



## Sport, politics and the public intellectual

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## <a> Sport, Politics and the Public Intellectual

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### <b> Introduction

It was Keynes (1948) who famously remarked that intellectuals typically have to ‘perform at one and the same time the tasks appropriate to the economist, to the financier, to the politician, to the journalist, to the propogandist, to the lawyer, to the statesman – even, I think, to the prophet and to the soothsayer’ (p. 1109). Likewise, Eyerman (2011) characterises them more simplistically as ‘carrier-groups’ who make claims and voice concerns for others. Those intellectuals, including academics, employed in sports scholarship – an academic field that has taken a coherent form over the last half century – are familiar with this multi-faceted depiction and their broader role in bringing to the fore the significance and impact of sport – arguably the most dominant cultural form of the post-modern age.

That sport has become so ubiquitous largely explains its relationship, sometime challenging, with politics. Of course, this is not new – politicians and their parties took less than two decades after the establishment of most sports governing bodies to recognise its value and little has changed in the century that has since passed. Naturally, it would be nice to think that politics has no place in sport but, personally, I could never quite understand the persistent desire to separate both spheres. Aside from anything else, were this the case many of the positive consequences of this relationship would be lost. Certainly, from the beginning of regularly scheduled international competition in the late 1920s sport has been used in diplomatic relations between countries, such as those that existed between USA and China in the late 1960s, where suspicion and hostility had predominated. It has often been a unifying force too in divided societies, including in Northern Ireland where I have lived much of my life, and generated patriotism that has assisted fledging political administrations to achieve popular support. It also played an important role in the fall of Apartheid in South Africa and remains a key aspect of a range of development programmes in the Global South to this day (Black and Peacock 2013).

Growing up in Northern Ireland, a virtual by word for ethnic and religious division for large parts of the twentieth century, it was quite normal to frame many aspects of sport through a political lens. Decisions that were made, opportunities denied, sometimes violence and personal intimidation in and around sport, could all best be understood when analysed in the context of politics, ethnicity and community identity. It was ‘normal’ to do so but, despite this, sport was still considered important, perhaps even disproportionately so as it created opportunities for mass gatherings, for transmitting political messages cloaked amid the respectability of sport, and, it has to be said, for blessed relief from an otherwise bleak political outlook. Elsewhere, in certain situations sport has been the *only* arena in which to convey political messages. Through the embodied resistance of sportspersons like Muhammed Ali, John Carlos and Tommie Smith, and Andy Flower and Henry Olunga, powerful, if uncomfortable messages for those in authority, have been played out (Hargreaves 2000). In the field of gender politics too, as sport is too often the site for the construction and reconstruction of hegemonic masculinity in society, women, including the Williams sisters in tennis, Katie Taylor in boxing and Tanni Grey-Thompson in para-athletics have all challenged out-dated stereotypes that traditionally may have constrained participation or prevented it altogether (Adams 2016; Hargreaves 2000).

My research career to date has been dominated by the study of two major areas within sports scholarship –it’s role, often in an Irish context, in the shaping of the politics of identity, and, the use of sport by States, including marginal ones in a Global sense, to relay political messages designed to attract the attention of an international audience. Obviously, there are similarities between these two fields of study but, equally, one could be labelled as being ‘local’ whilst the other, it seems, has become increasingly widespread and capable of giving rise to global diplomatic disputes of a kind not seen for many decades. It is my intention in this chapter to offer a flavour of the key arguments I have constructed in these two realms throughout my career to date, weaving in my personal observations and approaches in a way that I hope will prove useful for the reader.

### **<b> Motivation for Conducting Research in this Field**

In Fatsis’ (2018) recent exploration of an alternative conception of public intellectual life, he argues that the pre-existing concept of ‘the public intellectual’ is largely an elitist one, perpetuated to argue for exceptional understanding or status. He suggests such an approach ‘conceals a long-history of biased thinking about thinking as an elite endeavour with

prohibitive requirements for entry' (Fatsis 2018, p. 267). Despite the 'undecidability which surrounds the notion of the public intellectual, the job description usually describes the ideal candidate as someone who lives 'for rather than off ideas' (Eyerman 1994, p. 13)' (Fatsis 2018, p. 268).

