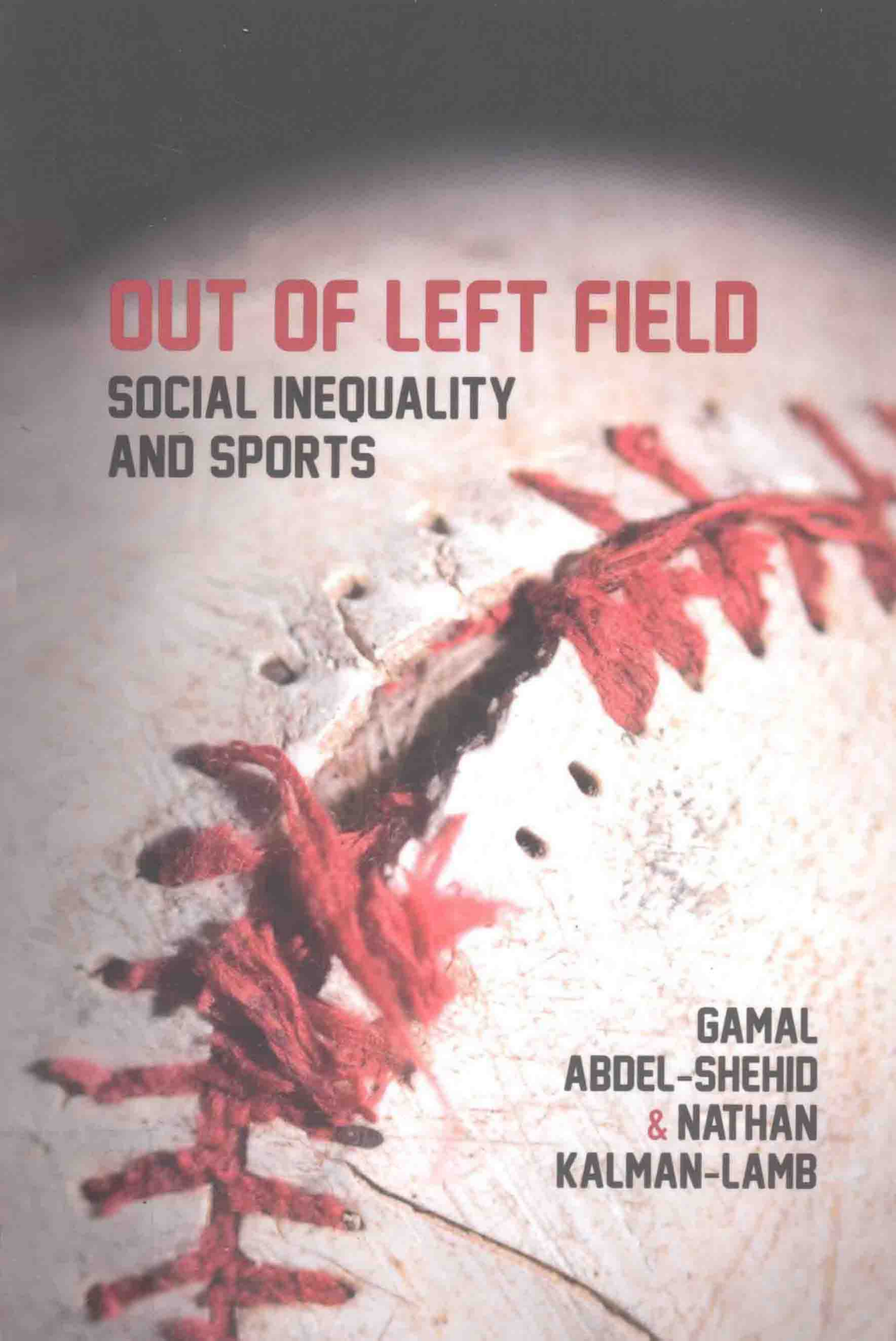
OUT OF LEFT FIELD

SOCIAL INEQUALITY AND SPORTS



GAMAL ABDEL-SHEHID & NATHAN KALMAN-LAMB

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—Gamal Abdel-Shehid

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—Nathan Kalman-Lamb

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1. OUT OF LEFT FIELD

On May 5, 2010, the Phoenix Suns hosted a second round National Basketball Association playoff game against the San Antonio Spurs. After falling behind early, the Suns battled back behind the impressive play of substitutes Jared Dudley and Channing Frye, as well as a typical dominant performance from Amare Stoudemire, and won the game 110–102 to take a two game lead in their series with the Spurs. On any other night, this comeback would have been the defining story of the game. This night was different, however. Before the game, Phoenix Suns owner Robert Sarver chose to have his team wear the jerseys they typically wore only on the NBA's Noches Latinas night, a night intended to honour the league's Latino fans. The jerseys were emblazoned with the phrase "Los Suns." The Suns wore them in order to protest a piece of immigration legislation that had been passed in Arizona in late April 2010. Directed at "illegal" immigrants who enter Arizona from Mexico, the law forces police to determine the citizenship status of anyone arrested for any reason, as well as anyone suspected of being in the United States illegally. It also makes it a crime for "illegal" immigrants to work in the state of Arizona. For Sarver and his team, "Los Suns" was more than a nickname; it was an act of protest against a law that unjustly restricted the rights of Latinos. It was a political statement. Sarver's act was important because it flew in the face of an unwritten rule governing sport in North America. According to that rule, politics and sports should never mix.

In the text that follows, we will proceed in the spirit of "Los Suns." Like Sarver and his team, we believe that sport can and must be transformed into a site for social and political struggles for justice. Suns star Steve Nash said of the team's decision to protest the law, "Obviously the passing of the recent bill and what that means to our state… we have a problem with that." Like Nash, we have a problem with the many injustices that exist both inside and outside of sport.

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Sport is many things to many people. For participants, it provides camaraderie and physical exercise. For spectators, it offers exciting entertainment and distraction from the rigours of everyday life. Most of us are interested in sport because it is a significant source of meaning and pleasure in our lives.

