

Sporting Metaphors: Competition and the Ethos of Capitalism

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That is the law which again and again throws bourgeois production out of its old course and which compels capital to intensify the productive forces of labor, because it has intensified them, it, the law which gives capital no rest and continually whispers in its ear: "Go on! Go on!" (Karl Marx, *Wage Labor and Capital*)

"You give 100% in the first half of the game, and if that isn't enough in the second half you give what's left."—Yogi Berra

The English language is replete with metaphors that use sport to describe daily life as a kind of game. Many of our sports metaphors date back to an earlier time when the most popular games were games of chance, poker and horse racing. In the latter part of the 19th century the team sports of baseball and football (to be followed by basketball and hockey and later still by lacrosse and soccer) began their ascendancy to the top of the American imagination. At the same time, capitalism was becoming the dominant economic system in America. As capitalism became more industrial, team sports gained in popularity (10). These sports are face to face and hard hitting, emphasizing quick, strategic decision making; athletic moves; and team play. Throughout the phases of 19th- and 20th-century capitalism, from personal to managerial to fiduciary (3), capitalism has come to value similar skills in its executives, managers, and investors.

This connection between sports and capitalism is reflected in and emphasized by our metaphorical language connecting sports and work. No metaphor is more powerful than competition and the idea of the competitive market as a winner-takes-all, no-holds-barred dogfight. This article examines metaphors that illuminate the competitive aspects of capitalism and its focus on winning but also metaphors that emphasize cooperation and ways that capitalism improves the lives not only of the winners but also of all who choose to play the game by its rules. Although sports metaphors invoked to describe capitalist competition may appear to cast an unflattering light on both capitalism and sport, on a deeper analysis those metaphors appeal to many of us because they reveal a closer resemblance to the Latin root of the word "competition" and its cooperative, pareto-improving implications. Just as healthy competition in sports requires cooperation, healthy capitalism is also,

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ultimately, a cooperative endeavor. I will argue that metaphors imported from and expanded through our experiences of sport reveal many, while concealing other, aspects of capitalism.

1. Metaphors and Culture

Although we tend to think of metaphor as primarily linguistic embellishment, two influential scholars of metaphor, George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, ascribe to metaphor a dual and ubiquitous role in thought and language. Metaphor, they argue, helps us categorize and understand our perceptions by constructing connections between distinct concepts. “The essence of metaphor is understanding and experiencing one thing in terms of another” (8: p. 5). When two concepts are connected by a metaphor, we use the more familiar concept to understand the less and use the scripts for action in one realm as a guide for action in the other. Thus, Lakoff and Johnson argue that metaphors reveal much about the way we think and act and are not just window dressing for our language. Indeed, they see metaphor as systematizing our very conceptual systems.

Metaphor structures human thought and guides our thinking. We use metaphor to think everyday thoughts, such as the thought I am having now about wanting to get this essay *out*, to *put* my thoughts *down*, to *make* it *look polished* and *professional*, and so *forth*. Our conceptual system hangs together in part by means of the relations of the metaphors we think with and use linguistically. We heap metaphors upon metaphors, as a quick glance at this sentence reveals: It contains a construction metaphor (heap), a spatial metaphor (upon), a time metaphor (quick), and two vision metaphors (glance, reveals). Although we are familiar with the injunction not to mix metaphors, our linguistic expressions would be nearly empty without such promiscuous mixing. Some of these metaphors are more obviously metaphors than others. Those that are less obvious or appear to be literal expressions are simply more fundamental to our conceptual scheme. On Lakoff and Johnson’s analysis, we can speak literally of only the most mundane, practical, and immediate experiences; all other talk is metaphorical.

Metaphor both reflects and constructs cultural foci. Lakoff and Johnson argue, “The most fundamental values in a culture will be coherent with the metaphorical structure of the most fundamental concepts in the culture” (8: p. 22). They propose that spatial relations form the most fundamental metaphors in our culture: in–out, up–down, near–far. They claim that one can trace the causal chain of metaphorical relations through a logical hierarchy of implications. For example, up is typically metaphorical for good, down for bad. Up is also metaphorical for more and down for less. If we examine a claim like “inflation is up,” we can see that the “up is more” metaphorical relation takes precedence over the “up is good” relation. Thus, the metaphorical relation “up is more” is more fundamental to our conceptual system than “up is good” (8: ch. 5).

