, indoctrination

Conflict theory postulates that the socioeconomic structure of the United States of America is arranged in a hierarchical pyramidal formation whose apex consists of a loosely associated elite class of wealthy and powerful individuals, firms, and institutions, being supported by and siphoning power and wealth from the disproportionately exploited working middle and lower classes below (Mills 2000 [1956]). In order for the current inequitable system to be maintained in a relatively stable (and hence profitable) state, it is necessary for the elite to engage in practices that politically and economically nullify the majority of working citizens while adopting, discrediting, or eliminating the relatively few who

recognize the nature of the established social order and who are unwilling to submit to established late capitalistic norms and rules.

Likewise, Marxists ideologues such as Ernest Mandel (Mandel 1978) believe that the United States has entered the historical phase of “late capitalism,” in which multinational corporations, led by a wealthy and powerful elite, collaborate with national governments to globalize capitalism in order to take economic advantage of the labor and resources of underdeveloped nations for the sake of continued economic growth in core capitalistic nations such as the United States of America (Wallerstein 1981). Encoded within the label of “late capitalism” is the

inherently historical and deterministic notion that capitalism is destined to collapse or be transformed from within into a new socio-political-economic system due to the contradictions inherent in the dialectical interplay between the capitalist and working classes.

In classical Marxism, this new system would be the dictatorship of the proletariat, a necessary precursor to a future utopian worldwide communist state. Other neo-Marxists, including Immanuel Wallerstein, believe that the transformation of the world capitalist system is already underway, though they believe it is impossible to know what kind of new world socio-economic-political system will replace late capitalism until the transformation is complete. Wallerstein warns the idealistic that “History is on no one’s side. Each of us can affect the future, but we do not and cannot know how others will act to affect it, too” (Wallerstein 2002). Speaking of the ultra-militaristic and conservative right of the political spectrum, the very same social elements underlying the socio-economic-political system under consideration in this paper, Wallerstein tells us that “they are working hard to build backing for... a new system as bad as – or worse than – the present one” (Wallerstein 2002).

According to Mandel, the late capitalistic stage in which the capitalist core nations now exist grew out of “monopoly capitalism.” Late capitalism retains many traits common to the monopoly capitalist stage, but expands these traits on a global scale into undeveloped nations. A particularly important ideological element common to monopolistic or oligarchic economic systems determined to hold or expand their economic power is the projection of the concept that a “free market” exists in which significant social mobility is not only possible but easily attainable. The elite want the masses to believe that whoever works hard and follows the rules has a reasonable chance of making themselves a success. However, though social and economic mobility do exist within monopolistic and late capitalist societies, the deck is so heavily stacked in favour of the powerful and the privileged that in practice only a very small percentage of the relatively powerless are able to realize significant economic or social mobility. Economic and social mobility on a minor scale is attainable within late

capitalism – but significant social mobility and the power, wealth, and status that come with the highest levels of achievement remain concentrated in the hands of a global elite. Furthermore, the means by which significant mobility may be realized are concealed under many layers of distorting ideology serving the conservative purpose of deceiving those who seek to realize extreme upward social or economic mobility. Extreme social mobility is possible even within inherently monopolistic systems, but the attainment of such mobility becomes very difficult when almost all of the structural elements of society and interpersonal interaction are laced with deceit stemming from ideological projections protecting the dominance and status of the elite class.

This paper attempts to demonstrate by discussing the ideological manipulations prevalent in modern sport and the news that true free and open social or economic marketplaces do not exist in the present era. Capitalists project the illusion that free competition exists because the open and free market ideology serves the purpose of consolidating power in the hands of those who already have it.

Members of the lower classes (the relatively powerless or the role players on sports teams) who attempt to compete in the social or economic marketplaces (the sports playing field) against the capitalist class (the powerful or sports superstars) must learn to resist or bypass the rules inherent in the system that is in place if they want a reasonable chance of attaining significant social mobility. People who “play by the rules” projected into the minds of the masses through late monopoly capitalist institutions, whether these be role players on sports teams or workers on the assembly line, are very unlikely to achieve significant social mobility, precisely because the “rules” which are presented as unquestionable “truths,” are in fact ideological creations and projections of late capitalist oligarchic economic structures whose purpose is to maintain social stability, not to encourage social mobility.

Achieving significant social mobility in late monopoly capitalism is dependant upon a willingness to work outside of the system or to break the established rules through direct resistance to unfair and oppressive norms embedded within social institutions such as sports and everyday social interactions with

people programmed by late monopoly capitalistic ideology. Everyday personal interactions are significantly influenced by the norms, ideas, and behaviours embedded within social entertainment and training spectacles such as sports. As this paper will attempt to demonstrate, despite the common belief that the sporting field of play is an “open market” representing free and fair competition, very little is fair or truly competitive about professional or collegiate sports. Popular sporting systems operate in accordance with principals projected by the norms, values, and principals prevalent within monopoly capitalist oligarchic economic structures. As Lenny Flank writes, “the highest stage of capitalist development is that of economic imperialism. In this stage, capital is fully centralized into monopolistic corporations which do away with the competition associated with earlier capitalism” (2007: locations 663-84).