Like many scholars, the concept of seeing oneself as a 'public intellectual' sits uncomfortably with me, especially so when considering the cultural ubiquity of sport. The proliferation of commentary on and analysis of sport, in its very many forms, makes the argument for exceptional knowledge or insight, save in a small number of scenarios, somewhat baseless. Yet, through a more fulsome unpacking of the concept, utilising the lens of Foucault (1977, p. 207) for example, it is possible to uncover an important role for a specific intellectual contribution. Foucault argues such a person can be understood as one who speaks 'the name of those who were forbidden to speak the truth'. It has echoes of the role foreseen by theorists aligned to the so-called 'second wave' of the study of public intellectualism, amongst them Marx and Gramsci, who urged intellectuals to aspire instead to, as Gramsci (1971, p.10) puts it, the role of the 'constructor', 'organizer' and 'permanent persuader'.

I grew up in a rural part of north-west Northern Ireland. It was a geographic locale largely untouched by the inter-ethnic violence that defined that part of Ireland for the second half of the twentieth century. Moreover, despite the unfathomable loss of over 3000 lives during the 'conflict', life there has a remarkable level of normality about it, even if the United Kingdom's (UK) decision to permanently leave the European Union (EU) in January 2021 casts an uncertain shadow over its future prosperity. Growing up, we rarely, if ever, saw the British Army or the often-maligned Royal Ulster Constabulary, Northern Ireland's domestic police force until 2001. Occasionally the distinctive sound of an Army helicopter overhead would draw our attention but otherwise our upbringing was, to coin a phrase, idyllic. Like many others, I was socialised into the local Gaelic Athletic Club, a constituent part of the Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA), the preeminent governing body of Ireland's indigenous sports, Gaelic games. It played the Irish national anthem prior to its games, used the Irish language in its spoken and written communication where others didn't, whilst there was a sense, even to a youthful nine years old, that it was the physical and sporting embodiment of the place I was from and, importantly, the people who were like me.

Later when I moved to Belfast to attend university my interest in the role of sport as a means of cultural and political agency grew exponentially. Having joined the University's GAA

club we were advised not to wear its attire in public, to consider using a kit bag that was generic as opposed to one that revealed the owner to be a member of the GAA, and generally avoid any behaviour that would indicate alignment with the GAA which, in Northern Ireland's divided landscape, meant one was Catholic and either nationalist or indeed Republican. That period in my life, the early to mid-1990s, has never left my thinking. The absence of a rational discussion with the unidentifiable 'other' – propagating a view that positioned me as 'the enemy within' – framed my interest in the inter-play between sport and the politics of identity. It was in the same city, Belfast, where previously I along with two friends attended the Northern Ireland v England Home Nations international fixture at Windsor Park in 1985. We were all Northern Ireland fans and the game took place between the team's participation in two FIFA World Cups in Spain and Mexico, which was a remarkable achievement by a team representing a country of barely 1.5 million people. It was natural to support the team that represented the place where we lived and, to some extent, it still does, even if very many people from my background now disagree. After that game a minor republican paramilitary organisation, the INLA, exploded a car bomb in the vicinity of the stadium. No one died but, even 35 years later as I write this, there is something about the events of that night that has never fully left my consciousness and probably never will.

So, I began thinking and then writing more about the politics of sport, even during an era when the people of Northern Ireland had certainly enough of the former if not the latter. I came under the mentorship of Alan Bairner, one of the great intellectuals of this field, by the late 1990s who, in his own way, expanded my horizons. This often involved games at Solitude, the home of Cliftonville FC, a club with a largely nationalist following in the Irish League and located in the north inner city of Belfast. I would go on to play for Cliftonville, which brought me into the company of young working-class men who could express the emotion, if not find the words, to convey something I had never experienced, living alongside a 'peace wall' separating them from people who were basically just like them but who happened to be of a different cultural and religious persuasion and experiencing a daily life framed by the politics of division.

I was motivated in my academic endeavours, therefore, by this sense of absence or loss. We (as a people) were in deficit because of what had been experienced on the streets of Belfast and Derry. Yet, I had been shielded from this and of a fundamental motivation to tell the story of what it meant to consciously frame language, behaviour and dress so as not to either offend – though it was never clear if offence was ever taken as it certainly was not the

intention – or politely avoid discussing matters with people ‘from the other side’ as they couldn’t meaningfully contribute to these matters as they had never been exposed to them. I would even go so far as to say it is a profound regret that I, like many others, could not actually express who we were – who we are – because of the absence, perceived or otherwise, of a rounded cultural appreciation of different ethnic traditions all so typical of a divided society. So rather than express simple cultural preferences, very often people chose the path of least resistance, giving rise to stunted, benign conversations and interactions designed to seek out the undisputed middle ground. Such an approach was ultimately proved ridiculous as all parties knew their purpose was to avoid discomfort, yet willingly participated in such engagements as if they were genuine.

