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# Sportswork – Towards a Notion of Good Work for Athletes

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## ABSTRACT

This paper explores the idea of professional sport as a form of labour. While research on everything from performance statistics to sports rights and technology had proliferated, what players think about *sport as work* deserves greater attention. The inequalities and exclusion of sports are evident and we need to understand the drivers of this, but we also need to understand why working in these industries matters to people, how they experience it and what values it has for them. In order to do this, I want to draw on critical cultural labour studies, and the paper argues that applying this lens to work in sport could help develop a notion of what constitutes 'good work' for athletes. The aim of the paper is to both to consider the landscape of sports labour research and to propose a future research agenda.

**Keywords:** athletes, sport, cultural labour, sports work

## INTRODUCTION

This paper is about professional sport as a form of labour. By this I mean something that requires using both mental and physical capacities to productive ends. It argues that the study of sport as a category of labour has been somewhat neglected, and in that respect (and others) it has much in common with cultural labour. Yet while the literature on cultural labour has exploded in recent decades (Banks, 2007; Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2011; McRobbie, 2002b, 2016; Conor et al., 2015), sports labour remains under-studied, despite the growth in writing about other aspects of sport (Boyle and Haynes, 2009).

The recent growth in cultural labour studies was partly driven by concerns about working conditions within the cultural industries, which from the late 1990s onwards were being promoted as essential to economic development in nations across the world (Hartley, 2005; Banks and Hesmondhalgh, 2009). Far from the policy ideal of creative labour however, the research revealed a world of long hours, low or no pay, endemic bullying, sexism and racism (Saha, 2018; Conor et al., 2015). Sport has similarly grown in economic importance and sports labour faces similar concerns. And in both cases they sit alongside, indeed derive in part from, pleasure, fulfilment, excitement and love for work, which McRobbie has memorably described as 'passionate' labour (2002b). It is in this seeming contradiction that much of the interest of studying such labour lies – not in a critique of false consciousness – but in understanding the tensions and perplexities of this form of work. But while research on the cultural industries is increasingly broad in its notion of culture, this is rarely taken to include sport. And while the literature on professional sport is also growing rapidly, there is very little discussion of sport as a form of labour.

There are a variety of reasons for this. Within the Academy study of both sport and the other cultural industries are fragmented through a variety of disciplines; sociology, cultural studies, leisure studies, sports science and so on, and while there are overlaps, sport and culture tend to be studied separately. Public policymakers, at least since the late 1990s, have been keen to categorise the cultural industries as part of attempts to understand and support them, in what is often referred to as the 'creative economy (Howkins, 2013). In the UK, sport has been one of the

responsibilities of the Cultural Ministry since 1997, though as Long and Bianchini note (2019) this has rarely led to them being treated as single policy area.

There is a debate to be had about the degree to which sport is or is not 'cultural' and the degree to which the professional (often highly mediated) sports industry is a 'cultural industry.' Many, perhaps most, would argue that sport and other forms of culture are essentially different: sport focussing on competition and with the necessary indeterminism that this implies, while other cultural activities are primarily symbolic or concerned with aesthetic values, and lack the element of competition (Hesmondhalgh, 2002; Mumford, 2019). This is sometimes presented as a classed debate with sport somewhat being 'looked down upon,' by the arts1 and there is perhaps something in this (Whannel, 2013). But this distinction by no means entirely about class, not least because class distinctions *within* sports are significant, or about a failure to take sport seriously. The difference between an indeterministic activity (not knowing the outcome of the game or match) and a scripted or scored piece of work, which seeks to tell a particular narrative, are real and profound.