### **Marxist/ Marxist-Leninist/Gramscian Ideological Theory**

The conservative capitalist element residing at or near the top of the American socioeconomic and political power hierarchy disseminates subtle but potent ideology aimed at the average American in order to manage or influence individual and collective perceptions and actions to bring them into line with capitalist norms and expectations. In this paper, the concept of “ideology” is used in its neo-Gramscian sense, denoting a system of partially or entirely false or deceptive beliefs created and disseminated by the ruling class and internalized by an oppressed population serving to support, justify, and protect the powerful in their exploitation of consumers.

According to Antonio Gramsci, the original meaning of ideology or “ideo + logy” was the “investigation of the origin of ideas” (Gramsci 1971:375). Marxists, Leninists, neo-Marxists, and neo-Gramscians use the term “ideology” to refer to the body of beliefs and perceptions produced by the dialectical relationship between the “base” and “superstructure” of a human society. According to Marx, the base of a society is its economic structure or its relations of production, while the superstructure consists of the social, political, religious, philosophic, and intellectual life that arises from the underlying

economic base “to which correspond definite forms of consciousness” (Marx 1977).

In regard to ideology, Marx wrote that the “mode of production of material life conditions the general process of social, political, and intellectual life. It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but their social existence that determines their consciousness” (Marx 1977). While some earlier Marxist theorists took “the distinction between ‘base’ and ‘superstructure’ mentioned by Marx ... literally; the economic base directly determines the ideological superstructure, and ideology has no impact on human affairs...” (Flank 2007: locations 2390-2412), neo-Gramscians and Leninists tend to relate to ideology on a more dialectic level in which the base affects the superstructure and manipulations of the superstructure of a society can change the form of the base. In other words, people can influence the base of a society by manipulating their thoughts or perceptions or manipulating the institutions and social structures that project ideology into the population. Ideology is important to the neo-Gramscian because “To the extent that ideologies are historically necessary they have a validity which is psychological; they organize human masses, and create the terrain on which men move, acquire consciousness of their position, struggle, etc.” (Gramsci 1971:377).

Furthermore, Marxist understandings of the meaning of the term ideology differ considerably from the general public’s understanding and popular use of the term. When the term ideology is used by a non-Marxist, it is usually understood in a limited sense to mean “an interconnected system of ideas (often political in nature)” and nothing more.

Neo-Gramscian understanding of the importance of ideological manipulation is inexorably intertwined with the concept of cultural hegemony. Cultural hegemony refers to the dominance of a culturally diverse society by one social class and its sociocultural norms, regardless of the desires or interests of dominated social classes. “The ruling ideas are nothing more than the ideal expression of the dominant material relationships, the dominant material relationships grasped as ideas; hence of the relationships which make the one class the ruling one, therefore, the ideas of its dominance” (Marx

1932). The institutions and media of the ruling class which form the social apparatus within which all citizens must operate project the ideas, philosophies, and norms of the ruling class as unquestionable and unchangeable universal truths. "In essence, the ideological hegemony of the bourgeoisie can be viewed as a sort of 'secular religion,' in which existing social structures and relationships are deified and treated as an inescapable and unalterable part of reality" (Flank 2007: locations 2536-56).

The ideas, philosophies, and norms which the ruling-class project into the rest of society are those that serve the best interests of the ruling class. Being saturated from all angles by the ideas and norms of the ruling class and lacking alternate sources of information and supportive institutional structures to transmit and reproduce those alternative ideas, members of the dominated classes subtly internalize the norms, ideas, and philosophies of the ruling class as their own. Thus, members of dominated classes who have internalized the ideologies of the ruling class very often act against their own best interests without realizing they are so doing, because they have internalized a "false consciousness," or manipulated perception of the world based on the ideas programmed into their minds by the ruling class.

One of the primary means by which a ruling class protects its power and status in a capitalist society is by encouraging the creation of false consciousness within the minds of the members of oppressed classes through a widespread projection of conservative ideologies through capitalist dominated social institutions embedded within social zones. In this way, members of oppressed classes tend to police themselves to conform to the desires of the ruling class. In capitalist societies, the government usually does not need to compel the population to accept capitalism by force. Oppressed populations accept the hegemony of the ruling class of their own free, but significantly manipulated choice.

Gramsci believed that it was necessary to wage a cultural struggle or war of position in the public sphere in order to overcome the false mindset held by the vast majority of exploited people protecting the ruling class and its interests. A war of position in the cultural arena involves establishing a counter-hege-

mony of institutions and social structures supporting the ideas and norms of oppressed peoples who have developed "class consciousness." Class consciousness is none other than the realization that society is divided into social classes dominated by a ruling class and the use of that understanding to act in one's own best class interests.