Terence Roberts highlights another aspect of metaphor that will be useful for our discussion of the development of capitalism through sporting metaphors (14: p. 70). Through a discussion of Richard Rorty’s theory of metaphor, Roberts reveals how metaphors “alter logical space,” enlarging the space of what is considered possible. Roberts illustrates this through a discussion of the development

of different bowling techniques in cricket. For Roberts, sporting technique is a language-without-words game, and new techniques or moves in a sporting practice are like new metaphors in language. They extend the language by making possible new thought combinations or analogies, but they also are open to contestation and critique. Similarly, new techniques for bowling create new combinations of batting and defensive techniques and challenge ideas about what was considered good or even legal bowling. Some techniques work for a while and then are defeated (perhaps only to reappear in subsequent generations) by new batting techniques. Roberts's discussion of cricket and metaphor was aimed at showing how sporting practice is a kind of language game, but the important point for my purpose is to see that metaphor is a way of expanding our thinking and revealing new aspects of a rule-governed practice, as well as challenging the justification of the rules.

Metaphors focus our attention on some aspects of concepts and divert our attention from others. For example, the metaphor of game, as in "life is a game," focuses our attention on how life reflects the following sorts of aspects of games: Games have definite beginnings and ends; there are rules; games often bring pleasure to the players but sometimes pain, as well; there are winners and losers; and so on. This example also reveals how metaphors can be false or misleading, though. While many games have only one winner and many losers, life does not seem to be like that at all. Metaphors also disguise aspects of concepts, such as how the game-life metaphor diverts our attention from the fact that life does not have well-defined constitutive rules and is open ended in terms of the allowable strategies that players can pursue.

Because metaphors are coherent with cultural values and reflect and construct our cultural obsessions while diverting our attention from other values and meanings, metaphor is therefore intimately connected with the construction and expression of ideology. By "ideology" I mean a system of beliefs, mostly or at least partly political, that has implications for action. While liberal political theorists are content to talk about ideology in this rather benign way, radicals point out the obfuscating features of ideology (17), such as Marx's famous discussion of commodity fetishism (11: pp. 71–83). Lakoff and Johnson's theory of the role and function of metaphor lends itself to both liberal and radical theories of ideology in that it explains how ideas hang together through metaphorical connections and how those connections can distort, disguise, or divert our attention from other aspects of those ideas. A good example of the ideological function of metaphor is the antiabortion movement that terms itself "pro-life." From the perspective of the supporters of that movement, engaging the "pro" and "life" metaphors to their cause was an ingenious, practically defining, move. Until that time the antiabortion movement might have been seen as more like prohibition, antisex, antiwoman, even as embracing slavery and oppression. But the metaphorical relation of "pro is good" with "life is good" captured the imagination of millions of Americans. It persuaded them that abortion must be murder if prohibiting abortion is pro-life. While the opposing movement employs the "pro" metaphor, as well, promoting "choice" is clearly rhetorically trumped by promoting "life." Yet, those metaphors notoriously distort and deceive. The movement focuses on a small aspect of even human life, let alone life itself. The opposing movement, with its connections to progressive support for women and children's health and welfare needs, might easily be considered more promoting of human life than the "pro-life" movement.

Thus, metaphors can powerfully support ideological movements by highlighting their positive features and disguising the negative ones.

Capitalism constitutes the ruling ideology of our age. I want now to examine the metaphorical relations that connect our conceptual scheme and support such pride of place to capitalism. The metaphors imported from sport through which we understand capitalism and formulate our politics reveal and conceal much about our culture that lies beneath our immediate, conscious experience of it.

2. Sporting Metaphors

Most theories of sport define it as activity that meets at least the following three criteria: Persons voluntarily engage in the activity, the activity is rule governed, and the activity poses a competitive challenge to the persons engaged in it. Perhaps the most influential definition of games, which was proposed by Bernard Suits, poses the following definition (16). A game involves (a) the prelusory goal, a state of affairs specifiable independently of the rules of the game, that the players are trying to attain; (b) the (lusory) means for attaining the goal permitted by the constitutive rules; and (c) the lusory attitude on the part of the players that they accept the constitutive rules. The crucial insight in this definition of “game” is that a game involves voluntarily using only the means allowed by the rules to reach the goal, and these means are characteristically not the most efficient means for doing so. A sport for Suits is a game that also requires physical activity. Thus, some theories emphasize that sport must be physically challenging (1) in order to rule out such games as poker or chess, but I would rather cast a wider net for my purposes here. In this article I am not trying to set out a novel definition or understanding of sport, but rather I am trying to examine capitalism and its ethos through sports metaphors that are commonly used to discuss the business of capitalism.

By capitalism I mean an economic system whose core, defining feature is that it allows private ownership of the means of production, that is, of capital inputs to production. In such a system, under very minimal assumptions of differences in preferences and/or initial distribution of capital inputs, markets will develop, including markets for labor. The definition of capitalism entails that these markets are to be free of undue government intervention so that we may enjoy freedom of movement and enjoy the products of work and trade.

The most important aspects of the concept of sport for its analogy to capitalism revolve around the rule-governed nature and competitively challenging nature of the activity. Sport is governed by two kinds of rules: constitutive rules that define what moves are permitted and how the game is scored and rules of decency and fair play. Metaphorical relations that come out of the constitutive rule-governed nature of sport include “foul,” “fair,” “in the ballpark,” “extra innings,” “from the word go,” “tackle,” “score,” “no holds barred,” “down for the count,” and “level playing field” (13). The injunction to “play by the rules” is a standby of business ethics. The primary metaphor from the rules of decency and fair play that surround sport is that of the “good sport.”