But while I completely acknowledge that these differences exist, I feel that there is a huge amount in contemporary, professional sport that is 'cultural' – identity, aesthetics, sense of place, narrative, commodification and mediatisation – are just a few of the terms that spring to mind. Debates about inequality, exploitation and exclusion are common in both cases and the importance of sport in people's lives, the beauty and joy and sense of purpose (as well as heartbreak) that it brings them is evident (Miller, 2023). In both cases, the study of labour has, as I've said, been neglected in part because nether corresponds to what people see as 'work,' and both are closer a model of unalienated work that people might casually see as 'getting paid to do your hobby'. However, developments in both cultural industries 'proper' and sport seems to be blurring some distinctions; playing videogames has indeterminate outcomes, while Olympic snowboarding has prescribed routines. Thus, while I lean towards the view of professional sport as a cultural industry, even if we continue to regard these as distinct fields of endeavour, I argue that the similarities make a strong argument for looking at the sports labour through the lens of cultural labour studies.

Twenty years ago it was reasonable to say that academics has little to say about cultural work (Hesmondhalgh, 2002). Since then it has become one of the most productive areas of cultural industries scholarship, in the process developing productive ways of looking at labour that both understands the agency of workers and the conditions under which they work (Banks, 2007; Banks and Hesmondhalgh, 2009; Conor et al., 2015). In the process it has made contributions to public policy on cultural labour (Brook et al., 2020, 2021, 2022; Cohen and de Peuter, 2022), albeit against a tide of often worsening conditions (de Peuter et al., 2022). It is perhaps a reflection of this success that debates about cultural labour have become somewhat bogged down in questions of inequality and exclusion. I should be clear that I regard these as extremely important questions and have written about them myself on more than one occasion. But there is a danger of eclipsing not only the very real dilemmas that cultural workers wrestle with in terms of their 'passionate labour' and the price paid to do it, but also the broader question of why it should matter at all that culture is produced under often exploitative conditions and often from a narrow social base. It matters because culture matters, in part because it shapes how we understand ourselves, one another and our society (particularly via the larger media industries). But it also matters because people think it matters, because it is meaningful to us, one of the most meaningful areas of our lives in many cases (Miller, 2023). The same, I argue, can be said of sport. In a recent paper on sports management (2021), Gammelsaeter is concerned that sports management literature has in recent years focused increasingly on the externalities of sports – the implications of it for health, for commerce or for public policy, rather than on sports itself, 'and the sporting human' (p. 259).

My own expertise is in cultural policy and cultural labour (refs omitted) and it is specifically the lens of cultural labour that I want to bring to this, as I think that work has done a lot, not simply to map what cultural labour looks like and who does it (Pratt, 1997), nor just to understand inequalities and exclusion (Saha, 2018), but importantly to understand why this labour matters to people, how they understand it, and why it is deemed valuable (Banks, 2007; Taylor and Littleton, 2012). Doing that will require quite a lot of ground clearing and definitional work, and it is to that that I turn next.

## DEFINING SPORT LABOUR

Any empirical work on sports labour would require a conceptual mapping of the field; what counts are sports labour, how many people do it and where. Such data is available from national and international statistics agencies, but it is scattered, poorly defined and infrequently updated.

[1] Without spending pages discussing the problematics of the term 'culture', it may be noted that I sometimes use 'arts' as a substitute for culture. I do this where it is primarily people writing about arts (as in the arts/sport debate referenced here) that I am referring to.

 

The European Union (EU) uses the Vilnius Definition (Eurostat, 2018) of what counts as sport (essentially products and services to do with producing sports) and reasonably enough regards sports labour as:

- people with a sport-related occupation in the sport sector e.g., professional athletes, professional coaches.
- people with non-sport jobs in the sport sector e.g., fitness centre receptionists.
- people with a sport-related job outside the sport sector, e.g., school sport instructors.

Similar approaches, which combine occupational and industry data, are the basis of most employment statistics, though ever year when I am teaching cultural labour classes students are bemused – and sometimes even annoyed – to learn that lawyers who work for entertainment companies and box office staff are part of the cultural industries. I then spend my time explaining why this is important, so it is something of a *volte face* to say that it is core sports labour – the work of doing the actual sport, or as the EU helpfully terms it, being an athlete2 – that I am interested in for this paper.

