“It’s about respect!” college-athlete activism and left neoliberalism

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ABSTRACT
This essay offers a critique of left neoliberalism with reference to certain tendencies in cultural studies, antiracist politics, disparity discourse, and college sports. Where the dominant tendency in cultural studies has been to produce complex analyses of identity-based oppression, this article insists on a conception of class politics that, on the one hand, calls for more attention to exploitation and, on the other, de-emphasizes the “working-class identity” model. By examining two recent episodes of athlete activism in college sports—namely, the much-admired “strike against racism” at the University of Missouri in 2015 and the widely condemned (and ultimately unsuccessful) effort by Northwestern University football players to form a union in 2014—the article contends that the commitment to eliminating racism and indifference to ending exploitation in these contexts reflects the broader commitments of a “left-wing” neoliberalism that devotes itself to ending inequality without redistributing wealth.

The title of this article is meant to articulate two paradigms of left-wing politics in American culture, and the argument, in short, is that these two paradigms, while seemingly at odds, are not incompatible with each other. On the one hand, “college-athlete activism” refers to the wave of student activism that spread across US campuses over the 2015–2016 academic year, and in particular, to focal points like the University of Missouri in Columbia, where student protests combined with college-athlete involvement to draw national attention to issues of racism and diversity, ultimately forcing the ouster of the University of Missouri system president, Tim Wolfe, and chancellor of the Columbia campus, R. Bowen Loftin. On the other hand, “left neoliberalism” refers to the idea, expressed by writers like Karen and Barbara Fields, Nancy Fraser, Walter Benn Michaels, Adolph Reed, and others, that the primary current of progressive politics in the United States is actually well-suited to the dictates neoliberal capitalism, and that, to put it in Reed’s terms, activism of the kind that regularly makes headlines on college campuses today largely (if inadvertently) internalizes the conditions of neoliberalism and adjusts its horizons accordingly. Those horizons, in particular, constitute a shift away from any kind of radical anticapitalist critique and toward the sweeping embrace of a politics of difference and identity, where struggles faced by people with certain identities are
privileged over—or become divorced from—politics that confront inequality as an economic problem demanding general programs of wealth redistribution. Here, advances in the realm of “recognition,” i.e. struggles over race, gender, sexuality, nationality, and religion, outstrip struggles for “redistribution,” which posit class as the chief medium of political mobilization and emphasize labor exploitation as a fundamental injustice.2

The triumph of left neoliberalism, then, is not to supplant the problem of redistribution with the problem of recognition but to confuse the two, advancing the idea that diversity is one and the same with equality, and by the same stroke, the problem of inequality is a problem of identity—of who we are rather than what we own.3 By this logic, neoliberalism posits a model of social justice where the ongoing problems of racism, sexism, and homophobia are addressed without challenging the inequalities necessitated by capitalism, which is to say, inequalities deriving from the basic economic relationship of class. Instead neoliberal politics responds to these inequalities by emphasizing diversity, inclusion, and other technologies of antidiscrimination, which, by contrast, are designed to facilitate equal opportunity within a capitalist society—what Preston H. Smith II elsewhere calls “racial democracy.”4

Accordingly, these technologies do nothing to combat class hierarchy and economic exploitation, and they make no contribution to a left-wing politics whose radical core is the demand for economic justice—or for that matter, a claim to a better society with less economic inequality, where the basic requirements for living (e.g. health care, housing, education) are not contingent upon one’s ability to pay but guaranteed as common goods. Where neoliberals may express outrage at these inequalities, such outrage typically takes the form of “disparity” discourse,5 in which the problems of redistribution (e.g. poverty, unemployment, skewed incomes) are not considered problems in and of themselves but rather problems that disproportionately affect marginalized groups. As follows, the problem of inequality becomes a problem of identity, or what is the same thing, a problem of “power differentials” within and between identity groups.6

Of course, scholars working within the field of critical/cultural studies have made no small contribution to this discourse, including, for example, “the assumption that contemporary politics is and should be organized around struggles over identity.”7 While this assumption advances a model of critique consistent with prevailing currents of feminist, antiracist, and LGBTQ discourse, it tends to absorb those critiques that foreground class structure as the basis for political conflict; such emphases, in fact, when proposed, are liable to be accused of “economic reductionism,” rhetorical obscurantism, “radical decontextualism,” and a lack of “nuance” when it comes to understanding how power works.8 My concern is that, as a result, class only gets taken seriously when it can be said to “intersect” with identity struggles.9

Given the amount of scholarly attention devoted to intersectionality, however, it is perhaps useful to consider the problem of inequality outside an identity framework, especially since, as Dieter Plehwe puts it, “neoliberals usually deny the existence of social inequality rooted in the capitalist class structure and instead prefer to speak of the diversity of individuals and possibly even groups.”10 Indeed one might say that neoliberals entirely prefer to think about inequality in terms of groups, including group identity. In the same vein, intersectional analyses tend to redescribe class structure as a form of disparity—or group discrimination—underscoring the fact that, for example, “some people are far more vulnerable to the changes in the global economy, where others benefit
disproportionately from them.” 

