Chapter 16: Change & the future

# 16.1. Sports fans as agents of change

Sports fans have seldom been agents of change in communities and societies. They identify with athletes and teams, cheer when they attend games and contests, watch their favorite athletes and teams on television, buy products with team logos, and teach their kids to do the same.

When fans do these things all at once it creates a sense of emotional unity that leads them to feel good about who they are and the community in which they live – at least for a few hours, and sometimes even for days, especially when the team with which they identify is winning games.

Now and then, this sense of emotional unity is converted into actions that produce real changes in neighborhoods and communities. But this is rare and it usually occurs when fans are connected through institutionalized structures that have political relevance and clout.

A significant exception to this description of fans currently exists in some countries in North Africa and southwestern Asia. According to James Dorsey, an award-winning, veteran journalist who has covered ethnic and religious conflicts in the Middle East, Africa, Asia, Europe, and Latin America (for the *Wall Street Journal*, *New York Times*, *Financial Times* and *Christian Science Monitor*), soccer fan clubs in these regions have been heavily involved in protests against autocratic governments and soccer stadiums have become sites for political protests and organizing activities.

This pattern has been evident in Egypt, Tunisia, Libya, Morocco, Turkey, Syria, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Yemen. When there is widespread opposition to an existing autocratic political regime in which people cannot express themselves through democratic processes, sports events become symbolic as sites for collective displays of oppositional political attitudes and positions.

Because sports events attract tens of thousands of spectators plus media coverage, it is difficult for police to control such displays if they are strategically planned. If the police or military respond with brutal control tactics, their actions merely reaffirm the validity of the oppositional displays.

Another aspect of fan involvement in change is that the members of football (soccer) clubs, especially disaffected young men, are usually organized and have had multiple experiences facing off with the police and other social control agents working in the service of autocratic leaders. Over time, some of the fan groups often referred to as *ultras* because of their fanatical actions, have become street battle-hardened militants who know how to resist the military and police that suppress political dissent with brutal and deadly force.

At the same time, ultras in several countries have claimed the public space of the stadium as a site for organizing, planning, and expressing their protests. Soccer fans were a key component of the protests that eventually led to the ouster of Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak in early-2011. Today, those same fans constitute one of the larger and most active civic groups in Egypt. They are committed to resisting the coercive tactics of the Egyptian president.

The Ultras Ahlawy in Cairo is partly motivated by the killing of 74 members of their club in a post-game brawl with the Ultras White Knights when police withdrew their protection from the stadium. When the police were not sanctioned, and 13 members of the White Knights were sentenced to death in a hasty trial, members of both clubs joined together to resist the heavy-handed actions of the police and other security forces.



***The members of Ultras Ahlawy, the organized fan group supporting one of the major teams in Cairo, Egypt, blamed the government-controlled police for the deaths of 74 of their members in a violent post-game clash with the Ultras White Knights in February 2012. Today, they and the White Knights direct their anger and resentment toward the government.***

Fan groups in other countries have engaged in similar resistance to government actions perceived as autocratic:

* Militant supporters of three rival soccer clubs in Istanbul, Turkey have recently joined together with union members, leftists and other government critics to protest the actions of Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan. Numbering in the thousands, the fans regularly march in the city’s central square and face off with police.
* With street protests outlawed in Saudi Arabia, soccer stadiums have become the scene of protests by Shiite Muslims and supporters of imprisoned critics of the government. This worries the Saudi ruling families because the stadiums are more significant gathering places than the mosques, especially for young people who oppose the government.
* A sports journalist in Iran described soccer stadiums as being as important as the Internet in facilitating opposition to the government. The police can’t stop the protesters because there are so many of them in the stadium. To mute the impact of their vocal expressions of opposition, the government has ordered those games be televised without sound.
* Fans in Algeria use the stadium as a protest point because it is difficult for police to isolate organizers in a space that has always been a sanctuary for free expression. The
* nationwide focus on soccer prevents the police from violent crackdowns for fear that the general population will object.
* Veteran journalist James Dorsey writes in his blog, *The Turbulent World of Middle East Soccer*, that soccer stadiums throughout North Africa and the Middle East have become breeding grounds for political protests and insurrections. He notes that the mood of the people in many of these countries can be assessed by observing the fans at soccer games. Mass protests can be predicted by listening to the fans’ expressions of dissatisfaction and pent-up anger as they long for more open societies.

