Rethinking Sporting Mystification in the Present Tense: Disneylimpics, Affective Neoliberalism, and the Greatest Transformation

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Abstract: While questioning the universalization, naturalization, neutralization, and idealization of sport and physical culture, this paper examines the ultimate mystification process of sport and physical culture by expanding upon two conceptual frameworks: Jules Boykoff's celebration capitalism and Lawrence Grossberg's affective landscape. It first analyzes the evolution of the Olympics into a corporatized, commercialized, spectacularized, and celebritized "Disneylimpics" that can consistently evoke an affective reverberation. It then introduces the idea of "affective neoliberalism" to highlight neoliberalism's affective and ideological aspects. With Grossberg's concept of affective landscape, this paper explores the internalization and intensification of anxiety and affective isolation within society. Additionally, the paper utilizes Karl Polanyi's analysis in his influential book, *The Great Transformation*, to investigate the historical expansion of affective neoliberalism. By highlighting the 11 September 2001, attacks in the United States, it points out provocative militarization and (re)organization of the soul into a fictitious commodity, in addition to labor, land, and money, which triggers the greatest transformation. Lastly, summarizing central arguments, this paper concludes with modest suggestions, mainly focusing on two questions: (1) where are we now? and (2) how can we more effectively respond to the present context?

Keywords: affective neoliberalism; celebration capitalism; mystification; militarization

1. Introduction

Stuart Hall ([1981] 2019a)—one of the most prominent scholars in the field of cultural studies—once famously described culture as "a sort of constant battlefield" (p. 354). While this analogy can be interpreted in multiple ways—especially considering Hall's lifelong contextualist and interventionist mentality—he clearly aimed to underscore that culture is not static or vacuous but affected by complex power dynamics intertwined in the context of "a continuous and necessarily uneven and unequal struggle" (Hall [1981] 2019a, p. 354). Thus, he persistently demanded that scholars identify new possibilities within this "continually contested terrain" (Andrews 2002, p. 112) to reformulate the status quo into a different and better place.

Despite Hall's urging for academic scrutiny, sport and physical culture may be one of the most "rarely questioned" (Jackson and Matheus 2023, p. 127) inter- or transnational battlefields in the diverse world of popular culture. Grainger et al. (2022) described this trend of invisibility as follows:

> The politics of physical culture frequently go unseen (or are willfully denied) in part because sport and physical activity are seldom seen to have anything to do with life's "big" or "important" issues. Physical culture is often thought to have little or nothing to do with the public institutions responsible for the collective organization and running society, like governments, the courts, the police, the military, and so forth. We may also view sport and physical activity as nonpolitical simply because this is the way we would like them to be. (p. 15)

Similarly, Jay Coakley (2015)—one of the founding figures of the sociology of sport—proposed the concept of "the Great Sport Myth" (p. 403). In his view, the public believes that sport is naturally pure and good by adopting two fundamental assumptions: "(a) the purity and goodness of sport is transmitted to those who participate in or consume it; and (b) sport inevitably leads to individual and community development" (Coakley 2015, p. 403). In short, sport and physical culture have been subject to universalization; naturalization; neutralization; idealization; and, thus, mystification processes that eventually led people to view it as an uncontested, transhistorical entity (Beamish and Ritchie 2006; Brohm 1978; Kidd 1984).

On this basis, this study aims to dissect a socially prevalent sporting belief by embracing two unique concepts: Boykoff's (2014) celebration capitalism and Grossberg's (2018) affective landscape. While elucidating and extending each concept, the study focuses on the macro- and micro-level mechanisms and configurations involved in the myth construction of sport and physical culture. More specifically, it adopts the Olympic Games as an empirical site and examines how this mega-level sporting event could remain outwardly innocuous amid longstanding resistance and opposition by creating an unbalanced relationship between the privileged and the underrepresented. After reporting the main implications of the findings, this paper concludes with several modest suggestions regarding how to more effectively contest sport and physical culture and its dominant myth within a popular cultural realm.