If neo-Gramscian ideological theory has validity, we would expect to find potent but subtle and concealed ideological transmissions meant to influence the thoughts and actions of the masses at precisely those sociocultural locations where the mass media meets popular culture. As Marx wrote, "The class which has the means of material production at its disposal, has control at the same time over the means of mental production, so that thereby, generally speaking, the ideas of those who lack the means of mental production are subject to it" (Marx 1932). Powerful media interests meet mass culture within the realm of popular televised team sporting events. As is predicted by Marxist ideological theory, in a significant number of cases sports commentators do appear to be serving as veiled mouthpieces of late monopoly capitalist-oriented ideology. Therefore, it is the opinion of this author that televised sporting events in America serve as a concealed but primary school of mass political indoctrination teaching late monopoly capitalist ideology and norms supporting an inequitable sociocultural hierarchy.

The notion that sport in the Western world serves to legitimize, support, and reproduce the capitalist system has been explored by a number of radical scholars (Hoch 1972; Meggysey 1970; Oliver 1971; Scott 1971). Perhaps Christopher Lasch summarized the radical position best when he wrote that "sport is a 'mirror reflection' of society which indoctrinates the young with the dominant values..." and an "agency of social repression, fostering the authoritarian interests of the dominant culture... their inculcation perpetuates the 'false consciousness' of the masses" (Lasch 1977:28). Paul Hoch declared that Western sports "undergird monopoly capitalism, militarism, racism, sexism, competitiveness, sexual repression, and the counterrevolution" (Novak 1976:215).

Criticism of sport in capitalistic nations is by no means limited to Western social radicals. The

communist world recognized the socially degenerative potential of Western sport as early as the 1920s, when “the Soviet Union largely opted out of the western system of international sport, condemning it as inherently capitalistic and exploitative” (Keys 2003:414).

Sport in the Western world has been accused of providing a foundation for male dominance (Sabo and Runfula 1980; Felshin 1974). Female athletes who struggle to transform the male-centric nature of many sports face numerous inequalities related to the “funding of programs, facilities and equipment, coaching, medical and training facilities and staff, travel, number of sports activities provided, scholarships, and media coverage” (Coakley 1978).

Christopher Lasch believed that pure sport was not so much the problem as was its secularization, “its subjection to some ulterior purpose, such as profit-making, patriotism, moral training, or the pursuit of health” (Lasch 1977:2).

In addition, it has been argued that sports are a socially acceptable mechanism used to train capitalist citizens to accept and glorify aggression and warlike behavior toward designated rivals. Richard Sipes presented evidence that the tendencies for warlike behavior and aggression may be learned cultural patterns (1973) taught within the sporting arena.

The distinction between a “team sport” and an “individualistic sport” is very important for the purposes of this particular paper. This study focused specifically on two “team sports” – basketball and football. For the purposes of this paper, team sports are defined as “sports in which individual expression of personal talent is extremely dependent upon being allowed to receive the ball.” In basketball and football, not only does a player have to be allowed onto the field of play by a coach with dictatorial powers, but an individual player cannot score without being allowed to have access to the basketball or the football. Sports in which individual players are capable of demonstrating their skills regardless of whether or not they are allowed the ball, such as baseball, are, in the context of this paper, defined as “individualistic” sports and not necessarily subject to all of the findings described herein.

Within individualistic-oriented athletic events,

sports commentators lose much of their power to define the skills or lack thereof of individual players in a deceiving manner. The batting average of a baseball player is determined by how many hits are made. No one has to pass a baseball player “the ball” before that player is allowed to express their batting skills. In team sports, however, sports commentators can and often do label players at a level well below their actual ability and pass this information off as unalterable truth in order to disempower players who are so labelled. This unfortunate situation corresponds well with many zones of the sociocultural arena outside of the sporting world where a group, or powerful members of a group, decide who will be allowed the opportunity to demonstrate their personal skills and who will not. Much can be learned by examining the social interactions and political manipulations inherent in sport in a capitalist society.

For the purposes of this study, a “sports commentator” is any individual assigned the role of translating for an audience the events occurring within a sporting event. Therefore, the “sports commentator” label includes commentators, sportscasters, sports radio talk show hosts, and even sideline reporters. Why is it important to analyze the sports commentator? Because a significant portion of the United States population watches sports regularly, maintains a passing interest in sports, plays sports, or wears clothing bearing the insignia of various sports teams. As Nancy Theberge wrote, “sport is part and parcel of our everyday life. The evidence of this is clear in the ties between sport and other institutions” (1981:346).