With these things said, it is important to also note that some Ultras express racist attitudes and engage in violent and destructive actions having little connection with political protest. In Syria, for example, jihadists (extreme right-wing Muslims motivated by dogmatic ideology) have used soccer as a venue for recruiting new supporters to their cause. They also use stadiums to promote their propaganda and energize the militancy of their followers.

Change cuts in many directions, and soccer fans in these countries have promoted anarchist, democratic, and fascist platforms. As sociologists, it is important to make these distinctions when discussing sports fans as agents of change.

**Note:** Material in the latter half of this reading is drawn largely from the reporting of James M. Dorsey who uses soccer as a lens for investigating current events in North Africa and the Middle East. His blog/column, *The Turbulent World of Middle East Soccer* (<http://mideastsoccer.blogspot.com/> ) is an invaluable source of information on the role of soccer in national and local politics.

# 16.2. Technology and change in sports

There are many cases in mainstream sports in which people use technology to push their personal in a quest for competitive success:

* Parents give synthetic human growth hormone to their children in the hope of “creating” world-class athletes.
* Athletes are in a constant quest to find substances and technological aids to help them become bigger, stronger, and faster.
* People of all ages seek sports equipment made with new, lightweight, strong materials, such as Kevlar, titanium, and carbon fiber so that they can develop new challenges and experiences.
* Some people dream of the day when the Human Genome Project provides information that permits the creation of genetically engineered “designer athletes.”
* Those people also dream of the day when the brain and central nervous system can be regulated to facilitate training and enhance performance.

These changes will raise many bioethical issues, but the people who use power and performance sports to form standards for judging what sports should be in the future may find it easy to ignore those issues. For example, many young people today are growing up with rapidly changing media images that blur the boundaries between human and non-human, and they expect that science will provide artificial organs as well as synthetic bones, tendons, and ligaments to those who need them in the future.

It won’t be shocking for most people in the future when unbreakable synthetic ligaments, bones, and joints are used to repair bodies injured in power and performance sports. It may not even be shocking when mechanical body parts are used to replace injured limbs and improve performance in sports. This already happening in the Paralympics.

Those who watch athletes in power and performance sports will increasingly accept the injuries and the abuse of athletes’ bodies as the medical and physical costs of pushing limits, and they will expect science to repair the damage. Acceptance of cutting-edge technologies will *not* come without resistance. Questions *will* be raised about the appropriateness of pushing certain limits in sports. Therefore, dominant sports in the future will not simply be the result of what is technologically possible. Some people fear that technology could eliminate the human element in contests and games and force athletes to alter their bodies in dangerous ways, even more dangerous than athletes are doing today.

Another source of resistance will be those who fear that certain technologies will subvert creativity, freedom, spontaneity, and expression among athletes, and it turns sports into programmed spectacles involving dramatically presented and technology-driven actions.

There will also be athletes who will not agree to become actors in such spectacles, and there will be spectators who will not watch them regularly because it will be difficult to identify with programmed athletes playing prepackaged games lacking human spontaneity and expression.

Unless athletes *feel pressure, emotionally respond* to victory and defeat, *make mistakes, work hard* for success, and *have their good and bad days,* spectators may have trouble identifying with them. If this happens, the prevailing power and performance sports will lose much of their commercial value.

The success of all commercial sports depends heavily on fan identification with athletes, and, if technology makes athletes too unlike the spectators who pay to watch them, fan identification could fade. After all, why watch cyborg athletes when you can buy a video game that enables you to control the images of the same athletes on the big screen in your home? The video game will cost less than a ticket to a game, and it will give you more control over your experiences – and you won’t have to listen to announcers telling you what you’re supposed to see and think.

The use of technology in power and performance sports also raises questions about fairness and access to sport participation. When the cost of technology is so high that only wealthy individuals, corporations, and nations can use it to their benefit, many people will question the meaning of athletic success. Will new definitions of *success* emerge? Who will benefit from these definitions?

These and many other questions beg for answers as new forms of pushing limits enter the realm of power and performance sports.

# 16.3. Working for change: Charity versus social justice

The sociology of sport often attracts students concerned about making changes that will improve people’s lives, especially those who lack resources. This is a good thing, and it has regularly fueled optimism about the future. However, when people associated with sports think about how to create change, they often are drawn to programs that emphasize self-improvement through motivation, hard work, and persistence. They may work in these programs or feel that the programs are worth supporting through donations – either their donations or those they can elicit through their fund-raising efforts.