When people play games, watch sports on television, read sports media, or attend university classes on sport, they do so because they *enjoy* it. There is, of course, nothing wrong with extracting pleasure from sport, but we argue that enjoyment is not the only reason to pay attention to it. Precisely because sport is so appealing in so many ways it is often difficult to see that it has its problems as well as benefits. Sport, like nearly any other social or cultural formation, is a site of inequality.

What does it mean to say that sport is a site of inequality? To answer this question, it is vital to understand the nature of inequality more generally. Sport, after all, exists within a broader social context and is not immune to that context. We argue that many forms of inequality — race, gender, class, sexuality, and disability — continue to exist in Western societies such as Canada. When we say inequality, what we really mean is that some people in Canadian society enjoy privileges at the expense of others who are marginalized and upon whose marginalization those privileges rely. This is a very significant statement, for it means that no one is immune from issues of equality. Those of us who are not confronted with inequality and oppression on a daily basis are nevertheless complicit in that oppression because it is the marginalization of others that provides us with many of the advantages we enjoy. This point will perhaps become clearer through the use of some examples. If we were to discuss gender as an issue of inequality — which we will at length in part two of this book — we would be talking about the ways in which men and women are privileged and oppressed in Canadian society. Now, from the perspective of a man, it might appear that gender inequality is no longer an issue in Canadian society. That man might suggest that he sees women as equals and never notices women experiencing prejudice. Yet that man might also enjoy coming home to a dinner that his wife has prepared, a home she has cleaned, and children she has cared for. He might also enjoy the fact that when he applies for a promotion to a job as an investment banker, he is more likely than his female colleagues to be considered for the job. He might also occasionally enjoy taking a long look up and down the body of a woman walking towards him on the street, appreciating her figure. In each of these cases, the privileges he enjoys and appreciates — experienced on a daily basis — come at the expense of women. He cannot come home to domestic harmony if his wife does not arrange it (although she may well have work of her own to attend to). He cannot move up the ranks of his company with the ease he does if his female co-workers do not experience a glass ceiling that prevents them from competing with him for those jobs. And he cannot take pleasure in looking at the bodies of women without transforming those women into the sexual objects of his gaze. Whether we are speaking of gender, race, class, sexuality, or any other form of oppression, the privileges of a dominant group are always made possible at the expense