With so much of the typical American’s time focused on sport, it would seem very likely that sporting events significantly influence the perceptions of the average American. If sporting events significantly influence the perception of the typical American, does it not seem eminently reasonable that the ruling class would take an interest in manipulating sporting events to promote ideology that supports late monopoly capitalistic norms on which the socioeconomic and political stability of the current system depend?

The sports commentator is the designated, socially and commercially authorized translator of a sporting event for an audience. Major (and minor)

networks have decided that sporting events should not be viewed in their natural, uncommented state. Audiences have come to expect and probably desire sports commentators, but why were commentators “attached” to sporting events which originally had no commentators? Why did and why do people accept the presence of a phenomenal “translator” of a game when the game itself is played without a “translator”? What does the presence of commentators in general suggest about the “translation” of raw reality into forms determined by the powerful to be suitable for mass audiences?

With few exceptions, a commentator is assigned to every televised sporting event. Not only is a commentator assigned to every game, but almost every event within a particular game is “commented upon” by a commentator or a sportscaster. Few actions are allowed to occur on the field of play “uncommented upon.” Whether the audience realizes it is the case or not (as this study will demonstrate, most people do not recognize the political purposes of the sports commentator), a commentator acts as a filter distorting the raw content of a sporting event in accordance with verbal declarations made regarding events occurring on the field of play. But what is the essential nature of the verbal declarations made? Are verbal translations of sporting events primarily personal observations, political (ideological) observations, or a combination of personal and political observations?

I propose that verbal translations of sporting events are a combination of personal and political observation, making the ideological portion of sports commentary harder to recognize for what it is and more effective at transmitting ideology due to its concealed nature.

### The Case Study

One hundred randomly selected college students in the greater Seattle, Washington region were asked to explain in their own words the essential purpose of the sports commentator. The comments printed below are generally representative of the answers I received and can be assumed to be fairly representative of the opinion held by the typical American college student regarding sports commentators.

“The sports commentator is there to like... I don’t know... make the game more exciting.”

“The commentator teaches the audience the best way a game should be played.”

“A commentator makes sure the audience doesn’t miss anything that’s going on down on the field.”

It seems reasonable to assume that, in comparison with the average American, educated college students would be particularly sensitive to any real or perceived connection between politics, ideology, and popular sport, but not one of one hundred students asked mentioned a possible connection between sports and political indoctrination, even when I brought up the issue in informal conversation after my study questions had been asked. If college students are any indicator of the general population’s awareness of the merging of politics and sport, then the vast majority of Americans do not perceive sports and politics to be interrelated at all. But when sports and sporting events are so deeply ingrained into American society and culture, and society and culture effect politics, how could sports and sporting events not be tied to political and ideological matters?

Regardless of common (mis)perceptions of the nature of sports and televised sporting events and the commentators who translate sporting content to a viewing audience, a high percentage of verbal declarations made by sports commentators could be judged to be overtly or subtly political in nature. Not only were televised sporting events found to be saturated with thinly veiled political and ideological commentary, but almost all of the politically-oriented comments made were strongly conservative in nature. That is, the ideology that is being transmitted by sports commentators appears to be supporting conservative late monopoly capitalistic norms at the expense of any other possible way of viewing events occurring on a “field of play.” Tellingly, sports commentary that would be considered liberal or leftist was almost entirely absent from the television sports commentary sampled. As Jean-Marie Brohm writes, “All of the values of the capitalist jungle are played out in sport: virility, fascistic male chauvinism, racism, sexism, etc.” (1978:15), yet the legitimacy of these values is never questioned.

### Capitalist Ideology Embedded within Sports Commentary

Conservative political ideology supporting late monopoly capitalism embedded within sports commentary found within this analysis tends to fall within a few definable categories. Most importantly, the majority of the conservative ideology embedded within sports commentary could be categorized as being related to the glorification and maintenance of extreme social stratification based on held or achieved power and the idea that the sports playing field is a fair and level ground in which fair and level competition determines who rises to the top. The people at the top tend to support extreme social stasis in order to protect their positions and this desire is reflected in conservative ideology found within sports commentary which is then disseminated to the masses who are, for the most part, working directly or indirectly in the service of the elite. Though the support of extremely rigid social stratification is the overarching category under which most political sports commentary falls, within this overarching category numerous sub-categories were found which will be briefly defined in the Specific Evidence portion of the paper.