In this way, the problem of inequality is made to matter by virtue of its having a disproportionate effect on certain groups by dint of their “subject position.” As Patricia Hill Collins and Sirma Bilge argue in their book *Intersectionality*:

First, economic inequality does not fall equally on everyone. Rather than seeing people as a homogeneous, undifferentiated mass, intersectionality provides a framework for explaining how social divisions of race, gender, age, and citizenship status, among others, positions people differently in the world, especially in relation to global social inequality ... For example, labor market discrimination that pushes some people into part-time jobs with low pay, irregular hours, and no benefits, or that renders them structurally unemployed, does not fall equally across social groups.

Thus, an intersectional approach emphasizes the differential outcomes of capitalism—including labor market discrimination, but also unfair mortgage rates, inadequate health care, a lack of access to decent housing, and good schools—it does not, in the end, take aim at the fundamental contradiction that underwrites these disparities, i.e. the contradiction between those who own and profit from the exclusivity of basic resources and those who must work to obtain them.

In other words, it does not take aim at the fact of class itself, only that class is simultaneously racialized, gendered, and intersectional. On this view, class is essentially a structure of *differential opportunity*, and hence the problem of class structure (like the problem of capitalism) becomes a problem of discrimination, as if the harms of the former are essentially those of social exclusion and marginalization, which prohibit fair access to capitalist markets and thus enable forms of “disparate exploitation”—where black people are *more* burdened than whites, women are *more* burdened than men, and so on.

But the problem of exploitation is not that it is disparate; rather, it is that inequality which derives from exploitation is a basic condition for capital accumulation. Yet the dominant model for thinking about inequality of this sort—the intersectional one—avoids calling capitalism (or exploitation) into question; instead, it tends to treat exploitation as a matter of “intragroup differences” and group “disparities.” Where this approach can be useful for thinking about how class is *experienced* differently, it does not explain how class is *produced* or, for that matter, how inequality is an inherent feature of a society whose economic structure is grounded in exploitation, and whose persistence is therefore not incontrovertibly tied to acts of racism, sexism, or homophobia. Those acts may well determine who is going to get rich and who is going to be poor, who is going to get the good jobs and who is going to be stuck at the bottom. But they do not make for rich and poor people, capitalism does. Yet because neoliberalism, like intersectionality, generally lacks a vocabulary for thinking critically about capitalism (or at least thinking critically as we do about racism, sexism, and homophobia), it becomes difficult to think about inequality outside an identity framework—as something not necessarily tied to a marginalized subject position.

For this reason, critics of left neoliberalism will argue that “neither hostility to discrimination nor the accompanying enthusiasm for diversity makes the slightest contribution” to creating an economically equal society; to the contrary, as Walter Benn Michaels puts it, the focus on discrimination functions instead “to provide inequality with a meritocratic justification: If everyone has an equal opportunity to succeed, there’s no injustice when some people fail.” From this standpoint, antidiscrimination becomes the hegemonic
criterion of social justice under neoliberalism—not least because it remains concerned with “equal opportunity” within markets, as opposed to resisting inequalities generated by those markets themselves. In other words, unequal access to health care, housing, and education becomes the problem, not the fact that health care, housing, and education are commodified institutions (in the United States, at least), and thus, as a political vision designed to make these and other markets more efficient for opportunity, antidiscrimination becomes an ideological problem for the left insofar as it articulates “a ruling-class view that discrimination and not exploitation is the cause of American inequality.”

By concentrating on exploitation, then, I do not mean to propose a choice between a politics of class and a politics of antidiscrimination. Rather, I want to follow the critics of left neoliberalism in arguing that a politics of antidiscrimination is already a politics of class—a politics that, in Michaels’ words, “has no problem with seeing people being left behind as long as they haven’t been left behind because of their race or sex.” Indeed, “a society free not only of racism but of sexism and heterosexism is a neoliberal utopia where all the irrelevant grounds for inequality (your identity) have been eliminated and whatever inequalities are left are therefore legitimated,” and so the emphasis on identity only helps to “produce a society where people are extremely attached to a particular form of social justice (antidiscrimination) while being extremely disconnected from another model of social justice (anti-exploitation).”

In the following pages, I want to push this critique further, demonstrating its relevance in later sections to the world of college sports, while drawing out its implications for class analysis in the meantime. My general argument is that, while there is a pronounced left commitment to antidiscrimination in the neoliberal public sphere, the commitment to anti-exploitation appears hardly ever. When it does appear, as occasionally in the world of sports, struggles against exploitation receive nowhere near the attention (let alone popular support or corporate backing) as struggles against discrimination. This is not to denigrate those struggles, nor to deny how they overlap with the problem of exploitation; it is, however, to argue that antidiscrimination sits rather comfortably with a politics of neoliberalism insofar as both prefer to substitute differences in the way people are treated for differences that have nothing to do with personal treatment, i.e. differences rooted in capitalist markets and property relations. Where the former pursues inclusion and empowerment within capitalist class structure, it thereby reflects the position of capital itself, which has long sought to locate the roots of inequality outside the domain of economic relations. Hence capital becomes the neutral background for struggles over identity and recognition once those struggles adopt the neoliberal framework that class is simply another name for social difference.