Of course, defining sports labour in this way is only the beginning of understanding it. Are we just taking about professional labour? And what defines professionalism – pay, qualifications, employment status? While the professional/amateur distinction is perhaps less historically fraught in the other cultural industries than it is in sports (see below), concern about the impact of unpaid labour on paid labour is widespread in cultural labour both in the literature and increasingly in public policy (Brook et al., 2020). Indeed, exploring the differences between amateur and professional, paid and unpaid labour in sports and the cultural sectors, both historic and contemporary, is one of the issues that I think merit most attention.

The other big definitional issues are what we might consider 'sport' and here my focus on sport as an industry makes this somewhat easier. Physical activities or games that are organised competitively will probably serve, but my focus is really on organised spectator sports, even mass spectator sports (though 'mass' itself rather hard to define). I'm interested in sporting labour and that implies sports that are large and organised enough to have a workforce of some sort, whether masses of organised, paid professionals or more likely a labour markets composed of the full and part time, the paid, the partly paid and the not paid. And even the largest of sports – football for instance – is likely to include all these forms of labour within a hierarchy of wealth and reputation (Bourdieu, 1988).

## LOOKING FOR LABOUR IN SPORTS LITERATURE

Despite the relative paucity of labour studies in the *academic* literature, the most widely read (and arguably respected) form of sports writing – journalism – concerns exactly that, the labour of boxers, cricketers, footballers, cyclists and so on. The rise of sports journalism is coterminous with the rise of organised sport and of course with the rise of organised gambling on sport (Boyle, 2006; Collins, 2013), starting in the 1800s. But it was the rise and mass circulation of newspapers, including the development of specialist sports newspapers, that cemented the importance of sports journalism as a way of understanding sport and its meanings (Huggins, 2021). Books on sport including biographies and autobiographies can be a useful source for understanding the labour of professional athletes, but clearly do not represent a systematic approach. We would only glean a very partial understanding of working in television from celebrity biographies and the same can be said of sport.

My focus is primarily on the academic literature, and here coverage of labour is somewhat under-developed. Sports history is perhaps the best source, perhaps because the history of sports formation and development is in part a series of labour disputes. The professionalisation3 of sport and the fiercely protected boundaries between amateur and professional sports are discussed in a wide range of sports literature, notably cricket of course (Marqusee, 2016; Wagg, 2017) where it is tied into questions of class, race, and Empire (Marqusee, 1994; Appadurai, 2015), but also football, athletics, baseball, and so on (Jones, 1998; Collins, 2013). The voluminous writing on cricket's amateur/ professional divide is full of accounts of the (perceived) differences in playing style between amateurs and professionals, where the 'freedom' of amateurs, specifically batsmen, to play the shots they want to play without worrying about winning or losing, is contrasted with the paid professional's responsibility to his employers.

Also well-covered in sport history is the history of labour organisations, with accounts of the development of Professional Associations in football (all codes), tennis, baseball, cycling and others (Harding, 1991; Jones, 1998; Holt and Mason, 2000; Korr, 2002; Collins, 2013) as well as the disputes between them (Lowenfish, 1991). Indeed, while recent work on trade union activism in cultural labour markets (Cohen and de Peuter, 2018, 2022) has drawn on revived interest in worker organisation, there are perhaps fewer historical accounts of the development of trade unions in the cultural industries, than there are in sport. The prominence of labour issues in sports history is hardly

[2] Although 'athlete' is sometimes associated simply with what we call athletics, I am using it here as a term for all sportspeople, largely because it is non-gendered and considerably more elegant than 'sportspeople.'

[3] Professional in this context simply means someone who is paid to take part in sport, it does not suggest credentialization or control of entry to labour markets.

 

surprising, as the development of professional associations, often facing hostility from sport's governing bodies, is about the development of a professional, paid workforce in what was becoming a major industry.