2. Have the Modern Olympic Games Ever Taken Place?

2.1. From the Modern Olympics to "Disneylimpics"

Perhaps Pierre de Coubertin is the most integral historical personality, maintaining an inextricable connection with the Olympic Games. This French notable is now commonly regarded as a progenitor of the modern Olympic Games who resuscitated the most beloved sporting event that used to exist in ancient Greece (Kidd 1984). However, as Kidd (1984) pointed out, there were different corporeal competitions all dubbed "Olympic Games". For instance, a person named Robert Dover regularly held the so-called "Olympick Games" in England during the seventeenth century (Kidd 1984). The main distinction between Coubertin and others was that he strategically reshaped the ancient Greek Games by highlighting "the image of antiquity" (Kidd 1984, p. 72). That is, he particularly emphasized "a universal character" (Kidd 1984, pp. 71–72) pertaining to Olympism—the central ideology of the Olympic Games: "humanism, universalism, internationalism, rationalism, and modernism" (Persson 2013, pp. 76–78). However, Coubertin's Olympics was not the event people today know and enjoy as "the most important, influential and visible force in modern sport" (Beamish and Ritchie 2006, p. 6). It was the 1984 Los Angeles Olympic Games that contributed to the reorganization of the somewhat "shaky antiquated-sounding ideal" (Tomlinson 2004, p. 148) of the Games into an entirely different direction. Due to successive failures—such as the Munich massacre in 1972 and a huge economic loss after the 1976 Montreal Games—Los Angeles was the only candidate to host the competition in 1984 (Boykoff 2014; Tomlinson 2004). Nonetheless, this crisis became a strategic opportunity for the International Olympic Committee (IOC), ultimately even turning into a "pivotal moment" (Tomlinson 2004, p. 148) in its history. While openly welcoming the commercialization process, the IOC established its exclusive sponsorship project entitled "The Olympic Program" or "The Olympic Partner Programme" which has allowed a direct penetration of transnational corporate juggernauts into the Games, such as Airbnb, Coca-Cola, and Samsung (Allison 1998; Boykoff 2014; IOC n.d.).

Consequently, given that Coubertin is now arguably recognized as a person who initiated the modern Olympic movement, two former IOC presidents—Juan Antonio Samaranch (1980–2001) and Jacques Rogge (2001–2013)—can be regarded as "contemporary Coubertins". By underlining intensified "kitsch and commercial, bland and banal" (Bale and Christensen 2004, p. 2) features, they redesigned the arrangement of the Games, underpinned by the 1984 Los Angeles Olympics (Boykoff 2014; Kidd 1984). Put more radi-

cally, it is questionable whether the modern Olympic Games ever occurred (Karamichas 2013)—particularly after the 1980s—given that (1) Coubertin cannot be seen as their "father" and that (2) they have rapidly leaned towards "a largely clandestine, elite-driven process with significant impacts on host cities, and all of it coming with an exorbitant price tag" (Boykoff 2016a, p. 1) while increasingly distancing themselves from Coubertin's initial model. Thus, I argue that present-day Olympic Games are neither what one generally knows as having originated from ancient Greece nor Coubertin's appropriation of this. Instead, they mirror heavily "corporatized-commercialized-spectacularized-celebritized" (Andrews 2019, p. 10) "Disneylimpics" (Tomlinson 2004) that provoke a repeated affective reverberation, including but not limited to "individualism and optimism; escape, fantasy, magic and imagination; innocence; romance and happiness; good's triumph over evil" (Tomlinson 2004, p. 151). In this sense, although the event appears to stimulate "the apparently innocent world of the Disney imagination" (Tomlinson 2004, p. 150), it precipitates the enforcement of unequal power relations that reinscribe the mystification of the event in particular and sport and physical culture in general.

2.2. From Celebration Capitalism to Affective Neoliberalism

To illuminate the mystification process of Disneylimpics in particular and sport and physical culture in general, I first consider Jules Boykoff's (2014) concept of celebration capitalism. Considering that he advanced this notion while explicating other scholars' ideas with his viewpoints—mainly Naomi Klein's disaster capitalism—I propose my concept of *affective neoliberalism* while expounding celebration capitalism with relevant ideas from other scholars to justify my main arguments. However, I would like to stress that this reconceptualization is not about criticism but rather stems from a great admiration of his remarkable contributions to Olympic studies.