My experiences therefore forge two sides of the same coin – my academic training emphasises the need for rigour, validity and reliability, which informs an evidence-based approach. On the other side of this coin is someone motivated to expose unfairness, discrimination, short-sightedness and a failure to extend equity to neighbours and colleagues for no defensible reason, which necessitates the telling of individual and collective loss, which may appear arbitrary and subjective.

In this field – the politics of identity – I typically drew upon the work of the Italian neo-Marxist Antonio Gramsci, to offer theoretical context for my writings. Gramsci, in short, suggests that the real power within and between societies exists in the realm of culture, of which sport is a dominant element (Gramsci 1992). According to this perspective, it is possible to argue that for marginalised people, including ethnic minorities, the pursuit of separate sporting choices even constitutes an act of resistance against the dominant ‘other’ - a counter-hegemonic process, to use Gramsci’s terminology (Gramsci 1992). Perhaps more than most theorists – and again this may be the influence of Alan Bairner upon my academic life – Gramsci best illustrates the nature of sport in an ethnically divided society for, very often, division is not an explicit matter – it is not ‘loud’ – rather it is implicit and ‘quiet’. To illustrate these concepts from my work in Ireland, it is about considering a way of life that is ‘normal’ and ‘accepted’ through the use of language, by its cultural framing and in a way that the only reasoned response is an intellectual restlessness that necessitates the telling of an alternative perspective.

Researching the politics of sporting identity in Northern Ireland, particularly when one is an active participant, means there is often a rich body of evidence upon which to reflect and

consider. Earlier I briefly referred to my time playing with the largely nationalist football club, Cliftonville FC, in the domestic league of Northern Ireland. It was very much an outlier in the Irish League as most other clubs, including Linfield FC, had a strong Protestant and Unionist support base. I along with my playing colleagues would have been routinely subject to sectarian abuse by supporters of rival teams – and some opponents – in a way I always found difficult to fathom. One never does become accustomed to be told to ‘Fuck off you Fenian bastard’ yet it’s equally challenging to avoid seeing this as a motivation to raise one’s sporting performance and secure victory against teams with such supporters.

In a wider context, it’s one of the reasons why many northern nationalists (Irish nationalists living in Northern Ireland) in the early 1990s decided that amid growing ethnic intolerance towards Catholics playing soccer for Northern Ireland, principally at international level, that they would align themselves with the Republic of Ireland team instead, which was situated as a *de facto* ‘all Ireland’ team by nationalists. In the early ‘Charlton’ years of the team – then under the direction of team manager Jack Charlton, a World Cup winner with England in 1966 who died in July 2020 – it was perfectly natural, not least as a public, counter-hegemonic act, for northern nationalists to support the Republic of Ireland team, and were evidently enjoying being part of something where they felt, or perceived, that they were welcome. It was a cathartic period in the sporting lives of northern nationalists, shifting the narrative from detailing a series of problems with how they experienced soccer in Northern Ireland, to a transformative, carefree abandonment of these same concerns through their support for ‘the Republic’ (of Ireland). Though, over time, something has changed in this apparent ‘ideal’ partnership. When I last attended a Republic of Ireland game, in 2018 in Dublin, some supporters from Northern Ireland clearly understood such fixtures as a way of promoting an unrepentant form of Irish republicanism, with their regalia confirming this interpretation. This is not in line with the attitudes of many fans of the Republic of Ireland team nowadays, as their thinking has also ‘moved on’. What arises is a growing unease between fans from either side of the Irish border and one that is likely to continue to cause issues in the time ahead.

What one is left with then, is a section of people – the northern nationalist sporting populous – with very few places left to turn. It’s a strange, solitary, almost existential reality for many, despite the positive developments of life in a post-Belfast-Good Friday Agreement Northern Ireland. With nowhere to go and no natural home to find refuge, many northern nationalists have either strengthened their connections with the indigenous sporting body, the GAA, - a



form of myopic nationalism - or in urban areas, furthered their interest, albeit typically in a virtual form, in the pursuits of British soccer clubs, including Celtic FC, Liverpool FC and Manchester United FC. There is something poignant about a situation in late 2020 when a sizeable ethnic minority seek solace either in ‘offshore’ identity expression or, at the opposite end of the spectrum, at the ‘parish pump’, with the link between sport and the nation, certainly in an Irish context, being continually repositioned and reimagined.