That framework is evident, for example, in the University of Missouri football team’s so-called “strike against racism,” where the Mizzou athletes organized their labor power to achieve distinctly nonlabor-related goals. Set against the background of left neoliberalism, the strike serves to illustrate how antiracist politics can simultaneously underscore and disavow the politics of class. To the extent that the “strike” lacked a critical vocabulary of exploitation, for example, it served to displace the idea of class onto race, demanding that black players (and students) gain “respect,” not money. No doubt, obtaining respect is important, but it also requires a different kind of remedy than exploitation. And where neoliberalism prefers to address the first at the expense of the second, the politics of recognition and antidiscrimination do the same.
The redistribution-recognition dilemma

To hone this distinction, it is useful to recall the work of Nancy Fraser, who famously argued for a politics of redistribution and recognition, but who also insisted upon the importance distinguishing between the two analytically. As Fraser describes it, the problem of recognition has its roots in “institutionalized systems of interpretation and evaluation” (i.e. cultural norms of signification, subjectivity and personhood), whereas injustices of exploitation are rooted in the economic structure. Surely, these injustices overlap in daily life, but as Fraser asserts, rendering them analytically distinct allows us to spot “mutual interferences that could arise when redistribution claims and recognition claims are pursued simultaneously.”

To take a concrete example, the problem of poverty might be said to constitute both a problem of redistribution and recognition: where poor people are poor because they lack money, they are also poor because of ideologies of cultural Othering and class inferiority, which inhibit critiques of the wider class structure. On this view, the problem of poverty is as much a problem of discursive recognition as economic distribution. But as soon as we begin to see poverty through this lens—i.e. the lens of disrespect (stereotypes), nonrecognition (being rendered invisible), or discrimination (being subject to inferior treatment and exclusion)—the kinds of “interferences” noted by Fraser become clear: for if poor people are ultimately poor because they lack money, it is hard to see how treating poor people with more respect (coming to admire their “difference,” for example) will do them any good.

Furthermore, it is hard to see how treating poor people as a “discriminated class” does them any better, since a capitalist economy without discrimination would still produce poverty. But of course, if poverty is understood as an essential condition of that system, grounded as it is in class exploitation, the very fact that capitalists need poverty becomes unmistakable—it makes clear, for instance, that so long as you have capitalism, you are going to have poor people, no matter how respectfully you treat them.

This is not to say that cultural norms of signification do not matter when it comes to making sense of poverty, but it is to insist that capitalism does not require such norms to be effective. To wit, poverty is a necessary part of the economic system—a system that, at present, takes root across a diverse range of cultural norms. This is why, as Walter Benn Michaels argues, activists and writers steeped in theories of social marginalization (along the lines of nonnormative racial, gender, or sexual identities) have “a hard time thinking about economic inequality, since the problem of the poor is not the problem of a minority and is not the problem of a subject articulated to an oppressive norm (a median income unlike, say, heterosexuality is not a norm).”

Thus, treating poverty as one of the many normative oppressions—describing it, for instance, as a corollary to classism—only redoubles the problem, since classism effectively substitutes the insult (the way people are treated because they are poor) for the causal injury (the fact that people are poor in the first place).

But to put the problem in this way is also to emphasize that poverty (like class) is not an identity; it is not a subject position like race or gender. It is, rather, a fundamentally unequal relation of material interests that cannot be made equivalent in a capitalist society. While racial and sexual difference can be plausibly imagined in those terms—that is, as fundamentally equal but socially constructed as unequal—it does not make
sense to treat class the same way, since, as Rita Felski similarly argues, class is “essentially, rather than contingently, a hierarchical concept.” Indeed, class is nothing but a structure of inequality, so “it makes very little sense to posit an affirmative lower-class identity,” as John Guillory writes in *Cultural Capital*, “as such an identity would have to be grounded in the experience of deprivation per se.”

In this sense, attempting to solve the problem of poverty (the experience of deprivation) in terms of classism (or recognition) only interferes with the politics of redistribution. At best, it allows us to think that giving poor people more respect, or recognizing our own “bias,” is a way to mitigate inequality; at worst, it creates a situation where the difference between the rich and poor grows on a daily basis, yet the dominant framework for dealing with this problem is “the recognition of difference.” While recognition makes sense in terms of racial, gender, and sexual difference, it does not make sense in terms of poverty and class, as those problems require eliminating difference, not respecting it.

Nonetheless, the tendency in cultural studies has been to treat economic difference (class) as a matter of cultural difference (identity). Whether this means examining the representational codes of working-class identity, the performative nature of those identities, the cultural links to other forms of recognition, the media practices that valorize class tastes, or the stereotypes of working-class whiteness (“rednecks,” “white trash”), the language of identity is rife in cultural studies, as scholars work assiduously to “reintegrate class analysis into social templates of race, sexuality and gender.” Yet if one takes this view, situating the politics of redistribution inside the logic of “the cultural turn,” it is not a far step to attributing the existence of class to anything but the economic structure—or indeed, to adopting the position identified by the late Stuart Hall, who, in his last interview, remarked that “in its attempt to move away from economic reductionism, [cultural studies] sort of forgot that there was an economy at all.”