2.2.1. From Celebration Capitalism

To understand celebration capitalism, it is vital to first illustrate disaster capitalism. According to Boykoff (2014), Klein suggested this concept to explain how "neoliberal capitalists unabashedly capitalize on catastrophe" (p. 3). Specifically, disaster capitalism refers to a conceptual device used to describe how corporate forces reap benefits during a disastrous moment. This socially disorganized and tumultuous period usually cements a particular societal atmosphere during which they can more readily collaborate with the government and then implement illogical policies and regulations without encountering strong public antagonism. This arbitrary control is plausible because "[d]isasters create collective states of shock" (Boykoff 2014, p. 3) from which people cannot quickly recover. On the contrary, Boykoff's (2014) celebration capitalism explicitly spotlighted "moments of celebration, at least from the perspective of profit-seeking capitalists" (p. 4). However, celebration capitalism and disaster capitalism are not mutually disconnected as the former (i.e., celebration capitalism) can be seen as the "affable cousin" (Boykoff 2014, p. 3) of the latter (i.e., disaster capitalism). While these concepts highlight "social euphoria" (i.e., celebration capitalism) and "social traumas" (i.e., disaster capitalism), respectively (Boykoff 2014, p. 4), they share similarities by mainly focusing on "the state of exception as an alibi to justify sidestepping normal democratic processes in the name of expediency, exigency, and urgency" (Boykoff 2014, p. 4). In short, a distinct contextual condition should proceed to facilitate the development of these two interconnected situations.

Nonetheless, it is crucial to point out one major contrast between disaster capitalism and celebration capitalism. Under the circumstance of disaster capitalism, "private corporations view the state and nonprofits as competitors to be outmaneuvered" (Boykoff 2014, p. 4). In other words, cooperation between the private and public sectors is rarely feasible under disaster capitalism since the enlargement of market-centered doctrines is its ultimate goal, accomplished by overriding both the government and the public. Celebration capitalism, on the other hand, can forge relatively solid "public–private partnerships" (PPPs) (Boykoff 2014, p. 3) through linked allyship between the public and private. However,

it would be remiss not to mention that this union is inherently unequal (i.e., "lopsided" in Boykoff's terms) in most cases. That is, "the public takes the risks and private groups scoop up the rewards" (Boykoff 2014, p. 3) in that the former is responsible for what the latter commits, mainly concerning financial extravagance and blunder of the private, by exploiting public funds that the citizen should eventually benefit from as a primary taxpayer. Consequently, the Olympic Games are an exemplary space for expanding celebration capitalism as nations on different continents regularly host them while prompting a transnational convivial ambiance. However, Boykoff (2014) added several details by applying the concept to this gigantic sporting site, which requires further clarification.

2.2.2. To Affective Neoliberalism

Before exploring additional details of celebration capitalism within the Olympic space, it is necessary to elucidate Boykoff's (2014) interpretation of neoliberalism as it relates to celebration capitalism. He insisted that "the Olympics are less about neoliberalism and more about the dynamics of [celebration] capitalism in general" (Boykoff 2014, p. 3) in that "[t]he tenets of neoliberalism, as relevant as they are in some respects, do not take us the entire way in illuminating the five-ring juggernaut" (Boykoff 2014, p. 3). He described what he believed to be the reasons for the Olympics being more applicable to celebration capitalism instead of neoliberalism as follows:

> Rather than full-blown privatization we get public–private partnerships where taxpayers pay sizable sums to fund the Games. Rather than the relaxation or abandonment of regulations, we get a strict, tight-fisted regime of rules from the International Olympic Committee. Rather than economic financialization, where capital and assets are squirreled away in abstract constructions like collateralized debt obligations, thereby defraying responsibility and staving off economic judgment day, we get real-deal debt, payment schedules and all. (Boykoff 2014, p. 9)

In other words, the Olympic space does not let "the market decide" everything (Boykoff 2014, p. 8) by promoting perfect "privatization, deregulation, individualization, marketization, trade liberalization, and financialization" (Boykoff 2014, p. 8). Instead, the public bears unwanted burdens primarily due to disproportionate PPPs. Furthermore, direct controls always exist from the IOC, which prevents the complete freedom of capital movement.