### **<b> Sport, Politics and Mega-Events**

By contrast, on a global scale, it is undoubtedly in the act of hosting major sporting events that the most potent political messages are formed (Horne, 2016). For some countries this again can be a powerful, indeed liberating, experience. The hosting of the 1995 Rugby World Cup by South Africa, shortly after the end of the Apartheid era, conveyed a symbolism that few other mediums could have achieved as readily (Preuss 2007). Similarly, the Summer Olympic Games of 2000, staged in Sydney, created a context in which the State could finally, and publicly, express its profound regret concerning the treatment of Australia’s Aboriginal community, those affected by the so-called ‘lost generation’. This was demonstrated in the response of the Australian nation to the medal winning performances of Cathy Freeman and how her successes clearly resonated beyond the athletics arena into all aspects of civic and political society (Hargreaves 2000).

It’s true also however that major sporting events, notably the 1936 Berlin Olympics and the Summer Games staged in Munich in 1972, have been examples of the exploitation of sport for purely political ends. The 1936 Games, designed to showcase the strength of Nazi Germany, are regarded as the *bête noir* of the Olympic movement, even if the achievement of the American track athlete Jesse Owens served to somewhat undermine this claim (Horne and Whannel 2016). Similarly, the deaths of 11 Israeli athletes in 1972 ahead of the Munich games poignantly illustrated that, very often, sport can prove disproportionately impactful for those seeking to convey a political agenda, precisely because it is thought to be above the political realm.

Indeed, the past decade has represented an unprecedented period of development within world sport. A host of global events, everything from the Olympic Games to a range of World Championships, have been awarded to countries of modest international standing, certainly in sporting terms. This may be welcomed as the further globalisation of this industry through the uncovering of new markets, as many of these countries are hosting events for the

very first time. Yet closer scrutiny of these emerging nations reveals commonalities that may prove significant in the future direction of global sport. As such, on the one side of this equation sit a collection of ‘new’ nation-states who regard sport as a credible, even necessary, investment towards realising their aim of full global emancipation. On the other exists an ever more complex sports governance network defined, in this era of neo-liberalism, by a pursuit of these very same ‘new markets’ amid the effective and expeditious ‘privatisation’ of world sport.

As such it’s not entirely clear how the greater acquiescence of sport by countries operating under this form of political regimes will play out in the future. In addition, there is a danger that the increasingly unregulated manner of awarding major sporting events to host nations may give rise to unintended consequences of a political nature (Hoye and Cuskelly 2007).

### **<b> Theoretical Context**

In examining, as I have done for much of my academic career, the relationship between nation-states, politics and sport, and in recent times the rise of what might be termed ‘marginal’ states in this realm, I have found myself considering the theoretical context in which these processes are best unpacked. In simple terms, therefore, it is necessary to consider whether: (1) the appropriation of sport by these countries assists their further maturity, as many are only recently established in international terms; (2) the often lavish staging of sporting events is designed to act as a form of cultural resistance against established ‘Western’ principles and practices; and/or (3) even that this considerable momentum on the hosting of major events provokes a realignment of any ‘core’/‘periphery’ relationships that may persist between these nation-states and others.

Of course, it’s necessary to lay out these different explanations for the further globalisation and politicisation of sport because it’s not always clear what is in the minds of States, not least certain authoritarian leaders, when significantly investing in major sport. I have worked for much of the last decade with individual counties in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, including the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Qatar, Saudi Arabia and Egypt. Investment in sport in these countries is typically arbitrary, it is about flexing metaphorical muscle, international ‘one upmanship’ and being seen to be at the cutting edge of developments. What makes this worthy of comment, however, is that many of these same countries have no identifiable sporting heritage or even present-day sports strategy that appeals to its indigenous people. It contrasts markedly with other parts of the world – from

China to the United States of America (USA) – where the politics of sport holds an internal focus very much designed to appease a domestic audience, improve their levels of social adherence and advance population health.

In keeping with the work of Walt Rostow, international sport assists a nation's so-called 'drive to maturity', an era defined by social and economic prosperity (Rostow 1990). Yet this maturation process is not an even one and whilst some countries may retain enviable levels of Gross Domestic Profit (GDP) with seemingly uninhibited access to natural resources, socially, culturally and indeed politically they may remain in the early stages of their development. Thus, for an ideal state of maturity to be achieved societies must present as 'fully developed' and thus the hosting of major sporting events serves, at least in part, to convey this message (Rostow 1990). Yet there remains a constant state of flux between the concept of 'modernisation', an essentially Western, normative term, and the 'traditional', and many emerging States continue to struggle with this juxtaposition. It is possible, for instance, to observe the 'hyper-modernity' existing alongside the 'traditional' within otherwise advanced and highly developed cities such as Dubai and Doha in the Middle East (Kilgallen 1990).