**Neoliberal racecraft**

Of course, Hall was also highly attuned to the fact that, in the United States especially, race is the modality in which class is lived. However, this does not mean that class struggle has to be waged in the language of racecraft; nor does it mean that the politics of wealth redistribution has to overlook the impact of racism. It does mean, however, that any attempt to “articulate” race and class (as Hall might put it) has to grapple with the reality that racism is the product of capitalism, and that, as Keenga-Yamahtta Taylor writes in *From #Black Lives Matter to Black Liberation*, “locating the dynamic relationship between class exploitation and racial oppression in the functioning of American capitalism” allows us to “explain its [racism’s] origins and persistence.”

Still, the prevailing assumption of left antiracism today is that a politics of class is woefully inattentive to the problems of race, and that racism is altogether distinct from the structures of capitalist exploitation. Two examples will hopefully suffice. Three months prior to the “strike against racism” at Mizzou, Black Lives Matter activists Marissa Johnson and Mara Willaford disrupted a Bernie Sanders talk at a Social Security rally in Seattle, on the grounds that, as Johnson put it, Sanders’ campaign for the Democratic presidential nomination was “basically class reductionist,” and that his social-democratic platform of universal health care, the right to collective bargaining, a living wage, and free public higher education “never had a strong analysis that there is racism and white
supremacy that is separate than the economic things that everyone experiences.”

Echoing this line a few months later, journalist Ta-Nehisi Coates rebuked Sanders for refusing to endorse reparations, stating that “Sanders’s radicalism has failed in the ancient fight against white supremacy,” and further, his “class first” approach was rooted in “the myth that racism and socialism are necessarily incompatible.”

Notwithstanding the fact that this perspective woefully overlooks the class commitments of historically black organizations like the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, the Black Panther Party, and the League of Revolutionary Black Workers—not to mention the socialist movements that had, for most of the twentieth century, served as the dominant political framework for most of the nonwhite world—such pronouncements fell on friendly ears with in the left-neoliberal wing. As the consequent Democratic presidential candidate Hillary Clinton stated in her “single issue” critique of Sanders, “Not everything is about an economic theory, right? If we broke up the big banks tomorrow … would that end racism?”

Indeed, where Sanders was positively inclined to draw links between “economic theory” and racial disparities in unemployment, wealth, housing and incarceration, Coates was just as keen to dismiss his “class first” approach for failing to view “Black poverty as fundamentally distinct from white poverty,” and for not addressing black people as a unique “class specifically injured by white supremacy.”

The crux of this view, of course, is that racism “is a force in and of itself, a vector often intersecting with class, but also operating independent of it;” and thus writers like Coates are more disposed to adopt the separation of race and class in favor of the concomitant idea that calls for economic justice are a way of skirting the injuries of racism—a notion that, as historian Touré F. Reed points out, has its genealogical roots in the liberal statecraft of the 1965 Moynihan Report, a document that also “presumed that African-American poverty had taken on a life of its own, making it nearly impervious to economic intervention.”

This belief, in combination with the essentializing view that, “by virtue of the common experience of racism, African Americans possess … deeply shared political interests,” helps to cement the pluralist notion of a distinct “black interest.”

The reason given for this interest, then is not the political economy of capitalism, but rather, the “enduring power of whiteness,” an inveterate, ineluctable force that, as Coates describes it, leaves black people (poor and rich) disproportionately worse off and more “exposed” to poverty than whites.

By comparison, one might consider the old-fashioned idea that a dynamic labor movement is what is needed for blacks to amass political power. Or how distinguishing black poverty from white poverty only helps to obscure the systemic roots of all poverty. Or how insisting upon “the enduring solidarity of whiteness” actually maintains the moralizing lexicon of what Karen and Barbara Fields call racecraft, the “mental terrain” that makes “straightforward talk about class inequality all but impossible” by obscuring class divisions among blacks and whites. Indeed, as Taylor puts it in regard to this point:

The actual legacy of … white supremacy expresses itself by obscuring the class antagonism among whites. “White people” are typically regarded as an undifferentiated mass with a common experience of privilege, access, and unfettered social mobility … being used to transpose class and race, further distorting the existence of class differences. In this way, “whiteness” is an adaptation of the American left to the myth that the United States is a classless society.
This distillation continues in the reasoning of left antiracism insofar as it insists that white people *tout court* benefit from the ideological power of whiteness.

But where 43 percent of white households make between $10,000 and $49,000 a year, and where “the majority of US poor are white, the majority of people without health insurance are white, and the majority of the homeless are white,” it hardly makes sense to talk about “the enduring solidarity of whiteness” in any material sense. Still, the prevailing antiracist sentiment is that “white people” are a privileged group, if not for the mere fact that they are less likely to endure such problems. Of course, the backside of this claim is that there are now five hundred billionaires in the United States, only two of whom are black. But to consider that number in this way is also to suggest the problem of inequality is in fact racial: where the disproportionate number of *white* billionaires is the problem, not, say, the fact that the billionaire class itself now owns 60 percent of US national wealth, the top 1 percent owns half the world’s wealth, and the richest eight people in the world own the same as the poorest half (3.5 billion people).

