

Football and Social Justice: a Conversation

DEGELE: In our journal “Fußball und Gesellschaft”, we are asking how social justice relates to the contexts of football. What is the normative idea of playing football, and how do social and political structures of football promote or impede social justice? How does the relationship between professional, amateur and grassroots football address ideals of social justice?

KAUR: The question of social justice, as Sen puts it, “is a bit like oxygen: we only take an interest in its presence only when it is absent” (1999, p. 264). In other words, when we talk about social justice, we are really searching for forms of injustices. So, when you ask me about social justice in the context of football, you are really asking me to think through forms of injustices embedded in its structures and/or practices.

The normative idea that football seems to promote is that it provides a level playing field and anyone with talents, grit, and hard work, can succeed – somewhat similar to the promises of capitalism. Of course, the reality of, both football and capitalism, is more complex. As social scientists, we are not just interested in football as a socio-cultural activity, but also in its popularity. It is no exaggeration to say that football is the most popular sport in the world. And this alone is the reason to attend closely to how football is situated in the global structures of domination, politics, power and prestige. At this level of analysis, recent work of David Goldblatt, *The age of Football* (2019), is an excellent reference. Scope of his analysis is global and far-reaching, revealing the layers of prospects and problems generated, in part, by ‘opium of the masses’ that football has become.

In my opinion, it is the relationship between professional, amateur and grassroots football that is likely to shed light on concerns of social in/justice. The professional football is dominated by a very small number of European clubs. They dictate the global economy of football. Were you to only focus on these clubs to interrogate concerns of social justice, they are going to come across as champions of fair-play and justice. Similarly, at the grassroots level, there are growing number of football-for-development initiatives, advancing ideas that football can be used to promote peace and social justice. Perhaps a group or an organisation may put together a programme and commit to intentionally promoting ideals of social justice in the context

of football and may even do so successfully. However, to credit football for that would be naïve and insincere. Despite the regional and historical variances in football structures across the world, football does not do is promote social justice – people and organisations do. Therefore, it is by attending to the relationship between different layers and realms of football and how people and structures *do* things with it that more useful questions about social justice could be articulated.

DEGELE: Which social categories of differentiation, such as race, class, gender, age or others (ability?), should be analysed to grasp ideas and practices of social in/justice adequately?

KAUR: The analytical focus has to be on distribution of material rewards and media attention across the social categories of differentiation. We are led to believe that it is the performance and the spectacle most in demand that is rewarded. There might be some truth to that. However, in my observations, it is not merely the art and performance of athletes or some equation of demand-and-supply that draw sports enthusiasts, stakes or rewards play an important role. Stakes add to the adrenalin of performing and spectating football. If footballers are playing for financial rewards and prestige, spectators also have much more than personal entertainment at stake. So, what I am arguing for is: rather than taking race, class, gender, age, or ability, as units of analyses, attending to stakes and rewards, tangible or intangible, direct or indirect, might be worth interrogating. This focus may expose social in/justices present by design, rather intention, and how these take affect across the social categories of differentiation.

There is a history to betting in sports. Today, sports betting is a bigger business than ever before, with array of online betting companies legally operating across the world. These have been reported to have devastating impact among the unemployed youth in parts of Africa (see for example, #OurCulture 2019, BBC Africa Eye documentary 2019). And this form of legal sports betting, capable of accommodating people from diverse socio-economic backgrounds, has created a space for organised crime to benefit from a lucrative industry of match-fixing (Hill 2012). Gambling is one of the factors that draws global and diverse spectators to the games of football. And yet, it remains among the least debated factor in the popularity of the sport. Sports betting, I would argue, might be a good angle to interrogate concerns of social in/justice. In my research, I focused on football gambling games, played and organised mostly by South Africa's black working-class. While taken on their own, these games show autonomy, initiative, and ownership, of the leisure time and space by the largely disfranchised working-class, the driving force behind these practices is a lingering (and often an unrealistic) desire to play football professionally.

Thus, these games are very much part of the broader football-industrial-complex, if not by design, than by desire. The professional football industry generates a large pool of (exploitable) aspirants and feeds into, both directly and indirectly, increasing the gap of income inequality. Focusing on football gambling does not neglect a category across the social differentiation but exposes how these categories are deeply connected and dis/advantaged by the very design.

Ethnography of Football in South Africa

DEGELE: Turning to the specifics of your ethnographic research on football among the working class of South Africa, how would you contrast the self-regulating fairness in the *kasi* football games and broader concerns of social in/justices in this context?

KAUR: The broader concerns of social in/justice in the context of agrarian working class of South Africa is income insecurity. Large number of young people find themselves un- and/or under-employed, available to work as unskilled labourers, at extremely low wages, in a labour-intensive agriculture and wine production industry. This kind of work is seasonal, and most young people are on temporary contracts, with no real prospects of secure livelihood or for a better life in this labour market. For those with some talent and tenacity for football, football becomes more sacred and meaningful pursuit. Given the historical tradition of self-organisation of football games among the black working-class of South Africa, the *kasi* football, in particular, continues to offer a sense of control and autonomy over their time, space and dreams. Still, *kasi* football ends up being mostly played amongst a small number of very localised football teams and clubs from economically similar backgrounds. It is often not in the interest of the players and organizers to get into conflict with each other: it is not worth it. The sum of money staked on these games is also very small and responsibility of how these games would proceed is entirely on the organizing individuals. There is no centralised/professional body to oversee and regulate these games. At the same time, while these games serve a purpose, the players and organisers do not attach much prestige to them. The bottom-line with *kasi* football is that these are a response to experienced marginalisation, not a desired end.