Yet all of this runs the risk of somehow under-playing the commercial and economic reality of modern sport. Sport is an important generator of economic investment - the transformation of Barcelona as a major commercial European city following its hosting of the Summer Olympic Games in 1992 being a perfect case in point (Preuss 2007). In this respect, Wallerstein's work in the field of 'World Systems Analysis' reflects a classic materialist epistemology (Wallerstein 2004). This is one in which the core consists of Western so-called 'strong' states, with an internationally commercially active elite that concentrates wealth and a comparatively 'weak' or underdeveloped periphery too often exploited by the core. On Wallerstein's account, the core seeks to extend its profitability, which redefines the concept of 'international' as 'hegemonic', to under-developed markets. Of course, this approach is often criticised precisely for its economic and political determinism, as it downplays the capacity of the so-called 'exploited' to retain some degree of self-determinism, not least in economic terms (Wallerstein 2004).

Historically the majority of the World's leading sports events have been hosted in western liberal democracies, mostly European nation-states. For example of the 55 Summer or Winter Olympics that have taken place in the modern Olympic era, two in every three have been

staged in Europe (a figure incidentally that rises to four in every five if one other country, the USA, is included). This allowed for a cultural and in particular economic superiority to be exercised across much of the remainder of the world, and thereby create a peripheral reliance on established ‘western’ systems and practices in the presentation of global sport that went largely unquestioned (Horne and Whannel 2016). However as previously semi-peripheral and peripheral states, in fact States that weren’t even established or certainly that remained largely unknown, have sought a greater share of international sporting equity, this historical system, certainly in the realm of sport, of peripheral subjugation has begun to wither, albeit unevenly. The emergence of a raft of ‘new’ countries has significantly weakened the established global sporting order and whilst still some way short of Wallerstein’s predicted ‘systemic crisis’ has cast an uneven and uncertain future for world sport (Wallerstein 2004).

Yet a disconnection between the practices, norms and values of the ‘core’ and those of the ‘periphery’ in State-sponsored sport persists and is most apparent, as suggested, in their internal political organisation. Many of these ‘new’ nation states are still on a pathway to full democracy, if that is their wish, and are ruled instead by a system of governance that is either totalitarian, monarchist or where power is retained centrally. Alongside latent concerns regarding the protection of other forms of freedom of expression this has left many traditional, established liberal democracies increasingly exasperated, if perhaps no less inclined to engage in a bidding war for major sporting tournaments evermore uncertain about the terms of engagement. An example of this was the 2015 decision by the Oslo Organising Committee to withdraw its aspiration of hosting the 2022 Winter Olympics when faced with rival bids from Kazakhstan and China. Interestingly this decision was announced following a vote in the Norwegian parliament, which mirrored similar votes taken in Munich and St Moritz, which arrived at a similar decision to withdraw interest in hosting events that began, financially speaking, to take on a life of their own (Horne and Whannel 2016).

### **<b> Methodological Approach**

The methodological approaches used by many social scientists, including those working in sport, are necessarily varied and typically mixed. The nature of the relationship between sport and politics is such that whilst it remains an undeniable reality and an accepted fact by the majority, there nevertheless remains something of a reticence about talking in detail about it. It is often with a tinge of regret that commentators refer to this relationship, as if somehow, they wished it was not really like this. Yet, elsewhere, the emergence of very powerful

examinations of the malpractice and corrupt governance of some individuals and governing bodies of sport by people like Andrew Jennings, Alan Tomlinson and John Sugden, during the last three decades, has emboldened many others to ‘speak truth to power’ and, with this, the prevailing attitude towards discussing ‘the politics of sport’ has itself evolved.