Sports pose a competitive challenge to their players in several ways. They often pose physical challenges of skill, athleticism, stamina, or endurance. Sports always pose mental challenges by requiring quick and effective decisions, the

ability to assess opponents (and teammates) and react to their strategic decisions, and emotional strength in the form of confidence, determination, flexibility, and persistence. Each of these aspects of challenge in sports engenders metaphorical relations that form a part of our conceptual scheme of capitalism.

Metaphorical relations that begin in the physical challenges of sport may seem to poorly fit the challenges of economic life in capitalism. But many such relations are metaphorical for the determination and persistence that are rewarded by success in business. “No pain, no gain” might be used by managers to justify a decision to streamline a company, despite the complaints by workers and public officials that the company might endure (not to mention the physical suffering of the workers themselves, who can only cynically be described as gaining from their layoff). A long session at work is a “marathon,” and someone who works hard will “go the extra mile.” One who is deft is “on the ball.” A person with determination might “make a comeback” after suffering a “setback.”

Decision making in games such as poker, chess, and gambling holds many similarities with the decisions made by capitalists and is a rich source of metaphors. Game theory, an important theoretical model of capitalist interaction, exploits this analogy explicitly. Many metaphors that are useful in understanding capitalism, then, have to do with taking risks. Entrepreneurs are said to “take a shot” at developing new products, even when the “stakes are high” and more timid persons would not “bet on it.” The stock market’s most secure capital are its “blue chip stocks.” When there is little information on which to make a prediction, however, “all bets are off.” Managers must be good at making decisions and taking responsibility for the results. They might “toss an idea around” with their associates, but ultimately they must “call the signals” and “make a move” or just “go for it.” If they find that they are outdone by a competing firm because they are “out of their league,” then the “buck stops” with the manager.

What about the voluntariness criterion of sport—are there important metaphorical relations engendered by this aspect of the concept that form a part of our concept of capitalism? Some metaphors that might fit this bill would be “free agent,” “for the love of the game,” “call the signals,” “freestyle,” or perhaps “go for it.” But metaphors that reveal coercion or force are just as common here. Consider “backed into a corner,” “pinned,” “cut one’s losses,” “tackled,” “in over one’s head,” or “fall guy.” On Jan Boxill’s view of sport, sport must be voluntarily engaged in if it is to have positive moral value for us. The same can be said of capitalism. Yet capitalism has been criticized as coercive. Indeed, Boxill contrasts sport with work in capitalism to illuminate how sport, unlike work, is free, unalienated activity. The metaphorical ambivalence, I will argue, is reflected in our ambivalent feelings about capitalism and its social costs and benefits.

Sport and capitalism are analogous in some ways and disanalogous in others. I have characterized sport already as activity that is voluntary, rule-governed, and competitively challenging. Capitalist interaction is likewise rule-governed and voluntary, if it is legal. The economic models of capitalist interactions are termed “competition,” as in “perfect competition” or “monopolistic competition.” In the next section I will explore the depth of this metaphor of competition in our understanding of capitalism. In broad terms, sport and capitalism both describe systems that structure large portions of most of our daily lives. There are important voluntary and nonvoluntary aspects to each of them. Sport can be avoided but at the cost

of not being able to speak the lingua franca of contemporary popular discourse. Capitalism can be avoided at a cost, as well, although the cost may be one's ability to survive. Whole subcultures live among us that avoid sports or capitalism, such as academics and the Amish, but neither is completely free of what they shun; they live on the periphery, not over the edge. For members of this culture, opting in to either sport or capitalism is far easier than opting out.

Some argue that a crucial disanalogy between sport and capitalism is that the former is not a serious, life-and-death matter, whereas the latter is. Francine Hardaway criticizes sports metaphors to describe aspects of contemporary culture as "doublespeak" that makes us think that the serious business of winning and losing in life is as negligible as if it were just a game (4). Hardaway seems here to define as serious only pursuits that make life meaningful. Clearly sport can do this for many of us, as Suits points out in his discussion of the seriousness of sport (16: pp. 46–47). Leisure activities have become the intrinsically valuable activities in terms of which we feel justified in working hard. Suits also notes that we have become pluralists about what counts as valuable leisure activities. Sport is as serious as art or religion, two other systems of meaning in our lives, each of which is at least a serious rival to capitalism as one of the main sources of meaning and value for us. Sports practitioners can be extremely dedicated to their games, and we often admire them for that dedication. Sport can be a life-or-death matter, though it typically is not, even though competitive sport often injures its participants. So sport is as serious as "winning and losing in life." If art can be life, then sport can be life, as well.