of a subordinated group. Moreover, these forms of privilege and oppression do not exist in isolation from one another. Although the man in the example above may typically experience privilege at the expense of women, if he is a person of colour he may also find that he experiences racial prejudice on a daily basis. The experiences of his wife may be similarly complex; even though she may be marginalized as a woman and person of colour, she is likely to enjoy privilege because of her sexuality and her relative wealth as a member of the upper middle class. Inequality, then, is a highly complex experience (and concept). It is something that is at once invisible to some and unmistakeable to others. It can implicate the same person in completely different ways depending on the form of inequality in question. Whether we want to admit it or not, inequality surrounds us all the time.

Thus, we argue that inequality, including inequality in the realm of sport, must be understood in relation to the histories of colonialism and capitalism that have come to shape the world as it exists today. The history of colonialism is largely the history of European domination of the world. Beginning in the fifteenth century, Europeans sailed from their home continent in search of new lands to populate and new resources to acquire. The realization that indigenous people were living in Asia, the Americas, and Africa did little to quell European enthusiasm for expansion. The colonizers did whatever was necessary to acquire the land and resources they sought, including killing and enslaving indigenous populations. Labour and resources acquired by European colonizers were vital to the growth of industrial capitalism back home; wealth and resources taken from the colonies financed large-scale factories and the development of technology, which in turn generated more wealth. However, capitalism does not generate wealth for everyone. The increasing prosperity of capitalists requires the efforts of workers who labour in their factories. These workers do not see a fair share of the profits created by capitalism. Instead, they receive little more than they require to survive. Thus, capitalist production relations have been responsible for the tremendous growth of wealth for a small proportion of the world's population at the expense of a much larger proportion.

Alongside the growth of capitalism, a crucial ingredient of colonialism was the development of racial prejudice. Colonizing countries justified the fact that they were taking land, resources, and labour from indigenous people by claiming that indigenous people were different from Europeans and inferior. Moreover, pseudo-scientific ideas were used to "prove" the existence of these racial differences. These ideas still influence popular understandings of race. Indeed, the very histories of colonial inequality are alive today: people born into families that profited from capitalist and colonial accumulation — many of them white — have greater access to education, employment, and connections to those with power than those born into families exploited by

capitalism and colonialism (people of colour, but also many poorer whites). The inequalities initiated at the birth of colonialism and capitalism continue to be reproduced.

This is why we argue that sport is not an exception. Just as the complex matrices of inequality pervade our day-to-day lives, so too do they seep into the world of sport. In fact, we can go so far as to say that sport both produces and reproduces inequality. That is, sport is the primary site for the production of some forms of social inequality, while for others it is simply another place in which these forms of inequality play out.

We begin explaining how sport serves to produce inequalities by turning to an example. Sporting cultures are notoriously homophobic. In locker rooms and on playing fields, homophobic slurs are perhaps the most common form of insult used to denigrate and motivate athletes. Significantly, no male athlete in any of the major professional sports in North America has ever come out during his playing career. In the context of sport, young men learn that masculinity means being hard, unemotional, and tough; and, most of all, it means being heterosexual. Although sport is far from the only homophobic social site, it is among the most influential. This means that as young athletes go about their lives, the lessons they learn in sport about sexuality become more broadly disseminated throughout society. This is how sport can produce inequality.

On the other hand, sometimes sport is an arena where inequality is reproduced. That is, sport sometimes serves to replicate forms of inequality already prevalent in society at large. For instance, the objectification of the bodies of women is common practice in North America, often in the service of selling products. Women are taught that they must look a certain way in order to be seen as sexually attractive and, as a consequence, valuable. Men, on the other hand, are taught that they can use other qualities, such as their ability to think, to achieve success and acceptance. This more general form of inequality is reproduced in the world of sport on a nightly basis. Men are generally allowed to play the starring role in professional sports as athletes who earn adulation and, often, considerable remuneration. Women, on the other hand, are consigned to the role of cheerleaders or dancers, whose role is to entice male fans with their sexuality. Thus, to enter the professional sporting arena, women most often must objectify themselves for the male gaze. This pervasive form of social inequality is reproduced, in this way, through sport.