Nevertheless, interviewees and research participants still require some level of conditioning before discussing this subject field. I recall, in my early academic career, researching the nuanced – as politics in sport often are – forms of political identities associated with domestic football clubs in Northern Ireland, a subject I addressed in some detail earlier in this chapter. I attended countless games, often arranging to meet individuals and groups at such venues, long before they would agree to speak to me for the purposes of academic research. Moreover, from my perspective, there was little value in seeking to engage their opinions at this early stage anyway because people shaped by the politics of division are guarded and, certainly in a divided society, somewhat savvy about being drawn into discussions of this nature. So, research work in this field requires patience and the researcher must be capable of being disarming and able to explain in clear, simple terms what they are examining, making no apologies for doing so. During an era when the activities of British intelligence services in Northern Ireland drew suspicion and scorn, the arrival of a ‘fresh face’ to, ostensibly, befriend and acquiesce with groups of young, working class men from embattled national and republican inner-city communities in places like Belfast and Derry, ensured that, apart from anything else, I was always acutely aware of a realisation that, at any point, I may need to abandon my research to protect my own safety and, by extension, the reputation and standing of my employing institution.

## **<b> Current state of knowledge**

### **<c> Governance**

It’s difficult to argue against a view that the field of governance has emerged as the most talked-about, researched and examined sub-discipline of sports scholarship since the dawn of the new millennium. The motivation for this almost certainly arises from the ‘drawing back’ of a veil of secrecy surrounding the administration of sport on a global scale. For some reason – and we are all equally culpable of this failing – we naively, perhaps, thought that those governing sport on our behalf were doing so for all the right reasons – they were shaped and forged by the ethics of fair play, informed by transparency and integrity. Looking back, we were remarkably trusting and not sufficiently searching in our enquires as to why some sports

administrators clung desperately, even obscenely, to power, whilst others emerged from comparative sporting backwaters to prominence, despite the fact that few involved in sport knew very much about them or their previous involvement. In this, there is something of a changing of the world order expressing its influence – the collective western powerbase of sports governance situated in Paris, London and Geneva – is being questioned and gradually eroded. An illustration of this, at the time of writing (July 2020), is the impending change at the top of the FIA, motorsport’s world governing body. Frenchman Jean Todt, who has been President of the FIA for 12 years, must vacate this role at the end of 2021, when the next leader will be elected. Yet, supporters of Todt have begun to lobby for an apparent unjustifiable extension of his term, ostensibly to guide the federation through a challenging post-Covid-19 pandemic era. Yet some commentators believe it may have more to do with the identity of his likely successor, the UAE national Mohammed Ben Sulayem, an Emirati with a reputation as something of a moderniser and working out of Dubai, one of the world’s new sporting powerbases. It will be interesting to observe this, and similar such elections, in the time ahead and what they tell us about the future direction of global sport.

Otherwise, the self-governed hierarchic networks that have traditionally existed in the sports world are increasingly facing attempts by governments and other empowered stakeholder organisations to interfere in their policy and decision-making processes, and often, it might be argued, for good reason. The 2015 decision to award the 2021 IAAF World Championships to Eugene, Oregon was noteworthy on two counts. Firstly, Gothenburg believed itself to be actively engaged in a rival bid for the 2021 event and was taken aback, to put it mildly, by a seemingly unilateral decision on the part of the IAAF to simply side for the USA bid. Secondly, Eugene, a city with a population barely in excess of 100 000 people, is also the home of the sportswear manufacturer Nike, which may have been a consideration in the final decision of the IAAF. Such developments reflect the emergence of a greater networked governance approach to sport to the detriment of the traditional form of self-governance, which was itself of course subject to increasing criticism from sports followers following a series of high-profile scandals and controversies (Hoye and Cuskelly 2007).

These concerns continue in the face of the then FIFA General Secretary Jerome Valcke’s assertion, prior to the 2014 World Cup Finals, that ‘less democracy is sometimes better for organising a World Cup’ (Horne 2016, p. 34). Remarkably, Bernie Ecclestone, then CEO of the Formula One Group that owned the broadcast rights for F1, gave an almost verbatim reprise of these comments at the Bahrain GP of 2016, claiming that the sport had, in his eyes,

become “too democratic”. It appears, despite the perception of sport as having a natural home within established liberal democracies, that the future for high-level sport is in those settings where things happen unquestionably, whatever the price (Hoye and Cuskelly 2007).

In less than 10 years, the Arab world has emerged as a dominant player in world sport (Kilgallen 2013; O’Connor 2013). How better to illustrate your advances as a modern nation than to host major sporting tournaments, to do so lavishly and to remain part of public discourse for many years in advance of a World Cup or Olympic Games. Sport, to parallel the work of Rostow (1990), is clearly a key component of any maturation strategy employed by GCC States. Yet it’s also the case that many of the Gulf States retain an uncompromising attitude towards dissenters and are viewed by some as repressive in their approach towards women, which begins to make problematic sport’s ready acquiescence of these same nation-states. There really is a danger that the wrong messages are sent out to observers about where the moral and ethical compass of sport, in its most generic of forms, is pointing (Forsythe 2009).