I have argued that there are enough metaphorical relations to support the capitalism–sports analogy so that we can discover something about capitalism by examining sports metaphors. In the following sections I will examine what I see as the six most revealing metaphors imported from (mainly North American) sports to understand contemporary, American capitalism. Of these, the most important is competition, for two main reasons. First, it is the one most explicitly used as the primary economic model of the system of capitalism. Second, the ambiguity of the notion of competition in both sport and capitalism reveals how each can be perverted and antisocial or constructive and mutually beneficial. The other five metaphors—level playing field, playing by the rules, teamwork, slam dunk, and step up (to the plate)—extend and refine the ambiguities and the potential for enlarging the space of what is possible in capitalism, as they do in sport.

3. Competition: The Central Metaphor

Competition describes a situation that determines a winner (and therefore the nonwinners, or losers), under commonly known criteria for winning (losing), and usually awards some prize or recognition. Sports are competitive by definition. They determine their winners by their constitutive rules; they are what Alfie Kohn calls structurally competitive because the whole point of their structure is to determine a single winner, or at least when to give up trying to select one and declare a tie. Competitive sports paradigmatically pit players against each other, although solo sports pose a competitive challenge by setting difficult criteria for success that relatively few can reach. In a sports competition if the players are trying to play

at all they are necessarily trying to win and not to lose. Since there can be only one winner and the others must be losers, there is a necessarily zero-sum aspect to sports. Competition in sports tends to breed a psychology of intensity and self-perfection bordering on narcissism and egotism. Thus, the often quoted Vince Lombardi statement that “winning isn’t everything; it’s the only thing.” But if it is the only thing that matters, then morality or decency, to say nothing of beauty, does not matter. Maximizing participation and contributing to education do not matter, either. In such an atmosphere, it makes sense to try to get away with breaking or hedging the rules whenever it gives an advantage.

Capitalism is metaphorically, not literally, competitive. There is, after all, no literal winner or loser in capitalism. Competition and capitalism are thus distinct concepts, but their connection is deep and enduring, and so we normally fail to note the metaphorical nature of the connection. Neoclassical economic theory, the theory of capitalist economies, uses the term “competition” in a special sense. A competitive market is an idealized model of a capitalist market in which it is assumed that there are no barriers to entry or exit, the agents involved take no interest in the others’ interests and pursue the maximum satisfaction of their own interest, subject to their budget constraints; and there are no transaction costs. Each seller in a competitive market can have no effect on prices; each faces a horizontal demand curve and so makes no decision on setting prices. Sellers compete to stay in the market, that is, to keep their costs low enough to be able to cover all their costs (including their own entrepreneurial labor costs). In the theory, winning is just a matter of staying in the game. Monopolistic competition turns out not to be an oxymoron for the neoclassical economist but rather another term of art, in which there are assumed to be many similar goods but none exactly alike (e.g., different brands of cereals), and each seller faces a downward-sloping demand curve. The metaphor of competition in economic theory, then, aptly describes the attempt to maximize success, which is the satisfaction of the agent’s interests given her budget constraints. That is, each can choose a price at which to sell their good within a range of options, only one of which is optimal. In the sense of seeking the maximization of self-interest, the theoretical agents of capitalism are definitionally egoists, but not necessarily egotists.

The culture of competition in capitalism, like that in contemporary sport, does, however, breed a psychology of intensity, greed, and egotism. The popularity of Donald Trump and his reality TV show *The Apprentice* testifies to this fact. He has become a cultural icon for his egotistical braggadocio. The contestants for the role of Trump’s apprentice seem willing to go to great lengths to impress him with their willingness to climb over the bodies of their competitors in quest of his affirmation. Capitalism pits not only sellers against sellers but also sellers against buyers. Sellers want to get the highest price from the buyer, who wants to pay the least for the good. There are perfectly legal and decent ways to get the highest price or to pay the lowest one. But moral and legal violations of laws meant to ensure fair competition in capitalism are also not rare. Martha Stewart, Enron, Westar, and WorldCom are only the most famous of the recent violators of such laws. Thus, competition can inspire bad behavior in the quest to win at any cost.

Is competition to be positively evaluated, then? Kohn lodges three main objections to structural competition, which he also describes as mutually exclusive goal

attainment (MEGA; 7). First, he claims that (ironically) it is inefficient. If people work together they can join their energies in whatever enterprise and attain a better outcome. If two businesses share knowledge, they can produce better and cheaper products; if two sporting rivals train together, they can encourage each other to higher levels of achievement. Second, competition causes psychological damage to the individual in the form of lower self-esteem (though, presumably, not in the winner) and performance anxiety. Third, competition causes social damage in that it damages relations between persons who must see each other as rivals (7: p. 9). A fourth, related, objection is raised by Torbjörn Tännsjö, who argues that our culture of competition is fascistic in that it encourages us to disrespect the weak, the infirm, and the disabled (18).