Having said all this, for many of us who have been raised to find meaning and pleasure in sport it is extremely difficult to accept that sport is a site of inequality. After all, we are told over and over again that sport is a meritocracy — a place where people succeed or fail based on skill and effort alone. Sport, we are assured, is a site of fundamental equality, where

all have a chance to prove themselves regardless of class or race or sexuality (although notice that it is difficult to include gender in this statement). Indeed, we are told that sport has played a crucial role in the struggle *against* inequality. After all, didn't Jackie Robinson pave the road to racial equality in the United States? Likewise, we are conditioned to think of sport as a healthful activity. Through sport, we can develop fitness and purge ourselves of the stresses and violent impulses generated by our increasingly busy and chaotic lives. Finally, it is frequently suggested that sports spectatorship plays a pivotal role in producing community in our increasingly isolated societies. Cheering for a sports team brings people together in a common cause. For instance, the primary narrative constructed around the recent New Orleans Saints run to the Super Bowl was about the team's ability to bring the city together after the horrors of Hurricane Katrina. Thus, for all these reasons and more, in our day-to-day lives we are taught to find meaning and value in sport. These lessons make it extremely uncomfortable to begin thinking about sport in a less favourable light. If we start to question some of the assumptions listed above, will it not be more difficult to relax and unwind in front of a Raptors game after a long day at work? This may indeed be the case, but we contend that it is essential to ask difficult questions about sport. Sport privileges some ways of acting and being at the expense of others. While it may be easier to ignore the inequalities that exist, it is also unethical to do so. The point of this text is not to indict and dismiss sport altogether, however. On the contrary, we hope that by opening our eyes to the power relations enacted through sport, we can start to transform sport into a site of pleasure for *all* participants.

High performance sport — elite, often professional sport — is certainly not the only form of sport. However, we have chosen to focus our analysis on high performance sport because of its tremendous influence. Although few of us have played or will play sports at a high performance level, high performance sport defines the way that games are played. In a sense, it provides a model that all other levels of sport attempt to emulate, from the way that coaches coach to the way that players play. These tendencies are broadcast through the vast media coverage that attends to sport. From television to magazines to films and the internet, sports media seem to proliferate ever more widely every day. This explosion of information about high performance sport is important because it is responsible for representing the nature of sport to participants and spectators alike. Sports media teach us lessons about how we should play and why. In order to get to the heart of the inequalities that exist in the world of sport, it is essential that we are attentive to the lessons taught by high performance sport.

SPORT AND CRITICAL SOCIAL THEORY

To assist us in this critical, socio-cultural survey of the world of sports, we draw on a number of theories or perspectives that we hope will act as markers to help guide the way. Every theory has its own application, a frame of reference or vantage point, from which it sees the world. These theories are like tools placed in a toolbox. A plumber will have need of a pipe wrench, while a baker will need a rolling pin. In the same way, some of the tools used by a liberal feminist to understand society will differ from those used by a Marxist. Another word for these tools is "concepts." They help explain a particular theory in greater detail.

People will always have differences of opinion about what tools they need in their toolboxes, but such differences should not be seen as obstacles. Often — for example, when one person explains a problem with a concept such as "patriarchy" and another explains it with "alienation of labour" — differences make for fruitful debate. One of the fascinating and crucial things about studying any topic is that it cannot be pinned down and defined once and for all. This is certainly true of the socio-cultural study of sport. As society changes, so too does the world of sport. Sometimes this is for the better, sometimes for the worse. Differences of opinion hinge on differing understandings of history or differing personal experiences, and the authors and schools of thought you will encounter in these pages bring forward different sets of experience and evidence.

In addition, the beauty of theories is that they are often capable of explaining more than just a particular and narrow phenomenon. You might find that many of the theories presented in this book help you think differently about your own lives outside the world of sport. You might read about how heterosexism operates in sport and conclude that it operates similarly in your workplace or family. And you might notice that the way in which high-performance athletes are treated is similar to how most other workers are treated in our society. These links between life inside and outside sport go back to the importance of studying sport: we approach society through sport because we are convinced that the latter is a reflection of our lives and our society rather than something separate from them. Sport and society are interconnected.