Practical tactics determined to be commonly employed by sports commentators to effectively transmit conservative capitalist ideology include direct ideological transmission, subtle ideological transmission, linguistic code switching, and the use of revisionist history. It is evident that in a majority of cases sports commentators not only support the notion that a natural and inevitable social hierarchy exists and is eminently desirable within sports and sporting events, they help to create and maintain that hierarchy as well. By analogy, viewers tend to internalize the possibility that whenever possible, significant aspects of society outside of sports should conform to the model promoted within sporting events as well. Though commentators seldom directly connect supporting commentary for conservative social hierarchies within capitalist-oriented sporting events to aspects of society outside of sporting events (though they were found to make such direct connections on occasion), the viewing audience is subtly taught by example and phenomenal analogy that extreme social stratification is a necessary and eminently desirable

sociocultural model. In the same way that a basketball “star” like LeBron James or Kobe Bryant should take the majority of shots in a basketball game for his team, the CEO of a major corporation should make most of the important decisions for a business, the President should make most of the important decisions for the United States, and rich, powerful, and high status individuals should make most of the decisions for poor, relatively powerless, and lower to middle-status people. The idea that people should strive to compete in the free market (which does not really exist) in order to determine their social standing is transmitted and internalized by the audience in the same way.

Sports commentators are subtly indoctrinating American audiences to accept the extremely conservative political viewpoint that high ranking individuals should be treated better than lower status individuals and deferred to whenever possible and that a free market and significant social mobility based on free and fair competition are prevalent in American society. More specifically, direct evidence was found that demonstrates that sports commentators give sports “stars” a disproportionate amount of attention, treat sports “stars” with undue deference and respect, and seldom question sports “stars” for decisions they make, even if the decisions made appear to be poor decisions, while constantly questioning the actions and decisions of lower status players, even if those decisions were correct decisions which led to beneficial outcomes for their respective teams. When lower-status players succeed on the court or emulate “star” players with their actions and achievements, sports commentators often attempt to “explain away,” or label as meaningless, the actions and achievements of the lower status players.

Popular sporting events are commonly used as late monopoly capitalist-oriented political theatre. Particular plays are commented upon in order to teach social lessons to the mass viewing audience about the need to maintain extreme and rigid social hierarchies. This is so even in the face of direct evidence that the people at the top are making incorrect decisions or that the people at the bottom are ready and capable of moving up. At the same time sports commentators promote the false idea that free and fair competition

is being used to determine who holds the highest position on the “field of play.”

The situation prevalent within sport in the United States is very much akin to the neo-Gramscian notion that the working classes are being taught to internalize the ideology of the late monopoly capitalist class despite the fact that the norms and values being taught are not in the subordinate classes’ own interests. The masses are taught to believe that a free market exists and that competition and hard work within that market will undoubtedly lead to extreme social mobility and power. Yet a truly free market or open and fair competition does not exist on the “field of play” or in greater society.

While sports commentators praise powerful sports stars and the actions and decisions they make (whether correct or incorrect), comments made in regard to lower status players subtly but powerfully imply that lower status individuals should be degraded subtly and directly as a matter of course, labelled as “role players” instead of as individuals or people with potential, constantly reminded to “play their role,” and frequently taught the need to accept the authority and command of higher status individuals such as sports “stars” and dictatorial coaches.

### **The Subtle Nature of Sports Indoctrination**

Political indoctrination attendant to sports commentary is subtle in nature. Unless an individual is looking for ideology embedded within sports commentary, they are not likely to come to the conclusion that ideology is embedded within sports commentary. “Again, it should be stressed that this process of hegemony is not merely a system of overt propaganda, in which the media deliberately disseminates false information in order to mislead people. The process is much more subtle than that; it works, not by forcing others to adopt a particular point of view, but by limiting all potential outlooks to those consistent with current social relationships...” (Flank 2007: locations 2515-36). That the ideology embedded in sports commentary is subtle should not come as a surprise, for in an unequal society in which predation of the misinformed is encouraged it would not be in the best interests of the powerful to betray attempts to

control the perceptions of the powerless. When and if the exploited become capable of seeing through the veil of obscurant ideology embedded within popular sports, class consciousness may begin to develop. With newly developed class consciousness as a foundation, the masses (or individuals from within the masses) may begin to resist their exploitation at the hands of the late monopoly capitalists. Effective ideological transmission often needs to be subtle in order to bypass the conscious and rational defenses of the human mind in order to effectively control thought and action from a subconscious level.

Some might think it preposterous to claim that sports commentators are part of an organized conspiracy constructed by the powerful with the aim of keeping audiences aligned with late monopoly capitalist ideology and the political and economic systems that support the elite. However, organized conspiracy is not necessary when late monopoly capitalist goals are considered. The quest for extreme profit and power at any cost to consumers has become standard operating procedure within many capitalist corporations. Corporations seeking to realize extreme profits and power would create and support oppressive ideologies as a byproduct of standard business practices, even if such ideologies were not consciously created in a conspiratorial manner. The greed of powerful corporations and people is all that is needed to create and transmit an effective monopoly capitalist-oriented ideology at a national level. Marx wrote that “many times, the intellectuals who help to justify bourgeois social relationships are not even consciously aware that they are doing so – they may believe that their line of thought is completely independent of existing social structures, yet by accepting certain portions of the existing intellectual paradigm as ‘given,’ the effect of their intellectual activity is to support the existing social order (Flank 2007: locations 2493-2515).