Management/labour disputes were thus common and the working-class labour pool on which some of the larger sports, such as football or boxing, drew were often connected through family or community to the wider trade union movements at the heights of their powers. Labour disputes, such as the abolition of the maximum wage in British football (Imlach, 2005), the development of open tennis championships (Jeffreys, 2009) or the Bosman ruling (Duval and van Rompuy, 2016) are sometimes covered as labour disputes in the literature, but not always. The Bosman ruling on the movement of players within the EU at the end of contract has produced considerably more commentary as a legal and trade issue than as a labour one, for example. This is also true of other sports issues, from working conditions and physical dangers to unequal pay, all of which merit attention in the literature, but which are rarely seen primarily as labour issues.

As Roderick notes in his work on professional football labour (2006a, 2006b) the most puzzling gap is in literature on sports sociology, a place that one might expect to find research into labour. Tian and Wise (2020) conducted a quantitative study of sports sociology research between 2008 and 2018, and while gender, masculinity and race appear as top ten keywords, labour is nowhere to be seen. Studies focusing on identity, politics and the body are also prominent in both Europe and North America, which according to the authors indicates that researchers, are engaged in 'classic sociological traditions,' – though notably not the classic sociological tradition of labour studies. There is far more material on consumption of sports (from fan culture to hooliganism) than on its production. Until recently this could equally well be said of sociological work on the cultural industries, and probably still can. In his own research on professional footballers, Roderick comes close to a 'cultural labour' account of footballers perhaps because he describes professional football as 'a form of entertainment work' (2006b: 245) and echoes the language of cultural labour researchers such as Helen Blair (2001) when he notes the maxim, 'you're only as good as your last game.' In his work, Roderick discusses the precarity of football as a profession, particularly with a constant over-supply of labour, as well as the importance of social networking to try and mitigate this, and the emotional labour footballers perform in order to both deal with and mask these anxieties – all issues which engage cultural labour researchers (see below). Roderick argues that the lack of attention to cultural labour in sports sociology arises in parts at least from the lack of qualitative studies of sports people themselves, and it is true that where labour is covered it is often through work on particular parts of the labour market or particular stages of labour formation, rather than via work on professional athletes.

While mainstream sociology could be said to neglect issues of labour, Roderick et al. (2017) point out, there is literature on sports labour in business schools, in management studies and in occupational psychology. There is a large literature on training and coaching, particularly within sports science, complete with handbooks and journals (Cassidy et al., 2009; Jones, 2009; Jones et al., 2011; Potrac et al., 2013; Magill et al., 2017). Although coaches and trainers are not the focus of my interest in this paper, and despite the fact that much of it comes from a pedagogical or sports science point of view, there is material here that is relevant including work on coaching as emotional labour (Nelson et al., 2013; Potrac et al., 2017). Other work, some of which is in the trade rather than academic literature (Baldi, 2019) looks at the fascinating topic of potential sports workers – the talented kids who never quite make it despite early promise and through a combination of injuries, and luck, bad timing or off-field problems. Still other work looks at sports labour markets, particularly the globalisation of such markets (Miller et al., 2001) and related migration (Lee, 2010) along with transfer policies (Hoey et al., 2021), recruitment and management of labour (Amis and Silk, 2005; Gammelsæter, 2021). Indeed, sports management literature is now a rather large field (Gammelsaeter and Anagnostopoulos, 2022), but much as the discipline of arts management is not where one would look for work on arts labour, so sports management contains relatively little on sports workers themselves, or on the material issues of labour as noted above (Gammelsaeter, 2021).

The differences between individual and team sports has no exact parallel in the arts or media industries and this clearly has implications for labour and the experience of being an athlete. There are of course cultural workers who move between standard employment models and freelance work and indeed many of the developments of contemporary cultural labour reflects the growing precarity of the workforce as larger employers from newspapers to museums move from standard to freelance contracts. The changing nature of sports contracts, transfer rules, compensation packages and related commercial activities, have produced relevant recent literature (see for example Dabsheck, 2004, 2006).