Where those numbers can certainly be broken down and made poignant through racial disparity discourse (only five members of the Forbes 400 are Latino!), such accounts work, in effect, to reproduce the logic of racecraft, which persists, as the Fieldses say, in the righteous practices of “progressive” antiracists who, much like their racist counterparts, are “unable to promote or even define justice [economic or otherwise] except by enhancing the authority and prestige of race.” Indeed this logic extends to the discourse of racial liberalism, where, as the Judith Stein once said, “the highest item on the black agenda must be something uniquely for blacks and that racial disparity is the only disparity that counts,” or, as the Fieldses say, “the most radical goal of the political opposition remains the reallocation of unemployment, poverty and injustice rather than their abolition.”

However, what this means is that “as long as the problem is defined in terms of disparity between races, the solution can only be the ‘reallocation’ of poverty, not its ‘abolition.’” And thus the commitment to fighting inequality on the basis of disparity is also a way to ensure that the structural effects of capitalism are equally shared, for the focus on disparity effectively yields an ideal where those disparities no longer exist — where, say, black people make up 13 percent of the population and 13 percent of the poor (not 22 percent as they do now), and white people make up 72 percent of the population and 72 percent of the poor (not 51 percent as they do now). Such a world, aside from increasing the sheer number of poor white people and diversifying the limited number of rich nonwhite people, would hardly be more equal; it would just be differently unequal. Yet the tendency to understand inequality in terms of disparity is a commitment to such a world … as are the politics of racecraft.

**Racecraft in sports**

This perspective finds its application in the world of college sports, where, tellingly, the most critical of commentators appear unable to “promote or even define justice,” as the Fieldses might say, “except by enhancing the authority and prestige of race.” For example, when sportswriters decry professional black athletes as “forty million dollar slaves,” or when sports scholars describe the NCAA as a “plantation system,” they are, in effect, invoking the problem of exploitation through the lens of racecraft. The problem, on this view, is not that athletes are exploited; it is that they are exploited in
unequal racial measure, so the solution is to ensure a more “level playing field”—equal access to coaching, management, and administrative positions.64 Naturally, this solution leaves the structure of ownership and labor intact while affirming the ideal of meritocratic diversification.

Compare this ideal to the ways racecraft has historically served to justify (by mystifying) the very material conditions of American slavery itself—the lucrative enterprise of forced labor. Where proponents of the plantation metaphor will draw upon this image to give moral weight to their arguments, ideological accounts of American slavery will, by the same token, retroactively assume that racism wholly explains that system. As the Fieldses write:

Probably a majority of American historians think of slavery in the United States as a system of “race relations”—as though the chief business of slavery were the production of white supremacy rather than the production of cotton, sugar, rice, and tobacco.65

In the same way, proponents of the plantation metaphor will write as though the chief business of college sports, i.e. the lucrative enterprise of student-athlete labor, is actually a problem of “interracial relations,” where the “disparate exploitation of Black athletes” becomes the issue, not the extortion of free labor.66

This elision, of course, displaces the structure of class exploitation onto a set of racial categories, and thus leads to a number of parochial responses. Take Billy Hawkins’ The New Plantation: Black Athletes, College Sports, and the Predominantly White NCAA Institutions, which concludes: “accepting Black athletes as partners in the intercollegiate athletic enterprise … is an emancipatory strategy that can enhance loyalty to universities’ brand, as well as improve brand identity, especially in Black communities.”67 Not only does this conclusion stop short of distributing actual paychecks, let alone economic power; it also remains consistent with the logic of neoliberal racecraft inasmuch as it imagines the problem of “the new plantation” in terms of “the history of race relations,” which makes it difficult for “Whites to relate to Blacks as equal partners.”68 Thus, Hawkins’ approach (and others like it) counter with a proposal that envisions emancipation along the lines of equal participation within the enterprise of college sport. And since the victims here are not workers who have been exploited but brand partners who have been unrecognized by “white institutions,” the strategy of emancipation consists in making those institutions more racially inclusive, and hence more efficiently functioning. The goal, in other words, is to improve the valuation of brand equity in the name of racial respect.

It’s about respect!

A similar goal finds its place within the burgeoning campus culture that likewise commits to improving “campus climate” in the name of greater racial awareness and recognition. Such a commitment informed the University of Missouri “strike against racism,” when, in the fall of 2015, athletes organized their labor power on behalf of a campuswide protest aimed at changing administrative leadership and bettering “race relations.” These protests (and the strike itself) would eventually come to signify a national wave of student protests that voiced a concerted commitment to “end systemic and structural racism on campus.”69

In the remaining space, I would like to contrast this wave, focusing on the Mizzou case, with another bout of athlete-activism involving player-workers: namely, the Northwestern
University football team’s unsuccessful attempt to unionize one year prior. While the Missouri case reveals players utilizing their labor power for distinctly nonlabor-related goals, the Northwestern case reveals a struggle against athlete exploitation that was ultimately doomed to fail—not least because that struggle, I want to suggest, lacked the same sense of political urgency and moral authority as the “strike against racism.” Indeed, this lack of urgency is nothing but a reflection of the broader left-neoliberal politics sketched above, which, as I have drawn it, commits to ending inequality without redistributing wealth. But here the far-reaching commitment to eliminating “structural racism” and the relative indifference to eliminating exploitation find their expression in the prevailing neoliberal campus culture, where it is easier (if not more compelling) to organize athlete-workers on the explicit basis of identity rather than as a class.