Sports commentators would not necessarily need to be consciously aware of the nature of the ideology embedded within comments made. An individual’s social class or status is very capable of creating significant portions of that individual’s perceptions and style of interaction with the social world. Holding, or desiring to hold, the social position of “sports commentator” may predispose an unaware individual

toward transmitting capitalist ideology to an audience, because the role of “sports commentator” is a primary position where late monopoly capitalist ideology can, and in fact is expected to be, transmitted to the American masses.

### Specific Evidence

Over 104 National Basketball Association (NBA), National Football League, and high school televised sporting events were analyzed over a period of six months with an eye toward isolating ideologically oriented speech for further consideration. Sixty of the games were broadcast by major networks, while 44 of the games examined were broadcast by smaller cable TV networks. As noted, the study sample included basketball and football games only.

The primary findings of the study included specific evidence suggesting that:

- Sports commentators alter their linguistic code based on the perceived status of the player being talked about
- Commentators talk significantly more about “star” players than about “non-star” players
- Commentators talk about other “star” players in games which do not even include the “star” being talked about rather than talk about the playing of non-star players in the games they are announcing
- Commentators favorably compare “stars” in the game being viewed with other “stars” on other teams not currently playing
- Commentators talk about high status individuals in the crowd, or “stars” from outside of sports attending a sporting event

Linguistic code switching was found to be very prevalent in the sample. An excellent example of the type of linguistic code switching commonly employed by sports commentators occurred during a Cleveland Cavaliers at Orlando Magic NBA league game when the commentator’s focus was on three separate individuals playing for the Cleveland Cavaliers. One individual being talked about was LeBron James, a very high status individual or “superstar” in the NBA. The other two individuals were “role players” allowed by the coach to come off the bench to participate in the game for a limited period of time. When the

commentator talked about the “star” player, he always referred to him by his personal name, LeBron James. But when two relatively unknown “bench players,” or “role players,” entered the game, the commentator did not refer to the players by their personal names. Rather, the commentator referred to the two players as “a couple of big bodies.” After giving the two “role players” a collective, derogatory, and disempowering label, the commentator then proceeded to clearly define the expected roles of the “two big bodies” for the audience. Specifically, the commentator informed the audience that “big bodies weren’t going to get you a ton of points, but they were solid big men who were going to get some rebounds and put-backs.”

When judged through the discerning lens of neo-Gramscian ideological theory, was the commentator merely helping the audience to understand the intricacies of the game, or was the commentator forcing disempowering labels upon two “bench players” while indoctrinating the audience via example in the ways of predatory capitalist exploitation of the lower classes? It seems likely that a significant number of viewers probably accepted the commentator’s comments as objectively true rather than used their own individual perception to judge the value and worth of the two “role players” who had been so graciously allowed to enter the game by a dictatorial coach. In this context, it seems very clear that the sports “star” is representative of the late monopoly capitalist, while the “role players” were being symbolically equated with the oppressed classes.

Before the two “big bodies” were even allowed to demonstrate what skills or potential they may or may not have had, the commentator had already refused to use the “bench players” given names, assigned the “bench players” the disempowering labels of “big men” and “big bodies,” lumped two distinctive individuals under one collective label, and “educated” the vast viewing audience on what the two “role players” were and were not capable of doing.

But how could the commentator possibly know what the two “role players” were and were not capable of doing? The commentator was clearly implying that conditions in the present are completely determined by conditions in the past. However, according to neo-Gramscian ideological theory, events in the past are

themselves misrepresented owing to the ideological filter overlain over all social institutions including sporting events and sports media presentations, which are social institutions of the late monopoly capitalist class that create and project ideological manipulations as a matter of course. The commentator was verbally denying the possibility that a “role player” was capable of accomplishing as much as a “star,” precisely because a “role player” was not a “star.” But since both “role player” and “star” are labels forced upon players without their consent, the distorting and controlling nature of the commentator’s comments become clear. A label does not necessarily equate well with reality, yet commentators act as though the labels that they create are direct re-presentations of an unchanging and unalterable underlying state. The sports commentator in the first example was doing nothing short of verbally denying the possibility of social mobility within a hierarchical sociocultural system without taking into account the potential of the players being labelled – yet the field of play (in this case the basketball court) is commonly believed to be a free and level determining grounds in which social mobility can be realized.