One forms of sports labour that does attract more attention than that of equivalent areas in cultural labour, is that of child and other exploited labour in global production chains. The production of footballs, replica kits and other sporting equipment, often under conditions of horrendous exploitation, has been an issue in the literature for some time (Sage, 1999; Miller et al., 2001; Carter, 2018) and it is arguable that coverage is better than that of global supply chains in the cultural industries (Miller, 2018; Lin and Liu, 2018). There is also a relatively large literature on sports labour migration (Poli, 2010; Maguire and Falcous, 2011; Nalani Butler and Dzikus, 2015),

 

though as Roderick (2011) comments, most of this is from a macro perspective with very little that looks at the subjectivities of migrating athletes.

Much of the work described above is valuable for a study of professional athletes as cultural workers, but there is relatively little focus on the athletes themselves, or what they think about work, and the disciplinary dominance of management or psychology means that, as Roderick et al. put it,

> "the psychological notion of mental toughness in the context of individualized performance (although rarely acknowledged as situated in the workplace) has been vastly over-examined in contrast to basic material human needs such as confidence in employment status, wellbeing, and the right to be treated in non-discriminatory and dignified ways (2017)."

The next section will look at how some of these issues have been covered in cultural labour studies and at the possible research questions that this might open up for a study of sport.

## ISSUES IN CULTURAL LABOUR LITERATURE

In their work on cultural labour, Hesmondhalgh and Baker (2011) elaborate on the concepts of 'good and bad work', and then use this to frame a discussion of cultural labour issues. It is also an approach adopted by Roderick et al. (2017) as they look at sport and its effects on mental health. While it does not cover everything (e.g., it does not consider labour organisation in much detail), this framing seems a helpful way to structure a discussion of issues that cross both fields and I will make use of it in this section.

Hesmondhalgh and Baker's book looks at labour in three sub-sectors of the media; television, music recording and magazine publishing. Their framework for 'good and bad work' considers a variety of issues: autonomy, sociality, self-realisation, work-life balance and security, which, together with factors such as pay and working hours, makes up a notion of good work. Bad work on the other hand, they look at in terms of powerlessness, boredom, isolation, overwork and insecurity (often referred to elsewhere as precarity).

A primary concern of Hesmondhalgh and Baker is the notion of autonomy – both aesthetic and professional – that is available to cultural workers. While keen to stress that they have no idealised notion of pure autonomy, they are interested both in the degree of self-determination that workers can exercise at work and the degree to which their cultural autonomy – the relationship between their work and the creative product – operates independently of other determinants. In this they draw on Raymond Williams (1981) and perhaps more surprisingly on Bourdieu (1996), both of whom give accounts of autonomy, not as abstract individual freedom, but as resistance, in this case to the total interpenetration of cultural production by marketplace relationships. That culture, even great culture, is made under market conditions is not in doubt, but this is in part because it is never completely subsumed by the need to produce for profit. Creative tensions, as we might call them, continue to exist and result in a whole series of fractures from famous legal battles with record labels to everyday discussions about magazine covers, or TV documentary editing (Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2011; Young, 2023).

It might appear that of all the cultural labour issues, autonomy is the last one to look for in sport. After all, one argument against treating sport as a cultural industry is its rule bound nature – the rules of cricket or football allow for somewhat less interpretation than is granted to other artists. But in a fascinating paper on CLR James' book *Beyond a Boundary*, (1983 [1963]), Andrew Smith (2006) discusses exactly this notion of contested autonomy, again by drawing on Bourdieu. James has sometimes been criticised for what some see as his naivete about cricket. Collins, (2013: 64) in his rather heavy-handed account of sport under capitalism describes James as being, 'in thrall to the sentimental cant of amateurism,' and even more sympathetic writers see it as a romantic blind spot in James' otherwise impeccable anti-colonialism. Smith, like Hesmondhalgh and Baker, reaches for Bourdieu and in particular *Rules of Art* (1996) to defend James' account.