This is why we often ask students to distinguish between using charity and working for justice as strategies for bringing about change. This distinction is important as an increasing number of people and communities live under conditions where opportunities are scarce or nonexistent at the same time that relatively few others enjoy ever-increasing wealth.

In such a system, there is a tendency for the wealthy to emphasize philanthropy as a way to level the playing field and give deserving people opportunities to improve their lives. Because the wealthy can influence cultural priorities in connection with strategies to foster social change, there has been a growing emphasis on charity as a top strategy. Charity is often couched in rhetoric stating a desire to “give back” to the society in which they have experienced success. As more people use this rhetoric, charity is increasingly seen throughout society as ***the*** way to make things better.

In the United States, the emphasis on charity can be seen when people with average wealth and incomes are willing to give millions of dollars to victims of disasters and accidents and to children, mostly in countries others than the United States. It also can be seen in the foundations created by super-wealthy families and individuals who want to show that their resources are being put to good and humanitarian use.

David Hilfiker is a medical doctor who has worked with many charitable organizations by donating his time and medical expertise to people living in poverty conditions. Peter Buffett runs a charitable foundation established with the resources of his father, Warren Buffett, who is listed as one of the wealthiest man in the world with assets topping $50 billion. Hilfiker and Peter Buffett have both dedicated themselves to charitable work for most of their professional lives, and both have come to realize that there are major differences between charity and justice as strategies for bringing about meaningful social change.

Dr. Hilfiker explains that charity is mostly about the givers, not the receivers. When people give to charity, he explains, they make choices about who will receive what they want to give at a particular time (PBS, 2006). Justice, on the other hand, makes charity unnecessary or replaces it with mutual sharing. For this reason, Hilfiker notes that charity is something we give, but justice is something we must work to achieve. Charity is based on the values and priorities of the givers, whereas justice involves changing the social, political, and economic structures that impact the lives of everyone in a society. In the end, charity depends on individuals and leads to an unequal power relationship between giver and receiver, whereas justice requires institutionalized processes that ensure fairness in all relationships. These distinctions are outlined in Table 1.

**Table 1. Distinctions between charity and justice**

| **Charity** | **<<<>>>** | **Justice** |
| --- | --- | --- |
| The individual giver | ***About*** | Changing structures |
| The giver’s values,  preferences, and motives | ***Based on*** | Institutionalized processes independent of individuals |
| The individual giver’s financial resources and motives | ***Maintained by*** | Collective commitment  to human rights |
| Creates a power relationship  with recipients being subservient | ***Socio-political outcome*** | Makes charity unnecessary or replaces it with mutual giving |

Beginning in 2006 – about the same time that Dr. Hilfiker was distinguishing charity from justice – Peter Buffett began managing one of three foundations set up by his father who was committed to giving away nearly all of his $50 billion fortune (there was one foundation for each of his three children to manage). As Peter and his wife embarked on their philanthropic journey, they noticed that most philanthropists want to solve local problems and “save the day” for people struggling to survive. They also noticed that charity motivated by such a desire generally had only short-term consequences and regularly caused unintended problems for those the charity was intended to help.

Over time, Peter Buffett came to see the charity of his and many other large foundations as a form of Philanthropic Colonialism. For example, these charities would frequently transplant strategies that worked in one setting into other settings with little awareness or concern for regard for local culture, geography or community norms. As portrayed in Figure 1, Buffet felt that much of this “giving” was motivated more by “*conscience laundering*” and a desire to defuse guilt by those who had vast amounts of money that came to them easily due to how they were positioned in society.

These acts of charity have no transformative impact on the existing structure of inequality in society. The rich may sleep better at night feeling that they have helped poor people survive to live another day, but the receivers of their charity remain locked into a system that provides them with little basis for meaning, respect, and fulfillment. When sports-minded people take this approach, sports are usually touted as sites of change and salvation: play sports and you will learn what is required for personal success.

**Figure 1. Functions of Foundation Charity for Givers**



According to both Hilfiker and Buffett, charitable interventions are like outing band-aids on chronic infections. They temporarily cover a problem but do nothing to eliminate its cause. For this reason, they both advocate and support strategies that change existing conditions by promoting systemic change.

As Buffett says, “It’s time for a new operating system. Not a 2.0 or a 3.0, but something built from the ground up. New code.” H urges that resources be used to invent and try approaches that eliminate structures based exclusively on market forces—which are skewed to benefit the few.