The reality remains of course that many of these peripheral States can facilitate a defining agent of globalisation, capitalist economics. Thus, if modern sport is categorised by extraordinary financial investment then such nations are well placed to meet this challenge and consider it only a small premium to pay for the projection of national legitimacy, if not unity, and evermore crucial to their full maturity as sovereign States. Nowhere is this more apparent it seems than in the Middle East, the countries of the GCC. Collectively they have taken the use of sport for non-sporting outcomes to an unparalleled level (Kilgallen 2013).

### *<c> Middle East*

As such amongst the dominant countries in world sport at present are those based in the Middle East, Bahrain, UAE and Qatar, though interestingly not the largest country in the region, Saudi Arabia (O’Connor 2013). Their combined populations equate to 12.7 million people, less than either the cities of London or Paris. Qatar, with a total population of 2.1 million, has less people living there than do so in Birmingham in the British midlands, whilst more people reside in Glasgow, Scotland than in the entire Kingdom of Bahrain. Yet their wealth and investment power are phenomenal. The UAE alone has a GDP of \$402.3 billion, whilst Qatar has a GDP that, at \$203.2 bn, represents more than half that figure but is drawn from only 20 per cent of the UAE’s population. If one were to combine the GDP of Qatar, Bahrain and UAE, it would figure amongst the Top 20 countries in the world in terms of

overall wealth, include Saudi Arabia and this moves into a global top 12 position (Kilgallen 2013).

Qatar accumulates sporting events in a manner unmatched by any nation-state in the history of modern sport (Kilgallen 2013). Between November 2014 and November 2015, for example, Qatar hosted the world championships in squash, short course swimming, handball, boxing and para-athletes, to name but a few. Yet one could comfortably situate Qatar inside a small part of the United Kingdom, e.g. Northern Ireland, where the author resides, and still have 20 per cent landmass to spare. Similarly, the cities of Milan, Barcelona or London are larger in area landmass than Bahrain, which has hosted a round of the Formula 1 Grand Prix for almost a decade and staged the Gulf Cup, the region's foremost football tournament, in 2013.

UAE, with a total population of 9.3 million people but, crucially, an indigenous population of less than 1 million, has managed to self-define itself as a modern, progressive, even Westernised nation-state, yet is barely four decades in existence. By identifying itself through the hosting of major events, it has skilfully used sports commonly associated with other parts of the world to achieve this status. Abu Dhabi, although something of a new arrival to global city marketing, is determined to eclipse Dubai's more immediate name recognition through its use of sport, which is heavily profiled in the 'Abu Dhabi 2030' vision. The remarkable investments of the ruling Mansoor family, underpinned by an oil reserve ten times that of Dubai, will make for an interesting period ahead as the State seeks to grow its already very prominent role in world sport (O'Connor 2013).

After the cancellation of the Formula 1 race in Bahrain during 2011, on the foot of a popular uprising in the country by the majority Shia population, part of the so-called Arab spring, the government response was swift. Widespread arrests of protestors and the expulsion of many foreign media outlets, including the BBC, was commonplace. Yet the approach of the FIA, motorsport's world governing body, was remarkable, notably again in its attitude to press ahead with the race in the face of internal ethnic conflict. Article 1 of the FIA Statutes clearly states that 'The FIA shall refrain from manifesting racial, political or religious discrimination in the course of its activities and from taking any action in this respect' (FIA Statutes, accessed on 23 November 2016). Yet the FIA's stance on the Bahrain GP, both in 2012 and again 2013, was expressly pro-Government, acting in favour of a Sunni minority administration that had invested heavily in hosting the Formula 1 race and was determined



that its staging would convey a sense of normality to a watching international audience (O'Connor 2013).

Indeed, the on-going geo-political tensions within the Middle East remain something of a concern for onlookers. These are best illustrated through the campaign of Jordan's Prince Ali Bin Al-Hussein's attempt to replace Sepp Blatter as FIFA President in early 2015. Despite not being favoured by his own Asian confederation, that perhaps unsurprisingly offered its backing to Blatter, Al-Hussein retained the unlikely support of a raft of other national federations. For example, he was nominated for the post by the English FA, despite the other two contenders for the position representing fellow-UEFA nations, and seconded by the United States Soccer Federation, which typically adopts a passive approach to the internal politics of FIFA. These unlikely of allies can only be explained, in the minds of some, in the context of wider political alliances existing and emerging in the Middle East. This overt intervention of politics into sport in the region does not play well with observers, concerned with the potential for divisions to foster between neighbouring States and spiral into all aspects of everyday life, including sport.