In the case of Missouri, a series of overtly racist incidents—including racial slurs hurled at black students and feces smeared into the shape of a swastika on a dormitory bathroom—led to a string of campuswide protests in September 2015. Following rallies urging UM president Tim Wolfe to take a more active stance in combatting campus racism, tensions came to a head in October when #ConcernedStudent1950, the group leading the protests, issued a series of demands calling for Wolfe’s dismissal, an acknowledgement of “his white privilege,” and more diversity initiatives on campus. 70 On November 2, Jonathan Bulter, a graduate student, began a week-long hunger strike in the hope of forcing Wolfe’s ouster. Shortly after, a group of faculty announced a two-day walkout in a show of solidarity with Butler and the students. However, it was not until 30 black football players announced that they too would undertake a strike of their own—no longer practicing or playing football until Wolfe had resigned—that the protests gained national attention. On November 7, the group posted a tweet at #ConcernedStudent1950 containing an image of players locked arm in arm with Butler and a message reading:

The athletes of color on the University of Missouri football team truly believe “Injustice Anywhere is a threat to Justice Everywhere.” We will no longer participate in any football related activities until President Tim Wolfe resigns or is removed due to his negligence toward marginalized students’ experience. WE ARE UNITED!!!!

Two days later, Wolfe resigned.

While the purview of the protests was thus racial awareness and administrative change, the tactic was de facto labor organizing. As student-government president Payton Head recalled to the Columbia Daily Tribune:

The football team definitely played an important role because they represented what drives the issues in this nation. That’s money. It’s capitalism. I’m calling senators and legislators in Jefferson City saying we have a student with his life on the line [but] nothing happened until the football team stepped in, and we saw the national and international media circling around the university. 71

Indeed, what came to be called the “strike against racism” marked the tipping point in both media coverage and institutional action, as players received widespread acclaim from a range of pundits who viewed the strike itself as an act of selfless devotion to a cause greater than college sports. The group even drew support from Mizzou’s own athletics department, its coaches, and various public officials, all of whom echoed the students’ call for “leadership change” once the school’s football finances were at stake. Missouri Attorney General Chris Koster suggested that the university system establish a
“task force” to address student concerns; US senator Claire McCaskill called upon UM’s Board of Curators to “send a clear message of support” to students; and Governor Jay Nixon issued a statement certifying “the University of Missouri is a place where all students can pursue their dreams in an environment of respect, tolerance and inclusion.” Back on campus, coach Gary Pinkel tweeted a photo of the entire team locking arms, alongside a message declaring: “The Mizzou family stands as one. We are united. We are behind our players.” This show of solidarity even motivated a host of similar antiracist demonstrations across campuses countrywide, and eventually, the Board of Curators came to approve a host of initiatives intended to improve UM’s overall racial climate, including a $1.1 million “diversity audit.”

Yet all of this widespread support took shape against the more obscure background of the recalcitrant political-economic structures enclosing state university systems like UM. As Dave Zirin summed up these structures in his commentary for The Nation:

So much of the political and social economy of state universities is tied to football, especially in big-money conferences like Southeastern Conference, where Mizzou plays. The multibillion-dollar college football playoff contracts, the multimillion-dollar coaching salaries, and the small fortunes that pour into small towns on game day don’t happen without a group of young men willing to take the field. The system is entirely based on their acceptance of their own powerlessness as the gears of this machine. If they choose to exercise their power, the machine not only stops moving: It becomes dramatically reshaped.

And indeed, the machine at Mizzou threatened to “stop moving” had the team persisted in its refusal to play; as Zirin put it, “the math was not on Tim Wolfe’s side.” For had the team not participated in its upcoming game against Brigham Young University, for example, Mizzou would have been contractually obligated to pay BYU $1 million in “damages” due to lost profits, a sum more than twice the salary ($459,000) of the former university president. What is more, had the strike continued a few more weeks, it would have jeopardized a host of comparatively longer-term revenues, including a $2.2 million apparel deal with Nike, $15 million in annual ticket sales, and $35 million in annual TV rights. This all set against the background of a university system in which Wolfe, a former executive at Covansys, a consulting firm specializing in corporate outsourcing, had been hired to “tighten spending” in a state committed to slash education funding. In good neoliberal fashion, Wolfe’s first act as president was thus to enact a 3 percent tuition increase and to propose a plan to eliminate graduate student health insurance—all while pursing a $72 million expansion of the university’s football stadium.

In this regard the ramifications of the player strike went well beyond the administrative purview of Wolfe’s executive leadership, much less his failure to admit “white privilege.” In Zirin’s words:

If Wolfe goes, it will show how university power really works in a country where football coaches are often the most highly paid people on campus and universities are like a company town whose primary business is football … When players take these kinds of direct actions, they show what they really are: a labor force.

