

Sport and cis-realism: Ideological fantasies of men and women fighting in the Olympics

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Ian Parker on the eruption of ideological fantasies of men and women fighting in the Olympics

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“Sport, sport, masculine sport, Equips a young man for Society, Yes, sport turns out a jolly good sort, It’s an Odd Boy who doesn’t like sport,” are [Bonzo Dog](#) lines I could have chanted to myself as I ran away from the ball on dreaded Wednesday afternoon school sports classes. I was made to have a go at boxing but took the gloves off after some little brute bashed me in the face, and I vowed never to do that again.

The nature of sport under capitalism was captured well in the subtitle of an old French comrade’s book, “[Sport, a prison of measured time](#).” Jean-Marie Brohm not only showed us how competitive sport condenses all the worst of a society that divides us from each other while serving it back to us as entertainment, but he also tracked the ever-widening gulf between those who are raised up as sports celebrity professionals and those reduced to the level of occasionally elated spectators, small compensation for immiserated lives. There are chapters in his 1970s book on “The Olympic Games and the Imperial Accumulation of Capital” and a “Draft Appeal for the Setting up an Anti-Olympic Committee.”

Segregation

The segregation of players from audience is a segregation that is more obviously mapped onto class in some sports like tennis, and onto “race” in others; for example, in boxing. Some lucky enough to be able to fork out the fees for membership of a golf club – an environment that encloses green space that sucks up water – might claim that all they experience is gentle rivalry and some banter around the course. Yes, it is possible that a little kick-about in a game of footie can be comradely fun, but the “beautiful game,” turned ugly years ago, not only as part of the spectacle but physically herding us into the pens, different pens.

A worse case is boxing, a particularly stupid and stupefying “sport” that invites one person to knock another senseless in an enclosed space. Here segregation around the ideological but efficiently policed notion of “race” operates to identify and enclose certain categories of people, which historically have included Black and Jewish communities proudly claiming their identities in this arena of inward-directed struggle. This then gives rise, on the one hand, to, sometimes progressive

assertion of energy and talent in combat, and on the other, and in wider context, these communities being all-the-more rendered into kinds of animals fighting under the gaze of a more civilised white folk audience baying for blood.

This is a place in which it does seem as if supposedly pure animal-like existence is the only escape from the human world, and as if, paradoxically, some are only human when in the boxing ring. Brute biological images staged for the audience then replace and blot out our creative capacity to act together. As Marx had it: "[What is animal becomes human and what is human becomes animal](#)." Our relationship with nature, including our own human nature, is then viewed in terms of separation, as alienated. Sport under capitalism requires, enacts and reinforces segregation.

Realism

This is all made to seem normal and, in a deeper even more pernicious ideological trope, "natural." This chicken comes home to roost in the claim that sport as such is a necessary civilized way of channelling natural inborn aggressive energies into harmless contained combat. It then appears in the recent claims in the tabloid press – the very tabloid press that has poured out a stream of anti-immigrant headlines – about fascist mob attacks on asylum-seekers, that the events have nothing to do with politics, but are, as with football hooliganism, testosterone-fuelled mindless rage, masculinity out of control. At play here is the assumption that there is an underlying real biological infrastructure which can be detected and described and must then be appreciated, worked with.

This ideological assumption is at the heart of attempts either to warrant the existing social order – what Mark Fisher called "[capitalist realism](#)," in which, in the oft-repeated words of Margaret Thatcher, "there is no alternative" to the way things are now, to the way we are – or to close down alternatives around a no-less toxic version of this way of thinking in sections of the left which can be characterised as "[stalinist realism](#)."

These twin responses, responses to the contradictions of capitalism that are more concerned with telling us what cannot be changed about human nature than with enabling us to do something different, are accompanied in the realm of sport, [among other places](#), by "cis-realism." The term "cis," which refers to what is on this side, the one side, is a way of naming those who believe their gender and biological sex are on one and the same side.

As a placard displayed during the recent Manchester Trans Pride procession directed at those who privilege this way of being human put it, "Cis isn't a slur ... but the way you wear it is offensive." So, it stands in contradistinction to that which runs across, "trans." What is at issue here is the way that one way of describing reality that sorts humankind into two strictly defined categories that are claimed to be biological absolutes is an ideological form of realism, cis-realism.



Cis critique placard at Manchester Trans Pride

Cis-realism

Cis-realism is the not so hidden underbelly of sport, an ideological appeal to motifs of biological difference that drums home a powerful heterosexist message that also intersects with racism. We

saw the way this operates to police existing categories of gender in the shameful treatment of the Algerian Olympic welterweight boxer Imane Khelif. Khelif, born a woman, who was accused by those obsessed with a cis-realist understanding of the world of really being a man.