By and large, the theories about the role of sport in society presented here are critical theories, which means that they begin with a basic assumption: the world we live in is fundamentally unequal. We have entitled our book *Out of Left Field: Social Inequality and Sports* very deliberately. Critical approaches to society that understand it to be profoundly unequal and unjust have often been called "left wing" perspectives. These perspectives are far from the most common or popular approach to understanding society or sport, in part because they are threatening to those with power. Nevertheless,

we feel that such an approach is essential because inequality is not accidental: there are structural, historical, and systemic reasons for it. At the heart of much critical theory is the search for justice, the search to somehow make the world a better place for everyone who lives in it. We take the position that there are several forms of social inequality in today's world. These include economic inequality, represented by the huge and constantly growing gap between rich and poor, as well as other forms of inequality, such as racism, homophobia, and sexism, which are based on identity but are also related to economic inequality, as we will see.

Above all this book is meant as an introduction to critical social theory with respect to the world of high-performance sport.[1] As such it has two aims: to convince readers of the benefits of a socio-cultural or sociological approach to sport; and to underline the importance of critical social theory within that approach. To move towards these goals, in Part I we explore the work of thinkers who have each independently asked the question "What is the nature of sport?" For Michael Robidoux and Debra Shogan (Chapter 2), sport is a place of exploitation, though for Robidoux the basis of that exploitation is economic, and for Shogan it is about social codes. Another thinker, Harry Edwards (Chapter 3), demonstrates how high-performance sport has exacerbated existing racial inequalities. Another, C.L.R. James (Chapter 4), argues that despite the social inequalities that surround us, high-performance sport is by its nature something of an art form, which explains its lasting appeal. Eduardo Galeano (Chapter 5) suggests (in similar fashion to James) that sport is indeed a refuge from social inequalities, even though this refuge has been somewhat changed by corporate ownership, whereby large corporations have essentially taken much of the pleasure out of sport. The second part of the book focuses more on how identity works in sport. Specifically, we explore the impact of economic and racial inequality on sport and how this has shaped ideas about our identity, or sense of self. A large part of this discussion necessarily involves looking at the role and experience of women's sport, using as tools some of the most recent innovations in feminist theory, such as transnational and de-homogenizing feminism. Historical evidence indicates that the origin of women's sport in the United States was connected to contemporary changes in economic structures, and that the very definition of "women's sport" was influenced greatly by the context of the racial inequality of the day (Chapter 6). A look at women's sport today indicates how global inequalities have an impact on the increasingly popular sport of women's soccer (Chapter 7). A key to this discussion is the element of masculinity — or what it means to be a man (Chapter 8). We find that over the last hundred years masculinity has not changed very much: it continues to be influenced both by economics and racial inequality. In the end, both men's sport and women's sport reproduce existing norms

of sexual orientation, although serious efforts are being made to change this reality (Chapter 9).

The final part of the book explores a pivotal question for the study of sport and society: to what extent does sport, as a cultural form, shape our ideas about the world as a whole? This discussion takes us through some ideas from the field of cultural studies. The goal of cultural studies is to examine how popular culture, or entertainment, is shaped by the material — or economic — forces in a given society. Specifically, cultural studies theorists argue that in an unequal society such as ours, culture belongs to a realm of ideas, or ideologies, that justify the unequal distribution of power, whether economic or any other form of power. Further, they argue that by intervening in the production of ideas about society, it is possible to transform unequal and unjust relations of power.

In taking up this discussion we examine how certain theorists have understood culture and how their observations can be applied to sport as a particular site of culture and ideology. Many of these scholars have been influenced by Karl Marx's concept of ideology. Marx conceived of society through the metaphor of a building with a base and a superstructure. For Marx, the base of the building consists of the economic relations in a given society. Marx chooses the term "base" to describe the economic relations of a society very deliberately, because the base is the foundation of all other relations in society. Thus the power dynamic between and among classes is the most important relationship in society. Because the economic relationship among classes is foundational, other facets of society such as culture and social and political relations relate back to this base relationship and *emerge* from the base. These other facets of society are its superstructure, or ideology.

