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Can Sport be 'Un-political'?

Ansgar Thiel

University of Tuebingen, Germany

Anna Vilanova

National Institute of Physical Education (INEFC), Spain

Martin Toms

University of Birmingham, UK

See next page for additional authors

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Authors

Ansgar Thiel, Anna Vilanova, Martin Toms, Lone Friis Thing, and Paddy Dolan



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EDITORIAL

Can sport be ‘un-political’?

Sports officials often claim that sport has to be ‘un-political’. This argument is most notably made in two contexts: Firstly, when the decision of awarding Olympic Games or World Championships to nations that struggle with human right issues is justified by the IOC or other international sporting federations. Secondly, when athletes express their concern over social injustices with symbolic gestures of protest in sports-specific contexts.

At the moment, there is an ongoing debate in American sports about the ‘adequate’ behaviour of athletes during the performance of the national anthem. How incredibly hateful some fans react to symbolic gestures of athletes such as Colin Kaepernick, who protests against racism and police brutality in the USA by kneeling down during the national anthem, can be read in an article by Nancy Armour in *USA Today Sports* (Armour, 2016).

Surprised by the fierceness of this debate, a European NFL fan wondered in a discussion with one of the authors of this editorial: ‘Is it against the rules of the NFL to kneel during the national anthem? No. Is it unconstitutional? No. Is it unsportsmanlike? No. Then why do people make such a great fuss about it?’ The European NFL fan continued: ‘It is a protest against obvious social injustices, isn’t it? It is not a protest against the country itself.’ He finally added: ‘Didn’t Kaepernick repeatedly state that his protest was a patriotic act? Didn’t he even choose a symbolic gesture that should express both protest against social wrongs and respect for the nation’s constitutional principles at the same time? Why shouldn’t he protest then? Wouldn’t it be unconstitutional and unpatriotic to deny the athlete his (constitutional) right to protest against injustices?’

Moderate critics, who raised their voice against Kaepernick, would probably answer these reflections by saying that it is not the responsibility of professional athletes to express a political opinion in the context of professional sport, or, that the playing field is the wrong place to have a political agenda. Other moderate critics would presumably state that they understand the issue, but do not support the means.

Mounting the argument ‘wrong place, wrong time, wrong means’ is a common strategy to silence complaints by apparently respecting the issue, but discrediting it at the same time. The sociological function of these ‘killer phrases’ is to stabilize established structures by relocating the discussion about the necessity of a change to an undefined space and time. How harmful this strategy can be for the viability of social systems is well documented in management literature (e.g. Thompson, 2007).

From the perspective of those being criticized, the time and the place of protest is never right. The reverse is true with regard to the viability and sustainability of society. History shows that every improvement of living conditions necessarily requires resistance towards the given because resistance is a prerequisite of change. Following Niklas Luhmann, system-theoretical conflict theory therefore regards the (verbally or non-verbally) ‘communicated contradiction’ as inherently functional (c.f. Thiel, 2003); the challenge social systems have to deal with is how to ‘manage’ these conflicts in order to generate a change to the better.

Let us come back to the initial question: Can sport be ‘un-political’? In an interview with the journalist Anis Micijevic for the German business journal *Handelsblatt* (Micijevic, 2013), the sport philosopher Volker Schürmann explicitly objects this assumption. Schürmann states that – although sport must not be instrumentalized for political

purposes – the Olympic Charter itself is already political. To claim a neutral position is also political, if at the same time the most prestigious athletic competitions are awarded to politically controversial countries – despite all reasoned criticism. In fact, these awards are nothing else than a support of the establishment.

A similar argument can be made with regard to the question whether athletes should have the right to protest against social injustices within sport settings. To deny them their right to protest is by no means a justified strategy to secure the neutrality and political autonomy of sport. In contrast, it serves the political agenda of those who want to prevent the discussion about social injustices receiving a larger forum and, consequently, more attention.

Nonetheless, one could legitimately ask where to set boundaries for protest in sport. From a sport sociological perspective, the answer is rather complex.

Within the club, the boundaries are – in the first instance – already set by employment agreements. A less formal restriction of possible behaviour is set by the club's goals. If the athlete's behaviour weakens the team's performance in a competition or endangers the club's financial basis, the club could force its athlete to behave differently. However, in both cases, the club has to set behavioural rules that can be referred to in case of unwanted behaviour. But even if such rules were established, this does not mean that they cannot be criticized.

Sports-specifically, behavioural boundaries are set by the rules of the disciplines and – with less binding force – by ethical codes, such as the Olympic Charter or the personal conduct policies in American professional sports. But even these regulations should not fundamentally rule out the possibility to question given structures in case of reasoned complaints. Silencing controversies instead of deliberately discussing them is not only undemocratic (and therefore incompatible with the principles of international sport), but also harms the system instead of fostering its development for the benefit of all.

Initiatives, such as the 'Play for Game Conference' organized by the Danish Institute of Sport (IDAN), can help to structurally establish platforms for discussions about basic standards for democracy, transparency and freedom of speech in international sports.

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Ansgar Thiel

Faculty for Economy and Social Sciences, Institute of Sports Science,
Eberhard Karls University, Tübingen, Germany


✉ ansgar.thiel@uni-tuebingen.de


Anna Vilanova Soler


NEFC Barcelona

University of Barcelona Barcelona, Spain

✉ anna.vilanova@gencat.cat

Martin Toms
School of Sport, Exercise & Rehabilitation Sciences
University of Birmingham Edgbaston, UK
 m.r.toms@bham.ac.uk

Lone Friis Thing
Department of Nutrition, Exercise and Sports
University of Copenhagen, København N, Denmark
 lfthing@nexs.ku.dk

Paddy Dolan
Department of Social Sciences
School of Languages, Law & Social Sciences
Dublin Institute of Technology Dublin, Ireland
 paddy.dolan@dit.ie