Kohn's objections assume that it is possible to eliminate competition, or situations described by MEGA. This is not always the case. In a running race some or all might improve their time, but there is one who is fastest. If only one person can have a certain job, then there is necessarily a winner. Robert Nozick argued that with any variable skill there will always be a relative component of success or achievement (12). So we cannot assume with Kohn that it is possible to eliminate competition in sport or in capitalism, or even in another kind of play or another kind of economic system that might replace them. That said, if Kohn's arguments stand, then competition might still be viewed as a necessary evil. The psychological and social effects to which Kohn refers ring true. Competition does raise anxiety and lower self-esteem in (those who see themselves as) frequent losers. It does cause rivals to be diffident and hostile to one another, at times even inciting violence. Although it is true that these are not necessary components of competition, given our psychology, we can expect them. But now we must ask whether the benefits of competition, particularly the psychological and social benefits, outweigh the costs.

The case for competition has been made by champions of capitalism, such as F.A. Hayek and Milton and Rose Friedman, and by philosophers of sport, including Robert Simon, Drew Hyland, and Jan Boxill. Competition could be valuable either intrinsically or instrumentally. In sports, a case can be made for the intrinsic value of competition, since the very definition of sport requires competition. Thus, if sport is valuable in itself, competition is, as well. According to Boxill, the intrinsic value of sport consists in the fact that it is an unalienated activity, offering the opportunity for meaningful self-expression and community with others (1). By unalienated she means that the activity is freely chosen and would be freely chosen even without any external reward for the activity. By this test, sport is an unalienated activity, but work is not. That is, most of us would not work, but almost all of us who play sports would continue to do so without its external rewards. Of course there are exceptions: the child who is forced by his parents to play a sport he does not like, the woman who watches football with her partner only for the opportunity to be with him, the professional athlete for whom the game has become too much like work to enjoy, or the man who plays golf in order to cultivate high-paying clients. In these cases sport is alienating and not intrinsically valuable. But these are the exceptions, where the external reward (or fear of punishment) is the only reason that these persons participate in their sport. Most of us find some value in the sport that is intrinsically motivating enough for us to continue playing it, if we play it at

all. It is characteristic of unalienated activity that we can find ourselves lost in the activity, focusing on its internal goals and strategies, unaware of the world external to it. Athletes will say that they play the game for such moments of “flow,” which are intrinsically motivating (2: p. 163). Now one might object that although this shows how sport is intrinsically valuable, it does not follow that competition is intrinsically valuable. Rather, some aspects of sports are intrinsically valuable, such as the fact that it involves play and games, but not competition. However, competition makes it possible for most persons to focus enough to have those intense experiences of flow that are so valuable. Thus, there is at least one aspect of sport that is intrinsically valuable and that thrives on the competitive nature of sport.

The case for intrinsic value cannot plausibly be made for competition in capitalism, I believe. Some defenders of capitalism will claim that it has intrinsic value because it is tantamount to a type of freedom. People are free in capitalism to contract to buy or sell products or services in the market in which others are free to accept or reject or offer competing contracts. Self-ownership is thus a hallmark of capitalism. This contrasts sharply with earlier forms of economic organization in which many persons did not own their own labor power, which could be commanded by others. This shows only that self-ownership, which is intrinsically valuable, typically results in competition. It does not show that competition is intrinsically valuable.

A strong case can be made for the instrumental value of competition in capitalism, though. Empirically, capitalist economies produce more wealth than any other form of economic organization yet devised. But can this be attributed to competition in capitalism? I cannot answer this question directly with any certainty. Suppose, however, we imagine that the rules that construct the competition of capitalism are suspended. This would allow all sorts of activity that we call antitrust—collusion, cronyism, and corruption—on the part of business owners. Surely this would be bad for the workers and the consumers. Countries in which the enforcement of laws against such activity is poor are also much less wealthy than those that have strong enforcement of laws guaranteeing competition. One might point to unions as an anticompetitive element, yet it is clearly good for workers. Perhaps unions also account for the success of capitalist countries that are wealthy? Although I think this may be argued, from the perspective of the entire economy, unions can be seen as a balancing force that maintains the competitiveness of the economy. If workers did not have unions to facilitate collective bargaining, then they would be harder pressed to negotiate on a level playing field with capital, which has the advantage of not facing such dire constraints as starvation and can normally afford to be more patient than workers. The existence of unions mitigates the effects of patience in the bargaining situation between labor and capital and, thus, will tend to make it more likely that whatever surplus they bargain over will be evenly divided. Unions can be seen as enhancing the competitive situation between labor and capital, avoiding a “blowout” by capital.