Borrowing from Marx, French philosopher Guy Debord argued in the 1960s that popular culture is a form of distraction meant to entice us to consume goods and services rather than contest the economic relations responsible for the production of those goods and services (Chapter 10). French theorist Roland Barthes and English cultural theorist Stuart Hall add to the discussion in their explanations of how we can decode the ideological messages embedded in popular culture (Chapter 11). These ideas are then elaborated through reference to the work of American cultural theorist bell hooks, who demonstrates ways in which popular ideological representations of exploitative economic relations are also related to equally problematic ideological assumptions about race and gender (Chapter 12). Finally, we will turn our attention to examining the persistent and disquieting relationship between sport and nationalism (Chapter 13).

In the end, we argue that high-performance sport is not what it may seem at first glance — that is, not merely a game played, usually for high stakes, between individuals and teams with little or no relation to larger so-

cial processes. High-performance sport, like all forms of culture, is in many ways a product of its environment. At the same time, it also acts upon that environment, informing broader social patterns. It is both exploitation and pleasure, spectacle and distraction. It is a site of oppression and, at times, of resistance. And, in a capitalist society, no matter how passionately we come to "inhabit" it in our own lives, sport as spectacle primarily serves to further the interests of capital.

NOTE

1. Other books provide a general introduction to sport from a socio-cultural perspective or to the sociology of sport. For example, *Canadian Sports Sociology*, edited by Jane Crossman and *Sports in Society: Issues and Controversies*, by Jay Coakley and Peter Donnelly outline the various topics in the sociology of sport.

2. ALIENATION AND DISCIPLINE IN HIGH-PERFORMANCE SPORT

When the topic of sports and economics is considered, the first thing that comes to mind for many fans and non-fans alike is the issue of high salaries. It has become commonplace to say that athletes are outrageously overpaid. After all, Sidney Crosby will earn $43.5 million over the course of his current five-year contract with the Pittsburgh Penguins of the National Hockey League (NHL) (*cbcsports.ca* 2007); Jose Bautista of Major League Baseball's Toronto Blue Jays will earn $65 million during his current five-year deal (Zwolinski 2011); and LeBron James of the Miami Heat in the National Basketball Association (NBA) will make $96 million over five years (Winderman 2010). It is easy to assume that these athletes are earning far more than their fair share. Who needs $96 million? Yet although athletes such as James earn more than anyone needs to, it is worth noting that, according to the logic of capitalism, they may not earn as much as they deserve. James' salary for the 2009-2010 season was $15.8 million (Van Riper 2010). In that year, the value of the team for which he played, the Cleveland Cavaliers, was $476 million (*Forbes* 2009). The next year, after James signed with the Miami Heat, the Cavaliers were valued at only $355 million (*Forbes* 2011). It is impossible to draw a perfectly straight line between James' departure and the decrease in the franchise's value, but it is clear that his leaving played a substantial role. We can certainly infer that James' value to the Cavaliers was closer to $121 million (the decrease in the franchise's value after he left) than the $15.8 million he was paid. As hard as it may be to believe, James was underpaid; his labour was exploited by the corporation that is the team.

Considering this, why is it that so many people complain that athletes are overpaid? One reason, we contend, is that athletes make money with their bodies. Western societies tend to privilege the mind over the body. Men who earn fortunes through technological innovation, like Bill Gates and Steve Jobs, tend to be championed as entrepreneurial geniuses even as athletes are indicted for their "bloated" salaries. Jobs earns only a $1 salary, but he holds $1.8 billion worth of Apple stock; by comparison, James' earnings seem pitiful (Babad 2011). It is also noteworthy that James is only allowed to be a salaried employee of his team, while Jobs is a shareholder, and thus owner, of his company. Clearly, power differences are at play here

as well as earning discrepancies.