Into these egregious attacks was woven, not surprisingly, a quasi-biological imagery of “race.” The unwarranted speculation, in this case not backed up with any medical evidence, focused first on testosterone, as if that is a hormonal marker of masculinity, and then chromosomes (in the unsubstantiated claim that she may have had the tell-tale “male” “Y” chromosome marker instead of supposed female requisite “XX”).

There were shades here of the demonisation of South African middle-distance runner [Caster Semenya](#) a decade and a half back. She had been assigned female at birth but then outed as “intersex,” a label that Semenya herself refused, preferring to identify as a woman. Humiliating “sex-testing,” and then the publicising and commentary on what she “really” was made her into one of the quintessential objects of the seemingly unavoidable regime of cis-realism in sport.

In the case of Imane Khelif, not only was Khelif’s biological sex and gender thrown into question, but her apparent leap across the taken-for-granted categories was [made visible precisely by her being Black](#), too Black. In terms of the meanings assigned to her, it was as if her very animality was all the more evidence that her “real” biology disclosed who she (or “he” according to the likes of J K Rowling) really was. Chromosome imagery, one of the staples of a [transphobe obsession with biology](#) that runs alongside genital correctness and hormonal level norms, then came into play after Taiwanese boxer Lin Yu-ting was accused, in a grotesque semiotic display of cis-realism, of really being a man; her opponent’s coach stood in the ring at the end of the fight with her fingers crossed, a gesture of abuse signifying the supposedly real femininity of XX.

In each of these cases, no claim was being made by these athletes for “trans” as a lived identity or mode of being that should be respected. Nevertheless, the wielding of “cis” as a normative understanding of gender and sex was used to pathologise these women who were, in the eyes of the cis-realists, not really who they claimed to be. The repetitive mis-gendering of these women cannot be addressed and solved simply by insisting that they “really” are women, for that would precisely be to fall into the cis-realist trap, a trap that then gives licence to those who want to turn on their actual hate-targets, trans people.

Categorisation

This is all, of course, par for the course in sport, for beneath the different weight categories – “welterweight” in the case of boxing, for example – lies the apparent bedrock of biological sex. The cis-realist fantasy is that this will all be sorted out by determining exactly who is a man and who is a woman, a procedure that is patently doomed from the start, and, because it is doomed, those who seem to depart from the assigned categories are themselves doomed to both sexist and racist hate-propaganda.

The presence of testosterone, for instance, is not a knockdown defining characteristic of men, but exists at different levels in different men and at different levels in different women. Those levels in the different sexes overlap, which makes “sex-testing” extremely problematic. Even assignation of sex based on the early examination of genitals is fraught with uncertainty, with some researchers suggesting that some version of “intersex” is the case for more than one in a hundred people; they are then those who will usually have to live uneasily, precariously, with the identity of cis-male or cis-female (that is, unless they claim to live across those categories as trans, in which case they face further abuse and sanctions).

Cis-realism is actually where sport under capitalism, at least, unravels itself. This kind of sport typically sorts people into other kinds of sub-divisions where they can run or fight against each other. But why these categories and not others?

Play the game

Some unrealistic suggestions: Why not class, which you might think would be a favourite go-to by some of the transphobe red-wall class essentialists, or length of training (which itself is often a function of class privilege), or a simple personality test to decide who has the will-power (or stubbornness) to fight on and who might decide to call it a day and do something more productive with their lives?

When it comes down to it, if it really is the case that winning and losing is not as important as how you play the game, you could immediately disqualify anyone who is fitter or faster than the others, for clearly they have an unfair advantage at the outset. Despite the attempts of women to break into professional sport, it is an arena of combat that is intrinsically stereotypically masculine; all of the aggressive hierarchical stuff of masculinity under capitalism is condensed and displayed in sport, sport as we know it. Commercialised and professionalised sport has become one of the places where capitalism and heteropatriarchy intersect and reinforce each other.

If you follow the logic of cis-realism you must enforce gender categories based on biological sex and thereby also endorse a survival of the fittest image of humanity that corresponds to capital logic. What we are faced with here is not an immutable biological infrastructure, but an ideological infrastructure laced into capitalism, a cis-realist transphobe one. The alternative is to go “trans,” acknowledge life across assigned categories and open the way to a more fruitful and enjoyable way of living together.

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P.S.

- Anti*Capitalist Resistance. 09 Aug 2024:
<https://anticapitalistresistance.org/sport-and-cis-realism/>

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