Competition in capitalism is valuable because it allows many different persons to succeed, at least in part. For businesses to be profitable there must be consumers to buy their products, and for there to be consumers to buy products, there must be a large sector of the population that earns enough through their labor to consume and a significant number who can invest and create new opportunities for work. Capitalism thrives where the situation is more like what game theorists

call a cooperative competition—that is, the players of the game have interests that are partly shared and partly opposed. The optimal and equilibrium outcome arises when each pursues a strategy that maximizes his or her outcome but also leads to the others being better off. This contrasts sharply with the situation of either the zero-sum game, where there is only one winner and all the others are losers, or worse, a game in which the equilibrium strategies, when pursued by the players, lead to a socially suboptimal outcome (e.g., the Prisoner's Dilemma). But such a situation is still competitive in the sense that the players cannot simply coordinate their strategies and cooperate as they can in games that are purely cooperative.

Likewise, sport is best described as cooperative competition. Drew Hyland's discussion of the place of competition in the dialectic of sport is helpful here (5). He argues that sport does not have the single goal of winning but rather a set of *teloi* that make sense of the dialectic of athletic competition, which consists in the attempt of each competitor to try to overcome or "negate" the other, in a single game or over a series of them. This negation can lead to alienation and the sense that the whole point is to beat the other team, perhaps even violently, or it can lead to a more benign form of negation, which "can even be an occasion for friendship, for striving or questioning together" (5: p. 66). The *teloi* of competition in sport, he argues, must include *teloi* such as friendship and mutual excellence, however. Alienated competition must be seen as a defective mode because seeking to win by all necessary means is the negation—the endpoint—of competition itself. The dialectic cannot be continued. Similarly, competition in capitalism cannot have as its end the goal of draining the other competitors in the market of all their wealth, as that would be the termination of market interaction.

Although there can be only one winner in many games, there must be competitors who adopt a lusive attitude, that is, agree to play by the rules and compete at their best, in order for there to be a meaningful sporting contest. There must be athletes and officials who agree to the rules that will govern the sport. There must be cooperation (even while there will also be competition) among team members in team sports. In individual sports, competitors often critique each other's performances and help coach them to better performances. Simon's concept of sport as a mutual quest for excellence (15) helps explain why cooperation is as important as competition for sport. Without the cooperation of a community of players, coaches, and supporters, a sport cannot thrive and, thus, neither can the athlete who participates in that sport. Although athletes and sports commentators may occasionally forget this, they cannot successfully continue to participate without some willingness to cooperate for the good of the competition. "Competition" comes from the Latin word *competo*, which means "to strive after something in company or together" (9). These roots are clear when we understand competitive sports as a mutual quest for excellence.

What are the *teloi* of the dialectic of capitalist competition, then? The point of an economic system is to produce the material goods and services that people need and desire. Like sport, economic interaction can be the occasion for friendship, the mutual quest for excellence, and the construction of a framework of meaning for our lives.

The competition metaphor tends to distract us from this cooperative aspect of both sports and capitalism in many cases. For example, in discussions of international trade, the ability of capitalistic competition to raise the well-being of all

parties is often confused with the idea that there can be only one winner and one loser. Likewise, in sport the goals of maximizing participation or the educational value of sport are sometimes seen as a choice between sacrificing or being sacrificed to the goal of competition, rather than as potential compatible outcomes of competitive athletics.

The metaphorical concept of competition in capitalism has an ambiguous meaning and value for our culture. While it conjures an image of the egotistical, striving Donald Trump and workers trying to undercut each other in a race to the bottom, on reflection, it also connotes a cooperative quest for excellence that lifts up the overall level of welfare in society and counts on the cooperative interaction of all members of the community. Competition combines with other sporting metaphors to make this ambivalence of capitalism go even deeper into the discourse of our culture.

4. Sporting Metaphors of Cooperation and Competition

Level Playing Field

An important sports metaphor that extends and refines the metaphorical concept of competitiveness in capitalism is the level playing field. This metaphor conjures up the image of a flat field in which no team is forced to play uphill and where round balls roll evenly, without surprising bounces. In sport, having a literal or metaphorical level playing field is important so that an effective challenge can be mounted by roughly equal players who are making their best efforts to win within the rules of the game. This, after all, is the point of sport—to test one’s own and one’s opponents’ skills by attempting to meet each other’s challenge within the rules. This is the meaning of Simon’s claim that sport is a mutual quest for excellence or Hyland’s understanding of sport as mutual striving (5: p. 64). A level playing field is necessary not only for a good match but also for a fair one. If the playing field is not level, then the challenge is greater on one side and lesser on the other. It may lead to a blowout, which is a situation in which the competitive challenge no longer exists, and is unlikely to be either “mutual” or a successful “quest for excellence.” The metaphor of the level playing field thus connotes both fairness and the requirements for a good, successful, satisfying competition.