Is it progress when a new sports program is initiated in a low-income neighborhood? Buffett’s answer would be this: ONLY when people in the neighborhood have the resources and support needed to raise their children with a realistic sense of possibility for their development combined with choices for how and which skills they want to develop. He also notes that as long as charity is the strategy for allocating resources, poverty and the absence of choice will be self-perpetuating.

This is an old story. From the perspective of those with power and wealth, charity has always trumped justice because it reproduces the power structure on which their wealth depends. Even professional athletes who realize that structures must be changed to bring about meaningful change are convinced by their agents to give priority to charity rather than to work for justice.

In societies characterized by deep and pervasive inequalities, justice is contentious, whereas charity is praised without qualification.

Buffett, Peter. 2013. The charitable-industrial complex. *NYT* (July 26): <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/07/27/opinion/the-charitable-industrial-complex.html>.

Hilfiker, David. 2006. *Poverty in Urban America: Its Causes and Cures.*

Tippett, Krista. 2006. David Hilfiker — Seeing poverty after Katrina. *On Being* (National Public Radio, August 24)

# 16.4. Using sports to make change: Does it work?

Change is usually controversial. Some people seek change to improve quality of life for themselves and their community, whereas others want to maintain the status quo because it’s comfortably predictable or it serves their interests and sustains their privilege.

During the late 1960s, ideas about change were shaped primarily by social activists. For them, *change* referred to transforming communities and society so that civil rights and social justice were guaranteed for everyone. The activist organizations with dealt with community organization and social issues that impacted entire categories of people. Their agendas were based on the belief that grassroots collective action would produce strong communities that would, in turn, produce engaged citizens.

This agenda made many people anxious, especially those with vested interests in preserving the status quo. During the 1980s, these people supported national and local political policies that emphasized individual self-interest and personal responsibility as the drivers of social progress. *Change* for them involved individual growth and success based on personal motivation and responsibility. They believed that individual success leads to positive growth and development that benefits everyone.

This shift in focus came with a new vocabulary. People referred to *development* rather than *change*. They were comfortable with the notion of expanding what already existed, whereas the prospect of transforming existing structures made them nervous.

Table 2 (below) highlights the differences between social changes that involve transformation and those that involve development.

**Table 2. Two Approaches to Social Change**

| **Transformation Focus**  **(1960s & 1970s)** | **Development Focus:**  **(1980s-present)** |
| --- | --- |
| Concerns were civil rights, social justice, fair laws and policies | Concerns are individual growth and success |
| Deal with community organization  and social issues | Deal with personal issues of motivation and responsibility |
| Believe that community organization facilitates grassroots development | Believe that individual success leads to positive growth and development |
| Believe that strong communities produce engaged citizens | Believe that successful individuals produce growth benefitting all |
| **SPORTS** can be sites for creating an awareness of social, economic, and political issues and developing the strategies to transform structures so they are fair and just. | **SPORTS** can be sites for creating self-esteem, self-efficacy, and a focus on personal success that will fuel the growth and development of existing structures and communities |

Sports today are seen and used primarily to promote development rather than transformation. Sports for development programs have grown exponentially since the mid-1990s. They have been funded largely by people who believe that positive changes occur when individuals make good choices and seek to improve life for themselves and their families. If this occurs, all will be well in the world.

This is why most sports for development (SFD) programs focus on children and young people. If they can be made responsible for themselves and their families, problems in the future will be less troublesome and easier to solve.

If SFD programs focused on transformation and truly empowered communities of people to politically assert themselves and transform existing structures, funding would be difficult to obtain because the transformations might undermine the interests of the nations, corporations, and foundations that currently possess or control global capital and resources.

*In summary*, sports can be a tool in the process of making change in certain situations, but the changes are more likely to stress personal development rather than social transformation. This does not mean that work focusing on development is to be ignored or seen as problematic. Helping individuals improve themselves is a worthwhile pursuit as long as it is done ***without*** (a) doing extensive homework about the history, culture, and current circumstances of the people with whom work is being done; (b) establishing a hierarchical charity-based relationship with people in the program; (c) ignoring or demeaning the culture of those in the program; (d) working with other organizations doing development programs in the same region; (e) establishing an independent assessment and evaluation study to be done periodically; (f) using evaluation studies to inform critical self-reflection about program goals and strategies, and without doing follow-up after departing from the program.

## For valuable information about SFD programs see,

Darnell, S. (2012) *Sport for Development and Peace: A Critical Sociology*, London: Bloomsbury.

Coalter, Fred. 2013. *Sport for development: What game are we playing?* London: Routledge.