Bourdieu concludes his critical account of the political limitations of art under capitalism, by noting that 'the fact of finding oneself thus at 'end game' does not necessarily lead to disenchantment (1996: 343).' In other words, the potential for contested autonomy within a particular field still exists and needs to be fought for. As Smith points out, for James, it was 'precisely the autonomy of that field, its operation according to distinctive criteria of meaning and success, which mattered and which gave sports its live political significance,' (2006: 101). Thus, it is not just the 'gentleman' batsman displaying his individual autonomy when he ignored the need to concern himself with winning or losing, but the fact that the cricket pitch was at least symbolically marked off from other social relations that allowed West Indian success in that field to have wider political potential. That fact that sport (as with all cultural forms) operates within its own roles and codes – however frequently abused – allows for what Bourdieu called 'the intention of autonomy.' Many years have passed since James wrote *Beyond a Boundary* or Bourdieu wrote *Rules of Art*, and in that time the commercialisation of professional sport has intensified and spread (Boyle and Haynes, 2009). But as the recent debates about the proposed Europe Super League in football

 

demonstrate4, appeals to ideas beyond the market – the 'spirit of football' in this case – are frequently made and indeed resonate with a wider public. That this is sometimes cynical, as in UEFA's 'spirit of football' posturing during the same debates is undoubtedly true; but for it to be deployed at all suggests some residual and potential which should not be totally dismissed.

Alongside debates about autonomy, there exist a whole set of issues, both material and not, that help structure some of the distinctive features of cultural work and may be useful in looking at sport. Precarity, in sport as in cultural work, has long been a feature of labour markets, but the degree to which it characterises them has perhaps intensified. Certainly, the celebration of cultural work in some of the policy literature and the encouragement to young people to take-up these careers, often neglects the degree to which risk and insecurity are core parts of them. The growth of jobs in the cultural industries has been more than matched by the growth of graduate labour seeking to enter them, leading to greater pressures and insecurity, as a large army of labour is willing to take up unpaid and often exploitative work in order to enter these industries (McRobbie, 2016). Work in professional sports, particularly as an athlete, has never had much security; risk of injury or ill-health, declining performance or competition from new entrants has always characterised sports work (Hickey, 2022). Recent years have seen a growth in awareness of other harms such as sexual or emotional abuse, self-harm, hyper-commodification or use of performance enhancing technologies (Griffiths and Bloyce, 2023).

Yet this precarity and indeed these abuses are entangled not just with the *ideal* of cultural work as desirable, but the fact that it is often spoken of as such by cultural workers. Debates about the links between exploitation and self-exploitation in cultural work can sometimes be seen as 'blaming the victim,' particularly at a times of rising militancy and awareness of cultural labour problems by workers themselves (de Peuter, 2014). But there are examples of self-exploitation in cultural work, and indeed the education and training of cultural workers helps inculcate such attitudes (Oakley, 2013). Indeed, contemporary cultural work sometimes seems to rest on the opposite poles of great promise – of freedom and self-actualisation, twinned with the normalization of risk and uncertainty – the price to be paid for escaping so-called 'mundane' work. As Roderick makes clear in his study of professional footballers (2006), much of what the literature tells us about precarity in the workplace in general applies to athletes as well, though there are differences. Athletes face careers which are short term in nature, a fact which, like dancers perhaps, but not writers, they are aware of from the beginning. Competition, which is clearly a feature of many kinds of cultural work, is still more integral to sport than other cultural forms – even though athletes may still be surprised by the extent to which it permeates all aspects of their working lives (Roderick, 2006).

But there are also similarities between the work of athletes and that of cultural workers. The boundaries between 'life' and 'work' for example are notoriously fluid – such that being an actor, or an athlete, can appear to be not just what people do, but what they are. Athletes in particular often appear to inhabit closed worlds where social relationships are primarily with colleagues in the same profession (or even team) or with childhood friends and family (Roderick, 2011). Again, like dancers or in some cases actors – sport is not just the only job they have ever done but the only thing they have been trained to do. As Roderick (2006) explains, just as freelance cultural workers do, professional footballers respond to the insecurity of their working lives by drawing on network contacts to find out who is looking for players, who is getting rid of them and so on (see also Wacquant, 1998, on boxers). While this makes sense as an employment strategy, it can have undesirable consequences as relationships are instrumentalised, friendships become resources for finding work and workers become emotionally detached from others (Wittel, 2001).