Yet it was not the players’ action as a labor force that inspired near-universal enthusiasm; rather it was their commitment to a political vision that effectively sidelined their status as workers in favor of a vision predicated on their status as black football

>The news out of Columbia, Mo., this weekend … is exhilarating because it’s the most high-profile example to date in a continuing revolution in which the athletes who drive the multibillion-dollar college sports machine have begun to use their visibility to demand change. What makes the Missouri team’s protest stand out even more, though, is that it’s not about the business of sports: compensation, image rights, labor issues or NCAA rules. It was initiated by black players showing solidarity with fellow black students who felt their concerns had not been adequately addressed by university administrators. It was athletes lending their standing to a fight that, on its face, did not involve them.⁷⁹

In other words, it was athletes lending their visibility to a struggle that effectively downplayed their status as workers (along with attendant labor issues like compensation, image rights, and better facilities) in favor of what Rhoden called the wider “human rights issue” of racial affinity. As Rhoden’s colleague (and Mizzou alum) Bill Connelly summed up this view in *SB Nation* a day later: “The Missouri football strike was about a lot of things, but mostly about respect.”⁸⁰

**What about work?**

Contrast this with the Northwestern University football players’ bid to form a union in 2014. Where the UM strike successfully used labor tactics to pursue nonlabor-related goals, the Northwestern team sought to organize for better working conditions and collective bargaining rights as workers—a political action that no doubt took direct aim at the system of exploitation driving the multibillion-dollar college sports machine but also, and not surprisingly, provoked much greater backlash from the very same institutional parties that would extol the Mizzou strike. As *The New York Times* put it, university administrators, coaches, alumni, former players, media pundits, and the NCAA were all united in their “blitz to defeat unionization.”⁸¹

Consequently, when the Chicago district of the NLRB ruled in March 2014 that Northwestern players were in fact employees with the right to unionize, the university and the NCAA began a coordinated assault to defeat a possible prounion vote. Most notably, an email obtained by *The New York Times* revealed that head football coach, Pat Fitzgerald, had taken it upon himself to personally dissuade the team from organization, describing the bid to unionize as nothing less than a betrayal: “The downside of joining a union, he wrote, is much bigger than the upside … Understand that by voting to have a union, you would be transferring your trust from those you know—me, your coaches and the administrators—to what you don’t know—a third party who may or may not have the team’s best interests in mind … You have nothing to gain by forming a union.”⁸²

Fitzgerald’s comments echoed those of Northwestern administrators, who, in similar, underhanded fashion, released a 21-page “question-and-answer” dossier that cautioned players to carefully weigh the repercussions of forming a union, including the possibility that Fitzgerald would leave the program, alumni donations would dry up, players would have difficulty finding jobs after graduation, and the school’s $225 million athletic center would be scrapped.⁸³

Mainstream media pundits, in turn, augmented these sentiments during the weeks preceding the vote. David Gottlieb at *CBS Sports* called the players’ effort “sickening” and
lambasted the temerity of student-athletes for demanding a “greater gift than a free college experience.” Sally Jenkins at *The Washington Post* acknowledged that

Athletes need leverage against the NCAA’s pocket-lining administrators … but unionization won’t provide the leverage to fix what’s wrong. It would just create a lot of splintered wreckage for thousands of scholarship athletes who would have to live with the adverse implications of being called “labor.”

The real gains, Jenkins concluded, would go to “the United Steelworkers, the backers of the unionization effort, in the form of dues from college kids.” Most cynically perhaps, *The Chicago Tribune* and *The New York Times* both published articles cautioning against unionization, suggesting it would actually tip the gender balance and put schools in conflict with Title IX. As the reasoning went, if football players were to be paid to play, insufficient money would be left over for less profitable women’s sports.

All told, this discourse not only circumscribed debates about labor exploitation more generally but also, and more importantly for my purposes here, rehearsed a number of claims that remained in neoliberal lockstep with the sorts of racecraft discussed above: namely, that any kind of labor or class politics, if it happens at all, happens at the expense of marginalized groups. Thus, the litany of antiunion claims that labor action would stifle reforms on the discrimination front, that businesses would shutter in the event of unionization, and that players would suffer at the hands of “third-party” interference were all driven by the reactionary notion that class struggles against exploitation create more problems than they solve. As such, they fit comfortably within a progressive neoliberal environment that accords primacy to political conflicts over recognition that tacitly accept the continued operation of capitalist class relations.

**Conclusion**

This comparative study hopefully elucidates a ruinous political situation (at least for the left), in which public discourse roundly condemns political action against exploitation while largely condoning (if not outwardly supporting) strikes against racism—especially when those strikes are stripped of their labor implications. This despite the fact that such actions ultimately hinge upon the ability of participants to organize as a labor force: as in the UM case, this effort combined with the economic threat that money would stop flowing into university coffers had the players refused “to do their job.” Meanwhile, athletes in the Northwestern case attempted to organize explicitly and decisively as a labor force but, for that same reason, were destined to run up against the economic and institutional power of capital—as in the end, the bid to unionize concluded in August 2015 with the NLRB overturning its previous ruling to assert jurisdiction over whether players could form a union, citing the potential for “instability” in labor relations.