Although I acknowledge that neoliberalism is "a contested and unstable term" (King 2012, p. 76) to elicit a lucid definition, Boykoff's (2014) depiction of neoliberalism seems to place greater emphasis on the economic aspect of the concept by unintentionally furthering "a kind of economic reductionism" (Grossberg 2013, p. 33) that supposes that neoliberalism "can be explained by an economic bottom line" (Grossberg 2013, p. 33). It is indisputable that the economic aspect is crucial to understanding neoliberalism. However, this point cannot solely determine everything about the idea due to its important affective and ideological features developed from its economic aspect (Andrews 2019; Andrews and Silk 2018). This consideration is relevant because the ultimate goal of neoliberalism is to cultivate not only a neoliberal structure but also neoliberal individuals "driven to maximize the freedoms (reduced personal tax burdens) and opportunities (expanded privatized employment and consumption sectors)" (Andrews 2019, p. 69). Fostering "responsibilitized neoliberal subjects" (Andrews 2019, p. 70) may not sound problematic as it appears to maximize individual freedom. However, it also means that people should "operate solely in her or his own self-interest and therefore will succeed or fail based on her or his own merits" (King-White 2018, p. 5), without connecting themselves with the broader societal conditions around them. Thus, it is easier for people to perpetuate "a marker of [a] lack of moral responsibility, fortitude, and/or a sign of pathological inferiority" (Andrews 2019, p. 70) by "blaming [themselves] for systematic problems" (King-White 2018, p. 6) if they encounter unavoidable setbacks originating from structural/institutional issues, such as gender-, race-, disability-, and/or class-based social problems. Put another way,

neoliberalism offers a useful pretext for there being "no need to improve upon the system" (King-White 2018, p. 6) because all of the problems are "always the individual's fault" (King-White 2018, p. 6). Hence, it ultimately disseminates an affective inclination towards hyper-individualization and the criminalization/demonization of receiving public/government assistance by reducing complex socio-historical, cultural, and political problems into merely personal issues and, therefore, consolidating the status quo (Andrews 2019; Andrews and Silk 2018; King-White 2018).

Thus, I assert that neoliberalism maintains "a contingent, complex, and, sometimes, contradictory formation" (Andrews 2019, p. 64) "depending upon the contingencies of the national context" (Andrews 2019, p. 65). To circulate its affective and ideological mantra more effectively, it strategically adjusts itself before merging with different forms of national philosophies, including but not limited to developmentalism, nationalism, Confucianism, and authoritarianism.[1] Hence, to illuminate further the affective and ideological aspects of neoliberalism, I do not regard celebration capitalism and disaster capitalism as "distinct phenomena" (Boykoff 2014, p. 4) but as one unit under "affective neoliberalism" given that (1) Olympic sites are not merely celebratory but also always a condensation and coexistence of celebration and disaster, and that (2) "affective capacities" (Andrews 2006, p. 270) are the "most unique characteristic" (Andrews 2006, p. 275) of sport and physical culture—including the Olympic Games—as one of the representative domains of popular culture. In other words, it would be imprudent to claim that Boykoff (2014) completely discounted the operation of neoliberalism within Olympic sites, as he stated that celebration capitalism can spawn a "discursive space for neoliberal policies to follow in its wake" (p. 109). Nonetheless, I believe that celebratory features cannot fully depict the Olympic space because this event simultaneously produces direct and indirect repression (Boykoff 2014, 2016b).

Although the IOC purports to advocate for the creation of the most equitable space by accepting the most outstanding athletes worldwide, it discriminates against "the type of athletes who could take part in its Games and the practice it would allow" (Beamish and Ritchie 2006, p. 7; Petersson and Vamling 2013). For example, when the South African athlete Oscar Pistorius, who has "two prosthetic limbs" (Howe 2011, p. 868), attempted to compete in the 2012 London Olympic Games, the main focus was arguably on the question of "whether his impairment offers an unfair advantage compared with 'able' athletes" (Howe 2008, p. 133). Illustrating his assistive prostheses as "a 'techno-doping' device" (Wolbring and Tynedal 2013, p. 178), certain groups deemed his participation at the Olympics "cheating" (Wolbring and Tynedal 2013). Similarly, although the IOC has placed "explicit importance" (Geeraert and Gauthier 2018, p. 19) on environmental issues and sustainability since the 1990s—even designating them as its "third pillar" (Boykoff 2014, p. 40; Geeraert and Gauthier 2018, p. 19), with the other two being sport and culture—this rhetoric does not accurately reflect the reality (Boykoff 2014; Müller 2015). For instance, the Sochi 2014 Winter Olympics is now commonly viewed as "the most expensive Olympic Games, Summer or Winter, ever" (Müller 2015, p. 191), accompanied by massive ecological destruction (Boykoff 2016b; Geeraert and Gauthier 2018; Petersson and Vamling 2016). However, prior to the Olympic Games, the organizing committee confidently proclaimed that the committee is "environmentally aware and will therefore ensure that the environment will not be damaged" (Jönsson 2013, p. 55). Moreover, due to the constant suppression from the government, the public's actual opinions and the related protests were curbed (Boykoff 2016b).