The degree of rivalry between a host of GCC countries and Qatar is similarly noteworthy (Kilgallen 2013; O'Connor 2013). The deaths of over 200 workers in the act of building stadia for the forthcoming 2022 World Cup, the astronomical rise in the numbers of cardiac arrests being suffered by many more who survive, and the regular ignominy these men – mostly from the Indian sub-continent – are subjected to, including being forced to compete, in late 2014, in a failed attempt by the Qatari's to set a world record for participation in the marathon, has become an international story. In the field of motorsport, which has a strong association with the Gulf, Qatar's capture of a round of the Formula 1 championship from 2016 onwards came at a considerable cost. It has now become the single most expensive round of the F1 championship in motorsport history as an objection from Bahrain to the running of an F1 event incensed the Qatari's to such an extent that they paid considerably more to stage the event than the second most lucrative round of F1. Finally, at the most recent World Handball Championships in Doha, not only did Qatar hire an entire team of foreign nationals to compete for the nation, it even transported fans from Spain to support them. These were people whose contract mandated them to back Qatar even if it was competing against Spain. This phenomenon is not new, with army and police personnel regularly being recruited to watch sporting events, but it does point to a fundamental problem when the State

vision fails to be matched by the reality of what is happening ‘on the ground’ and, as this gap grows, so too does the scepticism of those looking on from the side-lines.

### **<b> Main outcomes**

Public Intellectuals, including academics, do like to consider their contribution as being valuable, even transformative, even when it’s difficult to substantiate such claims. I certainly can’t make such grand assertions about my research career, albeit one that is grounded in key values and shaped by academic rigour and has – I would hope – made some proportionate contribution to the debates across those areas that I’ve outlined in this chapter.

In respect of the politics of sporting identity in Northern Ireland, key governing bodies there have begun to accept their wider civic and cultural role within a still fractured society, and have launched a number of initiatives designed to encourage greater inter-community engagement and, for want of a less dramatic term, inter-community healing. I’ve played a role in much of this work and I do think the field of public intellectualism, with its detached input and its often-compelling simplicity, can serve to cut through intransigence and normative behavioural patterns, typically grounded in fear and/or outdated tradition.

On a governance level, again, I believe I’ve helped locate the importance of fair, transparent and ethical management and administration of sport on the policy agenda and convinced governing bodies of the importance both of perception and practice in ensuring they too are properly representative of the sports they oversee and, moreover, the future to which they can contribute.

### **<b> Conclusion**

It is clear that public intellectuals play an important role in modern society, even if in some cases it is to highlight and relay uncomfortable, other times inconvenient, messages for those in power. Their voices carry substance because they very often capture the public mood on issues where mass public gatherings, including demonstrations, may have done so in the past. It is important this role continues in the context of sport because it is hard to imagine anything other than a further growth in its global influence. The international sports industry is a growing sector, sport is infiltrating an expanding body of public policy and its cultural reach and importance shows little sign of abating.

Thus, sport nowadays is not only about big business, but also global politics, strategic influence, social wellbeing and economic performance (Horne 2016). Whilst some commentators decry the emergence of something akin to a twenty-first century sporting arms race, the reality is that many countries have long since realised how powerful sport is and have set about exploiting it for much more, it seems, than sporting outcomes.

The picture that has emerged during this chapter is one in which there has been a considerable dislocation of a well-established global sports industry by the emergence of States, previously with only a passing interest in sport, at precisely the same point as the growth of sport worldwide has sought greater commodification of the sporting product. Yet all of this would be fathomable, indeed welcomed, were it not for the common political systems, the approach towards marginalised populations and the issue of rights more generally, demonstrated within these very same countries.

Ultimately therefore those States involved in this process seek to redefine, or simply define, their international image by shrouding themselves in the cloak of sporting respectability. Sport understood as ‘European’, ‘Modern’ and ‘Enlightened’ remains desirable for certain emerging nations. Sport for others represents a ‘Trojan horse’ amid a wider pursuit of international legitimacy, and improved trade relations, in a new world order driven by global capitalism. Ultimately international sport comes with its own messages – how to behave, how to think and how to interpret one’s place in the world. Here the concept of ‘soft power’ in sport is writ large and is evident in alignment with sponsorship of sports.

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