The emotional and psychological consequences of this type of work requires that workers devise strategies to deal with them. While popular depictions of athletes often draw attention to the difference between the emotions being experienced and the presentation of them by athletes, summed in in notion of a 'game face,' as Avner et al. note (2022), there is relatively little academic work on the emotional labour of athletes (though see Potrac et al. 2017, Roderick, 2006b). This is in contrast to research on cultural work which reflects growing interest in emotional labour (Grindstaff, 2002; Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2011). Avner et al suggest that promising avenues for further research includes looking at how athletes attempt to interfere or work with other people's emotions, or how they navigate the emotions resulting from the precarity of their work.

When considering the emotional and psychological aspects of this work however, we cannot ignore the pleasure that people get from taking part – whether professionally or not – in sport and other cultural activities. As Woodward has written (2017) pioneer feminists saw taking part in sport as a key element of women's liberation for good reason. The freedom to move your body, 'to run and jump and climb' (p. 165), is pleasure enough and that is before we come to the pleasures to be found in mastery of that movement and, for professionals in front of an audience, the mastery of that movement experienced collectively. While such pleasures can of course be instrumentalised and indeed serve as the basis for both exploitation and self-exploitation, the possibilities of

[4] The Apple documentary *Super League: The War for Football* contains good examples of this phenomenon.

 

pleasure in our (working) lives should not be dismissed as a goal even, or perhaps especially, when they are fleeting and time limited.

Much critical cultural labour research, perhaps the majority, is concerned with questions of inequality – who gets to participate in the cultural industries and who does not, and whether and to what extent these inequalities determine the kind of cultural production we get (Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2011; Conor et al., 2015; Saha, 2018; Taylor and O'Brien, 2017). There are a variety of – normative – reasons for this. An equitable society should ensure that people can have the opportunity to use their skills and talents both for their own benefit and for the benefit of others. Most of this holds for all parts of the economy, but the degree to which cultural products shape our lives and our society, the way that they function in Russell Keat's terms (2000) as a 'meta goods', which help shape our relationship to other goods, makes culture a special case. Thus, if the stories we hear, or the viewpoints we are exposed to, are narrowed and diminished by social inequalities, this can create, as Banks (2017: 3) argues, 'a democratic deficit.' In thinking about sport then, it is reasonable to ask whether sport also functions in this way. Does it shape our understanding of wider society? And thus, does inequality in sport matter as much as it does in other cultural industries? My answer to this would be yes – up to a point. The narratives that sport draws upon, not just of winning and losing, but of place and community, identity, beauty, even transcendence, clearly shape our lives and our understandings – witness the emotional investment that many people have in sporting activities. The mediatisation of sport enhances and amplifies these narratives. The rule-based nature of sports and the emphasis upon competition may limit these narratives in some ways, but sport is clearly one of the primary ways in which we see our society reflected back to us.

There is already a fairly large literature on various form of inequality in sports, but to echo again the theme of this paper, very little of this literature looks at inequality as *primarily* a labour issue. To take just a small part of the burgeoning literature, there is work on disabilities, both physical and intellectual (Kiuppis, 2018; Asunta et al., 2022), sexism (Fink, 2016; Hindman and Walker, 2020), gender and gender identity (Phipps, 2021; de Haan and Knopper, 2021), race and racism (Hill, 2001; Burdsey, 2006; Long and Hylton, 2002) and social class. Indeed, class inequalities are arguably better covered in sports literature that in other work on cultural labour, particularly in sports history for the reasons discussed above (Jones, 1998; Imlach, 2005).