A level playing field is important in capitalism also to ensure competition as a way to maintain the balance between firms, consumers, and workers that I discussed previously as an important component in a successful capitalist economy. Because competition is the central metaphor of capitalism, the metaphorical relation of the level playing field as preserving and enhancing competition is mirrored in our capitalist discourse. For example, in debates over laws governing antitrust or trade subsidies parties often argue that such laws will make or disrupt a level playing field.

Unlike the metaphor of competition, the metaphor of the level playing field itself carries little ambivalence for us. Fairness is an unmitigated good; a level playing field is a requirement of justice. However, like competition, the metaphor of the level playing field is clouded by ambiguity in its meaning. Achieving or recognizing

a level playing field is politically loaded, reflecting the political ambiguity of what it means to enhance or inhibit competition, let alone ensure justice. A good example of this is debates over international trade policies (i.e., “fair trade”) where some parties will argue that subsidies or quotas are needed to level the playing field for American firms since they face higher taxes or environmental standards, while others will point to American firms’ labor costs as the obstacle to a level playing field. On the other side are countries whose firms produce at lower costs because their workers do not have the luxury to forego work and income in order to demand better environmental standards or higher wages. They complain that there is not a level playing field when U.S. policies effectively prohibit consumers from buying goods made by poorer workers, thus further impoverishing them. What counts as fair thus depends on how one describes the conditions on which the competition is based.

Playing by the Rules

An important metaphor for understanding fair competition in capitalism is the concept of rules and what it is to “play by the rules.” Rules imply guides for behavior that are commonly known, or at least assumed by most of those playing the sport to be commonly known, and enforced to a greater or lesser degree so that if one is in clear violation of the rules one can expect negative consequences. In sport we can distinguish two kinds of rules: constitutive rules and rules of decency and fair play. The constitutive rules of a game are explicit and formal and describe the aim, the allowable moves, and the penalties for violating them. Rules of decency and fair play describe what moves, strategies, and behaviors are informally allowed. Since sport is a practical activity, even the constitutive rules have to be interpreted and tend to change organically over time to fit external and internal circumstances. For instance, when Lew Alcindor (later Kareem Abdul Jabbar) played college basketball he dominated the game so much that a new rule was introduced to rule out scoring by forcing the ball through the hoop with one’s hands within the rim of the basket—what we now call dunking. But when many more players could perform this athletic feat it was reintroduced as an element that enhanced the athleticism and excitement of the game.

In capitalism, we can distinguish similar kinds of action-guiding principles, namely, laws, that are the constitutive rules of capitalism, ethics, and the rules of decency and fair play. Laws define property and property rights and thus are definitive of the economic system itself. If persons can be property, then we have slavery. Likewise the law of property can make a system feudal or capitalist or socialist by assigning certain sets of rights and obligations to persons based on their historical relations to material and other wealth-conferring or -creating objects. Property rights define theft, which is a particularly salient way of failing to play by the rules. In our contemporary culture we talk about people who play by the rules and manage to make a living or fail to because of some kind of hard luck. Those who steal or cheat are said to be not playing by the rules and, therefore, in need of legal or social sanction. Law also defines fair and unfair competitive practices and prevents monopoly power, collusion, or insider trading from thwarting competition. Although there are many ethical prescriptions for individuals in all societies, the ones that could be said to be the ethical prescriptions specific to capitalism are

the ones that concern the behavior of firms, businesspersons, and managers more than workers, who are constrained mainly by the laws regarding theft of one kind or another. Businesses are expected to show a certain amount of generosity or philanthropy in order to be said to be playing by the rules.

Constitutive rules that define property rights have also changed in response to new external conditions. For example, antitrust legislation arose to respond to techniques of production that vastly increased returns to scale and the ability of large firms to engage in far more rapid communication and investment than smaller firms. These conditions led to massive firms that could corner the market, creating the inefficient and otherwise socially undesirable conditions of monopolistic competition. In an attempt to level the playing field for smaller firms and workers, antitrust legislation redefined what it meant to play by the rules. A similar situation is at hand with the advent of digital music and the ability to share files. Although property rights in recorded music used to consist of owning a plastic disc, which allowed only one person at a time to play that disc, now it is commonplace to make multiple copies of the same music file so that many can use it at once. This situation, in which music recordings are no longer “rival” in economists’ terms, may create the socially undesirable situation of fewer musicians being willing to create music since there is less financial incentive to do so. Furthermore, it just strikes many of us as unfair to the musicians. Our constitutive rules of property are only beginning to catch up, but we have the sense that if the new technology is to benefit everyone, a system of rules will need to be established.

In either the legal or ethical sense, then, “playing by the rules” in capitalism concerns the maintenance of the competitive environment as a mutually beneficial, or a cooperatively competitive, one. Thus, the metaphorical use of the positively normative phrase playing by the rules supports competition in capitalism in a way that, on inspection, reveals the important cooperative element of competition.