In drawing conclusions from these divergent cases, we might take heed of Adolph Reed’s point that, in the context of neoliberalism, certain kinds of antiracism (or for that matter, certain kinds of “strikes” against misrecognition; cf. the recent “women’s strikes” or the “Day Without Immigrants”) actually fit within the “comfort zone of neoliberalism’s discourses of ‘reform’” so long as they downplay the political primacy of class. In the case of college athletes, while the institutional powers had little problem supporting “safe and inclusive spaces” for students and athletes, the same constituencies (administrators,
coaches, alumni, media pundits) had considerable problems faced with efforts to curb exploitation. Hence the focus on labor and class struggle is not meant to be moralistic—my point here is not to privilege “the revolt of the working athlete” over “the revolt of the black athlete,” but to redirect the focus of political strategy: to open the horizons of left analysis in order to better understand how neoliberal power works as a distinct terrain of class politics.

Especially within cultural studies, where neoliberalism has been approached largely as a mode of governmental power with normative effects, it can also be understood as a hegemonic mode of class war that contours both the left and the right, and thus renders the critique of class structure (to the extent that critique exists on the left) as something other than class politics—a problem of racial disparity, for instance. Given the equilibrium sought after in disparity discourse, however, it makes arguably better sense to build a popular consensus around the collective capacities of those who are systematically exploited by neoliberal capital (regardless of race), since those capacities maintain the potential to exert real economic leverage over neoliberal elites who, in much more concerted class formation, occupy the major centers of power, including the multibillion-dollar college sports machine. Here, the focus on exploitation, as in the Northwestern case, presents a clear challenge to those on the left who value diversity but refuse to address inequality—precisely because that challenge has everything to do with redistribution and little to do with respect.

Notes

9. Hence, the two anonymous readers of this essay were in sync when they proposed “intersectionality” as a way to add “nuance” to the argument. While I am grateful for their suggestions, I remain unconvinced that intersectionality is the best way to understand class and other forms of inequality, not least because it forestalls frameworks that approach inequality from the standpoint of redistribution. Moreover, it obscures the possibility that remedies for redistribution follow different logics than remedies pertaining to discrimination.
12. Ibid.
14. Exploitation here refers to the process where labor generates value for capital, not the informal sense of harsh labor conditions. As one anonymous reviewer put it, by this (Marxist) definition, “both wealthy professional athletes and fast food workers are exploited, even if that exploitation differs in degree and lived experience.”
15. As Doug Henwood puts it in another context, “capitalism need not be racist or sexist … What capitalism can’t live with is an end to class exploitation.” Bhaskar Sunkara, “An Interview with Doug Henwood,” *Jacobin*, 16 May 2013. Of course, racism and sexism have historically acted to justify exploitation. But insofar as their origins (particularly racism in the United States) is inextricable from capitalism, and insofar as racism and sexism are problems of distribution within capitalism, they do not exactly produce the conditions of poverty, although they do account for unequal access to capitalist markets (employment, housing, etc.). But if one is concerned to address the social system that produces economic inequality in the first place (rather than its disparate effects), this is an important distinction to make.
22. Fraser, “From Redistribution,” 74.
37. In an echo of Hall’s point, Karen and Barbara Fields argue that beliefs about race (what they call “racecraft”) have made “straightforward talk about class inequality all but impossible.” One example is the white identity politics of the 2016 Trump election, where class issues (a lack of jobs, a “rigged” political system) were displaced onto racial scapegoats (immigrants, criminals), resulting in a bad diagnosis of economic inequality and some poor white people imagining their social victimization in racial rather than class terms. As the Fieldses write: “once racecraft takes over the imagination, it shrinks well-founded criticism of inequality to fit crabbed moral limits, leaving the social grievances of white Americans without a language in which to frame them.” Fields and Fields, *Racecraft*, 12, 286.
44. Ibid.
46. Cedric Johnson, “The Panthers Can’t Save Us Now,” *Catalyst: A Journal of Theory and Strategy* 1, no. 1 (2017): 60: “This line of thinking always assumes that there is something underneath it all that binds black people together politically, but that reasoning must always rely on some notion of racial essentialism and a suspension of any honest analysis of black political life as it exists” (78).
47. Coates, “The Enduring Solidarity of Whiteness.”
52. Ibid., 49, 214.
57. Fields and Fields, *Racecraft*, 147. Consider the “alt-right” neoliberals who seek to “awaken a white identity politics,” give priority to “national heritage,” and view politics as “downstream” of culture. It seems they too, like neoliberals on the left, prefer to think about inequality in terms of racial/cultural wars rather than class wars. See Richard Spencer “We’re Not


59. Fields and Fields, Racecraft, 147, my emphasis.


61. Ibid.


64. This is the logic behind the so-called “Rooney Rule” in the NFL, which requires teams to interview minority candidates for coaching and administrative positions. Here the problem of inequality is imagined as a “pipeline” problem of discriminatory practices.

65. Fields and Fields, Racecraft, 117.


68. Ibid.

69. For a complete list of student demands, see http://www.thedemands.org/.

70. Ibid.


72. For details, see Marc Tracy and Ashley Southall, “Black Football Players Lend Heft to Protests at Missouri,” The New York Times, November 8, 2015.


77. Miller, “With $1 Million at Stake.”


82. Quoted in Strauss, “At Northwestern.”

83. Ibid.

84. Quoted in Dave Zirin, “‘Right Now the NCAA is Like a Dictatorship’: Why the Northwestern Football Team Formed a Union,” The Nation, January 29, 2014.


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