One could argue that the commentator was only expressing his opinion on the value of “role players” based on previous experience and accumulated statistics. But in addition to the fact that the same commentators almost always repeated their tendency to negatively label non-star players in every conceivable circumstance, an argument could be made that perhaps “role players” have relatively poor stats not because they lack the skills to obtain better stats, but precisely because a dictatorial coach and perhaps other players on the team and the media had labelled them as “role players,” limited their playing time, and designed plays in which only the “star” players would be allowed to accumulate the very stats by which the label “star” and all of its disproportionate benefits could be earned. In the very same way, late monopoly capitalism teaches oppressed populations that the people who hold positions of significant power in the United States do so because they are more “talented” than the average person. Yet is this really the case? Do people who hold positions of extreme power in the United States hold those positions because of their

talent, or because of their willingness and ability to use oppression, exploitation, and deceit to hold down potential competition? Is the United States being led by the most talented, or the most oppressive?

Are role players “role players” because of their essential nature as supposedly inferior players or are they “role players” because they have been forcibly labelled as such? Does the commentator’s commentary serve to translate to the audience what is actually occurring on and outside the “field of play” or does it serve to transmit a conservative ideological message to the audience supporting the notion that the powerful are the most talented because they have competed and been found victorious on an equal, level, and fair playing field? What if a “role player” was given the same amount of playing time, the same access to the ball, and had plays specifically designed for him or her?

I would like to propose that the chances are good that a “role player” shown the same favouritism as a “star” player in a team sport would soon come to accumulate the kind of statistics common to a “star” player. Likewise, I would like to propose that a member of an oppressed class shown the same kind of favouritism as a member of the late monopoly capitalist class would soon come to accumulate significant power and wealth. But even if a “role player” were to accumulate the same kind of statistics as a “star” player, the question would remain whether the “role player” would ever be able to shake off the label of “role player” or would always be perceived as a “second class star,” because the athlete had once been labelled a “role player.”

Another professional basketball game provided an excellent example of the sometimes lingering nature of a derogatory label, when the commentator both praised and negatively labelled a “role player” at the same time.

Commentator: “That’s what I like about him. He understands his range. He isn’t taking shots beyond 20 feet.”

But was the praise given really praise or was it a verbal cover designed to disguise the spreading of predatory ideology supporting an exploitive sociocultural system at the expense of the player being talked

about? In this particular case, “good” is defined as a player who limits himself with boundaries defined by the sports commentator. If the “role player” had attempted to step outside of his predefined limits, he would have been considered “bad.” What happens when this same model of perception is accepted and applied in the personal life of the viewer?

This is best summed up in a quote from the end of an episode of *Hard Knocks: Baltimore Ravens*, a documentary television series based on the inner machinations of a professional football training camp. As an individual who has just been cut from the Raven’s tryouts walks sadly out the door, a player who has made the team informs the audience with no small amount of pleasure that “Some players belong on the team and some don’t belong on the team” (*Hard Knocks*). The typical sports fan would probably accept such a statement at face value without considering its deeper sociocultural, political, and economic implications.

### **The Extreme Focus of Commentary on Sports Stars.**

Linguistic code switching is combined with a disproportionate focus on star players and even other high-status individuals not involved with sports who attend games as members of the audience, representative of the alliances which tend to be formed between members of the late monopoly capitalist class. During a particular NBA playoff game found to be representative of most of the playoff games examined in the study, the camera spent an inordinate amount of time focusing on a “superstar” player at the expense of the other players on the court. The commentator had something positive to say about the “superstar” at regular intervals throughout the game. Before and after commercial breaks the camera would often switch between close up cameos of Tiger Woods (a “superstar” golfer in the audience) and the “superstar” basketball player. In addition, the commentators spent an inordinate amount of time talking about which “superstar” should be the MVP of the league, rather than talking about the actions and play of other players who were on the court and who were actually playing at the time. What does such commentary and focus on “superstar” athletes

teach the non-critical members of the mass viewing audience about the need to worship and submit to the successful and powerful?

### **Political Manipulation of Commentators Outside of Sport.**

In an April 2008 article the *New York Times* reported that the U.S. Military Groomed TV Analysts. Specifically, it was reported that many “U.S. military analysts used as commentators on Iraq by television networks have been groomed by the Pentagon, leaving some feeling they were manipulated to report favorably on the Bush administration” (Barstow 2008). Apparently, the United States military extended offers to a number of popular television military analysts to attend specially organized retreats sponsored by the military with the stated purpose of sharing information to the analysts about the state of the Iraqi-United States conflict. The US military completely controlled the information they released to the analysts. The analysts who attended the retreats would later go on air to a mass television audience having knowledge of the Iraq conflict based only on what they had been told by the U.S. military.

Robert Bevelacqua, a former Fox News analyst and Green Beret, was quoted as saying that “It was them (the Bush administration) saying, we need to stick our hands up your back and move your mouth for you” (Barstow 2008). It seems clear that the U.S. military desired to use military analysts on popular television news programs as mouthpieces spreading the official U.S. military version of events to the masses in the Iraq conflict. According to the precepts of late capitalism, the military and the government are essentially in place to support the status and power of the elite capitalist class. If commentators are routinely being coerced into spreading conservative political ideology on major news programs, is it really that much of a stretch to claim that they may be being used in other settings in a similar way?