Taking these factors into account, I would like to "intentionally complicate" Boykoff's (2014) explanations of PPPs with affective neoliberalism by highlighting "his somewhat contentious uncoupling of PPPs from neoliberalism" (Andrews 2019, p. 84). I argue that the relationships within the Olympic Games are lopsided not only between the public and private spheres but also between the privileged and the underrepresented, including (dis)abled bodies, (non)humans, and nature. Furthermore, as Boykoff (2014) identified, multiple types of supporters of the IOC and the Olympics assist the continuation of this unequal linkage by contributing to perpetuating the state of exception. These include

the government; security-, military-, and construction-related industries; the organizing committee; and, most importantly, the media. While expanding the jubilant corporatization, commercialization, spectacularization, and celebratization of the Olympic Games (Andrews 2019), its close accomplices' dissemination of diverse affective effects in cooperation with widespread media sources quells seemingly unfavorable representation of the event by amplifying positive stories. Examples include "festive feelings of goodwill, peace, and internationalism" (Boykoff 2014, p. 5), "the feel-good claims of environmental and social sustainability" (p. 5), and "emotion-generating advertisements from corporate sponsors" (p. 101). Thus, "[t]he 'feelgood factor' is [affective neoliberalism's] justificatory crutch" (Boykoff 2014, p. 116) which subsequently promotes an extensive "washing" (Skey 2023) process of the Olympic Games that diminishes it to only one image—the positive aspects of the event. Consequently, affective neoliberalism ultimately triggers the mystification of the Olympic Games and thus Disneylimpics by simplifying the complex configurations within the event. While constantly stimulating affective leaning toward positive storylines, it objectifies the event and thus successfully augments "upward and downward shifts in scalar narratives that both highlight the pivotal role of the IOC as well as the uniqueness of place that the host city proffers" (Boykoff 2014, p. 102). In other words, affective neoliberalism within Olympic spaces downplays perceived negative, localized, and *ubietous* heterogeneities while emphasizing more positive, globalized, and *ubiquitous* homogeneities (Andrews 2019). Hence, it engenders the reductionism and essentialism of the Olympic Games without considering its multilayered realities (DeLanda 2016) entangled with numerous dominant, overlooked, and unseen forces.

3. The Greatest Sporting Myth Ever

3.1. From Lawrence Grossberg to Karl Polanyi

Although previous sections delineated an operation of affective neoliberalism within the Olympic Games, it remains unclear how its multi-dimensional movement is possible across and even beyond Olympic space. In this respect, I would like first to reconsider Boykoff's (2014) theoretical interpretation of the state of exception in relation to three associated scholars—Carl Schmitt, Giorgio Agamben, and Naomi Klein:

> While the state of exception can often help preserve governmental structure (Schmitt), galvanize the squelching of political rights (Agamben), or install disaster capitalism (Klein), it can also take the form of celebration where rather than fear we get fête, rather than the bare life we get the beer life, rather than disaster we get spectacle. (p. 11)

To reiterate, Boykoff's concept of celebration capitalism emphasized the festive aspect of the Olympics. Specifically, under the comprehensive influence of celebratory conditions, it is rather difficult to fully recognize the rapid enlargement of lopsided power dynamics. While affective neoliberalism also acknowledges the sweeping continuation of the state of exception—following Grossberg (2018)—I argue that not merely the celebration aspect but another affective factor—anxiety—is one of its core components contributing to the consolidation of the state of exception. Thus, this section first elucidates the swift inflation of anxiety and its outcomes, inspired by Grossberg's (2018) concept of affective landscape. Then, it investigates the historical rise of affective neoliberalism, referring to Polanyi's (2001) explication in his seminal book, *The Great Transformation*.