Contrast *kasi* football to experiences of rural working-class football clubs at the organised structures of football. The expectations attached to the official league games are very different. These are seen more prestigious. Most clubs and players have to make some serious sacrifices, save enough money, adhere to superficially

set professional standards, just to be accepted/considered as serious contenders. Entering these league games also implicitly expresses that the club, or at least some of the players of the club, genuinely believe in the promise of official leagues to identify talent and support the talented to climb the professional ladder. However, the organised structures tend to be more opaque and absorb unfairness within its hierarchies, circuits of decision making and power struggles. Not only low-income working-class football clubs give up their autonomy and control over organising football games on their own terms when they participate in official leagues, the social-moral contract that regulates fairness at unofficial games is also lost at the official games. This is not a suggest that the official leagues will necessarily or intentionally treat those outside their circuits of influence unfairly. With all the weight and expectations attached to the official structures, as well as lack of transparency and control over how disputes are resolved, poorer players are more likely to be left with feelings of doubt in the fairness of these structures towards them.

Ultimately, it is the deep inequalities in socio-economic class status and how people are treated, the banal humiliations they experience in their daily lives, within and beyond football field, that defines the social in/justices of the context. It is not simply about access to decent and secure living, but how low and insecure income ascribes social status and in/humanly treatment that places the question of social in/justice at the centre of life within and beyond football. Football is just one social avenue from where these social injustices could be observed.

DEGELE: Are there lessons from your description of “unorganized” or unofficial football that could be learnt by the established football as in Europe?

KAUR: The critiques of established football in Europe that I have learned by engaging with scholars and scholarly work on the topic often points at the over-professionalisation, especially at junior levels, and discrimination that non-Europeans experience. While these are some real concerns, I am not entirely sure how self-regulating fairness of “unorganised” football might address these. The unofficial football is a response to, or even a product of, a very specific kind of disenfranchisement and broken social contract in an extremely divided and unequal society. It is not a solution to these problems. My guess is that where-ever people feel excluded and disenfranchised from the dominant social contract that holds a society together, “unorganised” and under-the-radar form of social and leisure practices will take shape. The lessons, therefore, are in observing the conditions and circumstances in which such practices take shape and are performed. It is about understanding what they present. It is also important to not romanticise such practices but learn from what they may tell us about the concerns of social in/justices in a given context.

DEGELE: In the paper you show how studying sports in a socio-politically fraught context allows access to examine social inequalities and injustices. What particular insights and implications of studying sports ethnographically would you like aspiring researchers to consider?

KAUR: I came to appreciate ethnographic methods while engaging with, and through my experiences in, the field of my research. The incident I share in the paper of feeling nervous about trespassing private property while visiting a sports field, and then tactfully getting out of trouble I might have gotten into by emphasising of my “apolitical” study of sports, is a good example. To be honest, I have no idea what kind of trouble I was imagining in the situation. But I was nervous, nevertheless. And the fact that I spontaneously choose to emphasise and hide behind the “apolitical” character of sports (I don’t and didn’t believe sport is “apolitical”), was interesting and insightful and every bit worth reflecting upon. What other research methods allow, let alone encourage, such critical self-reflection then ethnography? Beyond its long-term immersion into the field, ethnography demands from ethnographer to be a keen and reflective observer of life as it unfolds. To better understand, analyse, and explain what sports do in our contemporary societies also means being attentive to not only what happens but also how we observe what happens. As such, there is so much meaning, emotion, imagination, mythology, and money, that is invested in the making of modern sports (see Besnier et al 2018). And then all the clichés about sports’ positive role in society that have come to have so much political currency. Critical and self-reflective research methods are only more important in the context of sports. As researchers, we are complicit by the love for sports we write about. It is important to note that identification of opportunities and limitations, strengths and weaknesses, positives and negatives, of sports, is not critical research. My case for ethnography of sports argues to take romance with, passion for, and apolitical impressions of, sports as research tools to access complexities and contradictions of socio-political realities, and not as truisms in and of themselves.

In other words, I would encourage aspiring researchers of sports to not accept common-sense ideas about sports at face-value but enquire how these are constructed and what they convey in practice, not just in words. Or what do discourses of sports’ positive-passionate-apolitical discourses do in the real world? As anthropological tropes would have it, a careful and observant study reveals that common sense is neither common nor sensical. Similarly, popular and common-sense understandings of sports, at a closer examination, may reveal that these are neither common nor sensical. There is a lot more unique and exciting to study and write about sports than simply reiterating commonly held beliefs, and often superficially understood ideas, about social role of sports in the society.

References

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