However, an even greater problem with the constant criticism of athletes' salaries is that the focus on the issue of over-payment deflects attention from the day-to-day struggles of the majority of working athletes who do not have the privilege of a million-dollar paycheque. Minor and independent league players in baseball and hockey in North America, for example, and college athletes in the United States, earn only a small fraction of what is earned by their professional peers, even though they generate revenue for teams. In fact, according to the official website of Minor League Baseball, first-year ball players can expect to make no more than $1,100 a month, which amounts to a potential maximum annual salary of $13,200, far below the poverty line (*Minor League Baseball* n.d.). Given that the minor leagues are staffed with far more players than the professional leagues — for instance, there are 228 official minor league baseball affiliates compared to the thirty major professional clubs, not including myriad independent leagues — the majority of those who play sport for a living in North America are significantly exploited (*Minor League Baseball* n.d).

In order to gain some insight into the nature of exploitation in high-performance sport, we begin with the work of Karl Marx, who wrote in the mid-1800s and had an incredible effect on the societies of his time. Most famous for two books — *Capital* and *The Communist Manifesto*, which was co-written with Friedrich Engels — Marx is well-known but often misunderstood. Unlike other philosophers, he believed that the job of philosophy was to change the world rather than passively analyze it. He spent his life's work trying to understand and agitate against the form of economic exploitation occurring in the world as a result of the Industrial Revolution of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

Although Marx did not directly discuss sport, his work continues to influence sport studies, as it does many other disciplines. Marxist perspectives on sport contend that sport is not at all a paradise where people work together in order to excel. Nor is sport something that allows those less fortunate an opportunity to rise up in society. Instead, the Marxist perspective suggests that sport is a reflection of the larger society — which is seen as fundamentally **exploitative** or unequal. The nature of this exploitation is not random; rather, it is based in the society's economic system. Before we explain the nature of the exploitation, let us recall how we define the term economy. **Economics** refers to the way in which goods and services are bought and sold in a given society and how the society organizes the production and distribution of these goods and services. Another phrase for economy, popularized by Marx and Engels, is **mode of production**.

Marx and his colleague Friedrich Engels argued that all societies over the course of human history have been defined by a struggle over various

scarce resources. They noted that the nineteenth-century mode of production known as **capitalism**, which had emerged roughly around the sixteenth century, featured a struggle between two primary classes of people in society: the **proletariat**, or those who had to work or sell their labour to someone else for a living; and the **bourgeoisie**, who owned businesses and factories and thus did not need to sell their labour to someone else. In general, those who owned businesses (called the **means of production**) were in a different class or position in society than those who did not. According to Marx and Engels, the relation was not an equal one. Members of the bourgeoisie did not need to sell their labour to someone else because they received profits from the labour of their workers. They also had the privilege of deciding how to use those profits. Marx and Engels noted that the distinctive feature of capitalism was that labour had become a **commodity**, something that could be bought and sold. They also noted that all other goods and services produced in capitalism were commodities.

A simple example will explain how labour becomes a commodity in capitalism. Let us imagine that as you and a friend are playing a game of tennis at a nearby school, someone watches your match, then notes how good the two of you are. This person — we'll call this person "the Promoter" — says that they can not only pay you for playing tennis but also provide you both with a new pair of shoes and racquet. You're a bit curious, so you ask how much you'll be paid. $50 per game, the Promoter tells you. Sounds fine, right? So the Promoter signs you to a contract, and you make plans to return to the school next week at 4 p.m. for a paid tennis match. In the meantime, the Promoter sells 75 tickets at $10 each, making the revenue for the match $750. They get the tennis shoes and racquets donated by a local clothing store, pay $20 to rent the school tennis court, and give each of you $50. So the total costs of the match are $120 plus $30 for an ad in the local paper. The difference between the costs and the revenues is known as the surplus or the **profit**, which is $750 minus $150, or $600.

This simple, hypothetical example shows how capitalism works in sport. Of course, high-performance sport works on a much larger scale, with player salaries reaching the millions and profits from owners reaching much more than that, but the principle remains the same. Keep in mind that, proportionally, very few players make millions in professional sports. The majority, as we will see below and from our example above, play for minor league teams and receive very little money. The players, if they do not have enough money or **capital** to organize the games themselves, are required to sell their labour to the owners if they want to play at the professional level. The owner, if successful, will make more money than the players. At first glance, this may seem like a fair arrangement, but if we continue, we can see where problems might arise. Let us return to our example of the tennis match. Supposing