Considering inequality in sports therefore would be a major element of any study of sport labour, and one question would be whether inequalities manifest in the same way or in different ways as in other cultural sectors? We might expect that different sports have different class profiles for example – football being somewhat different from polo. But while we know what class inequalities have worsened over time in the arts and other cultural sectors (Brook et al., 2022), is this also true of sport? In what ways is this linked to consumption, if at all? What about gender, race and other forms of inequality? What are the factors behind this and what counts as cultural capital in sport? What, if anything, does sport do better than other cultural sectors in terms of equality? And – indeed – is the discourse of equality even meaningful in a cultural industry where competition is such a core feature?

One final area of cultural labour literature that has grown of late is that on worker organisation and other collective response to precarity, including trade unionism, co-operatives, the anti-precarity movement and other social movements (Cohen and de Peuter, 2018, 2022; de Peuter et al., 2022). As I have suggested above, sports literature, particularly sport history is generally richer in such accounts and one promising avenue for research might be a comparative piece that looked at labour organization or labour disputes in both sports and other cultural industries.

## CONCLUSIONS AND POSSIBLE RESEARCH AGENDA

This paper has argued that in the (growing) study of sports, labour is relatively neglected and that much can be learned from looking at the growth of cultural labour studies. That literature has argued that we should take cultural labour seriously, because these industries are significant in size, heavily promoted in public policy and, in producing cultural products, help shape our understanding of ourselves and society. I argue that research on sports labour could benefit from a cultural labour lens, and that this would in turn refresh cultural labour studies. There are a variety of ways in which this could be done, and I think a significant research agenda could be developed, of which what follows are simply some suggestions.

Both sport and cultural labour have often been seen as good and desirable work, if they were seen as work at all and not purely as 'vocation.' This has to some degree isolated them from critique (Roderick et al., 2017) particularly where ideological notions such as courage or fairness in sports, or self-expression and autonomy in the arts have been mobilised. Decades of critical work on cultural labour has disturbed this to some degree; scandals in sport ranging from doping to sexual abuse have perhaps had stronger public effects. Taking a cue from Hesmondhalgh and Baker's work on the media industries (2011), one approach would be to look at what constitutes 'good work' in sport from point of view of athletes. Hesmondhalgh and Baker looked at issues such as autonomy, self-expression, work-life balance and sociality as well as material issues such as pay, career management

 

and security. Would these be appropriate issues to consider? What would autonomy or a notion like self-expression mean? What other conditions might create good work for athletes?

Inequality in both sport and other cultural industries has been a major focus for research in recent years, but there is still a relative paucity that looks at this from a labour perspective. If we take just one example – say women in sport – there is research that looks at media coverage of women's sport (Cooky et al., 2021), sponsorship of women's sport (Fink, 2015), or fan attitudes to women's sport, and while I would not want to suggest that there is no research on pay and conditions, I argue that there is a need for more work on how theses inequalities manifest as a labour issue? What are the structuring factors – both material and attitudinal? Race, gender and disability are the main focus of research into inequality – but what of other factors such as class or sexuality? How is inequality narrated by athletes and what are the concerns that they have about it? Do they differ from those expressed in work on cultural labour?

Finally, as mentioned above, I think there is scope for comparative work on labour organisation in sport and in the other cultural industries. The history and role of trade unions and other professional organisations across both sport and other cultural sectors, as well as contemporary labour organisation and labour disputes, would I think be fruitful to examine. The amount of freelance labour in the cultural industries is often cited as reason for poor pay and conditions, and levels of unionisation are highly variable. How does this compare with professional sports, where professional association often play a strong role in representing 'freelance' labour? How are core labour issues such as unpaid work treated across sectors, and how do these issues affect labour market participation and hence representation?

It is traditional to end these articles with 'more research needed' and I am indeed arguing that more research is needed. The cultural importance of sport cannot be in doubt and the growth of research into all aspects of sport is of course to be welcomed, but greater attention needs to be paid to the makers, producers and workers of the sports world.

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