

*The End of College Football: On the Human Cost of an All-American Game* by Nathan Kalman-Lamb and Derek Silva, Carolina/USA: The University of North Carolina Press, 2024, 264pp, \$24.95 (paper) ISBN:9781469683461.

“We are unequivocal in our position that college football, like tackle football more generally, should be abolished. The sport is morally unsustainable given an accounting of both its exploitation and its harm” – Nathan Kalman-Lamb and Derek Silva

What a breath of much needed fresh air is *The End of College Football* to the sociology of sport. In this recent book, Nathan Kalman-Lamb and Derek Silva provide a detailed empirical account and moral critique of American Football within the US higher education system. The book cuts through the myths that surround the dominant evangelistic and functionalist understandings of performance-sport, indeed including within much uncritical social science scholarship, to expose some of the many ugly faces of ‘sport’ as it is popularly imagined, structured and practiced in modern capitalist societies across the West.

Comprising of six main chapters, the book brings to light the foundations of exploitation and harm upon which big-time college football is built and sustained. The authors draw on the structural components of racial capitalism in the US to foreshadow the wider system in which college football is embedded. The conceptualisation of racial capitalism broadly follows Cedric Robinson in it being a process whereby white authorities extract economic value from Black and Brown folks by structuring the labour market they participate within.

From this macro context, Kalman-Lamb and Silva provide an eloquent and detailed exploration of the everyday experiences of “campus athletic workers” within an unjust system built to systematically extract wealth through means that inherently entail significant bodily harm and exploitation. The problems explored, they argue, cannot be detached from racial capitalism that is characterized by economic exploitation, harm, abuse, educational inequality, gender inequity, and legacies of plantation dynamics. That is to say, the exploitative dynamics of college football reflect and accentuate the exploitative dynamics of US society writ large.

The empirical foundations of the book primarily come from in-depth interviews with 25 former NCAA big-time college football ‘players’. Accompanying this is both authors decade-long experience of working within higher education institutions and alongside various persons related to college football. The preface gives the reader a feel for the authors, and how their experiences have shaped and motivated this project. The result is a comprehensive, and at many times deeply upsetting, insight into the empirical realities of the human cost of an all-American game. It will rightfully make you angry.

Central tenets of the authors compelling critique of college football are first that it is distinctly *not* extracurricular play. Rather, it is uncompensated work; exploitative labour from which

little remuneration flows back to the athletes. Next, the 'compensation' that is proffered, being the student-athletes education, is challenged because of the structural conditions which fail to create effective learning environments. That is, college football 'players' must simultaneously study for a degree whilst also enduring the exceptional strain of their unpaid athletic labour. The authors then call for a "paradigm shift" in understanding exploitation in college football by outlining the logical consequences of (brain) injuries in a sport which compels bodies to collide within the rules of 'play' and sustains a (sub)culture which normalises risk, pain and injury. Subsequently, the distribution of broken bodies is then outlined with a racial analysis that shows Black bodies bare the biggest brunt of exploitation and harm in college football. And finally, the authors argument is shored up by tackling, and doing away with, the notion that student-athletes 'sign up for it' by a critical examination of coercion and consent.

Ultimately this all leads to the conclusion that college football should, indeed must, be abolished. It is here that I feel one of the most significant contributions of this work comes forth, beyond its thematic focus on college football within the US. Kalman-Lamb and Silva clearly, and unapologetically, say what must be said. If we – as scholars or otherwise concerned citizens – wish to deal with foundational harms embedded within a given institution, performance-sport in this case, then we should intervene at the foundational level. Such is a 'radical' approach as in being concerned with the 'root' or 'origin' of something.

In cases whereby a given object of study (i.e. college football) cannot exist in its current form without harm and exploitation then anything other than a radical approach will not suffice. Reform is not good enough. In fact, and as argued in the book, reformist positions only serve to justify and support the continuation of a damaging system. In their conclusions, the authors draw attention to the "academic fetish for [reformist] solutions", which they go on to question why "any treatise articulating a problem must also solve it". Sometimes it is entirely appropriate for critical scholars of sport only to point at and raise awareness of the inherent problems of performance-sport in Western capitalist societies. As to engage in reformist solutions, operating within the systems which produced the problems, would be to make one complicit in the continuation of harm. Put differently, it's akin to rearranging deck chairs on the titanic as it sinks.

So, the genuinely critical and radical sociology that oozes throughout *The End of College Football* is desperately needed to shake up the status-quo of performance focused capitalist sport, and all the grotesqueness that comes with it. This also speaks directly to our sub-discipline that appears to have gotten too comfortable with such status-quo. The sociology of sport was once a bedrock for genuinely radical interventions, but the critical flair has somewhat dampened over recent decades while the problems inherent to performance-sport have grown in type and degree. Kalman-Lamb and Silva's vital contribution is promising evidence that the radical spirit lives on in sport scholarship.

Moreover, this book's contribution goes beyond disciplinary boundaries and thematic topics of study. It serves as a timely reminder to all social sciences that much of the problems facing Western capitalist societies – namely the existential threat of climate change and the deepening material and social inequalities that flow from the exploitative logics of neoliberalism – are beyond reform. We must imagine alternative futures outside the logics of current social and economic systems which necessitates radical thought and abolitionism, with journals such as *Critical Sociology* being vital in housing such scholarship.

In summary then, *The End of College Football* makes several contributions and is a must read for anyone connected to sport as well as critical scholars more broadly. The authors are to be praised for not only delivering this excellent book, but their associated activist and public sociology efforts in fighting for a reality congruent assessment of 'sport' and for a better future in which harm and exploitation do not haunt what ought to be playful forms of human expression.

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