Not only were major news programs using military commentators to alter the public’s perception of the Iraq conflict, but many of those same commentators had direct ties to military contractors making money off the war. If this is the case, does it not seem reasonable to assume that sports commentators

might be coerced to alter their commentary in ways meant to maximize a network's profit off of televised sporting events?

Perhaps the corporate structure in which the sports media and sports commentators operate serves to "inform" sports commentators what they should say and not say as well. Perhaps Lenny Flank is correct when he writes that "The media cannot think in a non-corporate way precisely because they are corporations, and they are organized as corporations because without these economic resources, they would be unable to survive in a market economy" (2007: locations 2536-56).

### **Conclusion**

I propose that the evidence supports the possibility that sporting events have become a premier "school" of late monopoly conservative capitalist-oriented political indoctrination in the United States. Where historical examples of relatively blatant political indoctrination mechanisms associated with Khmer

Rouge Cambodia, the U.S.S.R., North Korea, or Communist China may be fairly easy for an outsider to recognize, somewhat similar political and ideological mechanisms supporting late monopoly capitalism may currently be at work in the United States under the guise of televised sporting events and presumably in many other areas of society as well.

Surprisingly, conservative ideological transmissions supporting late monopoly capitalism embedded within popular sporting events may be more effective in keeping the population adhering to the dominant political and economic ideology than were the more direct methods used to indoctrinate the populace in places like Cambodia and China, precisely because the illusion is presented that sports is entertainment, not a political or ideological event. A significant percentage of the American population are willing participants in their own indoctrination into the tenets of conservative capitalism without even realizing they are being indoctrinated at all.

**References:**

- Barstow, David  
2008 U.S. Military Groomed TV Analysts. New York Times. Electronic Document, <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/04/20/washington/20generals.html?scp=3&sq=military+analysts&st=nyt>, accessed April 20, 2008.
- Brohm, Jean-Marie  
1978 Sport: A Prison of Measured Time. London: Ink Links.
- Coakley, Jay  
1978 Sport in Society. St. Louis: Mosby.
- Felshin, Jan  
1974 The Social View. In *The American Woman in Sport*. Ellen Gerber, Jan Felshin, Pearly Berlin, and Waneen Wyrick, eds. Reading: Addison-Wesley.
- Flank, Lenny  
2007 Hegemony and Counter-Hegemony: Marxism, Capitalism, and their Relation to Sexism, Racism, Nationalism and Authoritarianism. St. Petersburg: Red and Black Publishers. (Kindle eBook)
- Gramsci, Antonio  
1971 Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci, edited and translated by Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith. New York: International Publishers.
- Hard Knocks: Baltimore Ravens  
2001 NFL Films, HBO.
- Hoch, Paul  
1972 Rip Off the Big Game. New York: Doubleday.
- Keys, Barbara  
2003 Soviet Sport and Transnational Mass Culture in the 1930s. *Journal of Contemporary History* 38(3):413-434.
- Lasch, Christopher  
1977 The Corruption of Sports. New York Review of Books. Retrieved from <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/1977/apr/28/the-corruption-of-sports/?page=2>.
- Mandel, Ernest  
1978 Late Capitalism. London, Verso Books.
- Marx, Karl  
1932 The German Ideology: Critique of Modern German Philosophy According to its Representatives Feuerbach, B. Bauer and Stirner, and of German Socialism According to Its Various Prophets. Electronic document, <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1845/german-ideology/ch01b.htm>, accessed January 2, 2010.
- 1977 A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy. Moscow: Progress Publishers.
- Meggyesy, Dave  
1970 Out of Their League. Berkeley: Ramparts Press.
- Mills, C. Wright  
2000 [1956] The Power Elite. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Novak, Michael  
1976 The Joy of Sports. New York: Basic Books.
- Oliver, Chip  
1971 High for the Game. New York: Morrow.
- Sabo, Donald and Russ Runfola (eds)  
1980 Jock: Sports and Male Identity. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall.
- Scott, Jack  
1971 The Athletic Revolution. New York: Free Press.
- Sipes, Richard G.  
1973 War, Sports, and Aggression: An Empirical Test of Two Rival Theories. *American Anthropologist* 75(1):64-86.
- Theberge, Nancy  
1981 A Critique of Critiques: Radical and Feminist Writings on Sport. *Social Forces* 60(2):341-353.
- Wallerstein, Immanuel  
1981 The Modern World-System I: Capitalist Agriculture and the Origins of the European World-Economy in the Sixteenth Century. Maryland Heights: Academic Press.
- 2002 New Revolts Against the System. *New Left Review* 18. Electronic document, <http://www.newleftreview.org/A2420>, accessed January 4, 2010.