Teamwork

The metaphor of the team and teamwork is explicitly cooperative. Typically it conveys the notion of cooperation in capitalism when used to describe workers or managers in a firm. Yet the sense of cooperation is ambivalent in this metaphor, as well. A sports team is not a purely cooperative situation but rather more of a cooperative competition. Each team member has an interest in working well with the team to defeat an opponent, but each also wants to play individually well enough to maintain her position in the starting lineup. While the benchwarmers would like the team to win, and so will work to improve the play of the other team members in practice, each would also like to outshine the others in order to earn a starting position. As the metaphor is imported into capitalist discourse, it can also carry with it the implicit understanding that while teams work together, teammates are not only altruistically motivated to maximize the performance of the team, but are also interested in their individual standing on the team. One is often encouraged to be a team player when one is being asked to sacrifice individual interests for the good of the team.

In economic theory, firms, which might be considered the quintessential economic teams, are sometimes modeled as having a single set of desires or preferences,

as represented by a single utility function, in which the utility of the firm is positively proportional to financial wealth (i.e., money). But just as team members in sport have their own desires to succeed as individuals, individual employees' utilities are opposed to each other in that each one wishes to gain individual wealth (and perhaps also status), even if it costs the firm as a whole some financial wealth. Economic theorists have more recently noted this competitive situation within, as well as between, capitalistic firms (6).

Slam Dunk; Step Up (to the Plate)

This brings us to my final two sporting metaphors, each of which emphasizes the individual achievements and roles of team players. A slam dunk in basketball is an especially violent dunk. The basketball player performs a slam dunk in order to intimidate the other team, a team-oriented motivation, and impress them and the fans with the individual dunker's athleticism and raw power, an individualistic motivation. A slam dunk is also nearly a sure thing—one almost cannot miss the shot when the ball is stuffed into the basket. The metaphorical use of this term particularly conveys either or both aspects of the concept. A product that is a "can't miss" success is a slam dunk. A person who makes a particularly good business presentation is said to have made a slam dunk, meaning that it was a display of individual virtuosity in business acumen and that it will certainly succeed.

Taking credit for one's individual actions and performance implies that one also takes responsibility for one's actions. The metaphor of "stepping up" or to "step up to the plate" reveals this dual aspect of individual responsibility. "Stepping up to the plate" literally describes a baseball player as he comes up to bat and steps into the batter's box at home plate. At this point he is the one offensive player on whom the immediate future of the game rests. There is no other player at that moment who can affect the game like the batter will, particularly if he should hit a home run. Metaphorically, an individual who steps up to the plate (or simply steps up) is taking the responsibility for attempting to either secure her organization on the same successful course or to effect some change in course that will help it succeed where it had been in some sense failing or to take responsibility for not doing so. Only an individual can take moral responsibility, and being willing to do so indicates courage, just as it requires courage to stand in the box as a pitcher throws a baseball in one's general direction at lethal speed.

Thus there are both team and individual, cooperative and MEGA metaphors that fill out the conceptual scheme of capitalism. These individualistic metaphors, however, are somewhat newer than the others. This may reflect a recent change in the popularity of different sports and the styles in which they are played. Basketball has become the most popular sport in America in large part because of the tremendous individual talents of Magic Johnson, Larry Bird, and, most of all, Michael Jordan. Yet these players were popular in part because they were excellent team players, as well as individually skilled. Their immense popularity may be in large part because they were able to resolve in their own play the ambiguity of individual versus team to forge outstanding examples of cooperative competition within their own teams and the league itself.

5. Conclusion: Capitalism as a Cooperatively Competitive Culture

Investigation of some of the most common sporting metaphors in the discourse of and about capitalism reveals that our capitalist culture relies on cooperative values perhaps as much as competition in the structural (MEGA) sense of Kohn. Capitalist competition, if it is to be evaluated positively, can be seen as not only involving cooperation but also requiring some cooperative constraints on would-be winners to enhance future competition and the survival of capitalism as a viable and successful economic arrangement. As Marx suggests, the endless urging of capitalism to more and greater profits by the capitalist cannot be sustained. Furthermore, the related metaphors of the level playing field, playing by the rules, and teamwork reveal that the discourse of capitalism explicitly recognizes the importance of cooperation within competition. Hobbes showed us long ago that we can only escape the war of all against all by accepting the sovereignty of enforced legal constraint on our competitive, diffident, vainglorious natures. The sporting metaphors of capitalism continue to disclose that lesson in discourse. Finally, the metaphors of the slam dunk and stepping up to the plate reveal the degree to which individual achievement and responsibility are valued in our capitalist culture. The sporting metaphors that I have examined reveal ways that we may open up the conceptual space of our understanding of capitalism as unbridled, alienated competition for a more expansive and positive understanding of capitalism. These metaphors reveal that the very structure of our capitalist conceptual scheme already harbors the ancient idea that in striving together we reap the greatest benefits of capitalistic competition.

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