3.1.1. From Lawrence Grossberg: The Internalization of Anxiety

Although anxiety as a concept appears to share similarities with the idea of fear, it retains one conspicuous difference. Whereas fear is usually transitory and stems from obvious causes, anxiety is prolonged "in a perpetual state of virtual 'angst'" (Grossberg 2018, p. 99) without a clear beginning or end. As Grossberg (2018) noted:

> Always experienced in the present, anxiety is yet always a futurity, operating in a future tense. It renders crisis banal, a new normal, a never-ending normalization

of the state of emergency as it were. The sense of perpetual emergency becomes ordinary, everyday experience. (p. 99)

As noted in the previous sections, the main goal of affective neoliberalism is to publicize more positive, transnational, and uncontested understandings of the Olympic Games by trivializing seemingly negative, domestic, and contested stories. However, expanding upon Grossberg's (2018) conceptualization of affective landscape, an escalation of anxiety, which leads one to embroil oneself in extreme frustration by eliminating any opportunities to reflect on the past, present, and future status, is another influence that traverses society. In other words, affective neoliberalism normalizes a state of "omnipresent anxiety" (Grossberg 2018, p. 100) by internalizing "the terror of the humiliation of being a victim" (Grossberg 2018, p. 98) in the public frame of mind.

More specifically, affective neoliberalism advances a profound sense of detachment from reality that, in turn, induces three levels of affective isolation from society. First, it promotes "an increasing self-consciousness" (Grossberg 2018, p. 95) associated with heightened relativism. While facilitating "the inability to judge the comparative value or merit of anything" (Grossberg 2018, p. 94), it leads to a fixation on what one perceives as important due to individual efforts. Moreover, an elevated sense of personal certainty allows one to cultivate "an absolute sense of partisanship" (Grossberg 2018, p. 96) that justifies a strong binary perception of society, such as dichotomic formations of superiority versus inferiority, good versus evil, and us versus them (Grossberg 2018, p. 97). As a result, affective neoliberalism heightens anxiety, leading to "an organization of passive nihilism" (Grossberg 2018, p. 92) that concretizes temporal and spatial separations from reality. Hence, widespread affective neoliberalism formalizes "a radical personalization of everything" (Grossberg 2018, p. 101) or "an increasing sense of personal omnipotence" (Grossberg 2018, p. 101) that appears to offer the exclusive freedom of private choices. However, it bears two representative paradoxes: (1) this "choice is necessarily constrained by the range of goods and services on offer" (Andrews 2019, p. 17) and (2) it overlooks "the lack of freedom, or agency, experienced by those incorporated into the bonded labor relations enacted by debt-financed consumption" (Andrews 2019, p. 17). More specifically, the choice assigned to the public cannot originate from its authentic discretion. Rather, it stems from artificial packages of the privileged groups utilized to reinforce the existing social formation by concealing the complexities of diverse processes intertwined with unequal power relations.

Therefore, the repercussion that evolved from the multi-scaled movement of affective neoliberalism is that it leads people to believe that "the problem is simple" (Grossberg 2018, p. 31) and, eventually, renders "people increasingly feel[ing] incapable of making a difference" (Grossberg 1992, p. 65). However, it simultaneously triggers

replicative *corporatization* (institutional and management reorganization designed to realize profit-driven structures and logics); expansive *commercialization* (sport brand diversification and non-sport brand promotion across multiple sectors); creative *spectacularization* (entertainment-focused delivery of popular sport spectacles, realized through a combination of structural reformation and cross-platform mass mediation); and intensive *celebritization* (sporting contests constructed around, and a site for the embellishment of, specific public persona). (Andrews 2019, pp. 8–9, italics in original).

Consequently, the mystification of sport and physical culture prevails due to the divergent forms of sporting spaces—including Disneylimpics—being consistently conceived of as "some sort of escape" (Silk 2012, p. 6) from the extensive influence of both the state of exception and societal/personal anxieties by popularizing their "entertainment-oriented, and superficially benign" (Andrews 2019, p. 75) appearances as their core quality. Hence, while minimizing deeper, (un)noticed complexities, the affective neoliberalization of sport and physical culture creates the "setting for responsibilitized neoliberal citizen-consumers"

(Andrews 2019, p. 81) who are not able to actively debunk this (un)intentional distraction and ultimately contribute to the depoliticization of a collective public response.

3.1.2. To Karl Polanyi: The Greatest Transformation Ever

Despite its illustrations of the multilayered impact of affective neoliberalism across different dimensions, its accurate origin remains debatable, given that affective neoliberalism is never prearranged and passive but rather contingent and complex. While accepting this inherent limitation, Polanyi's book *The Great Transformation* can provide a probable exposition. According to Polanyi (2001), the economic system was initially embedded in a social matrix in that the domination of social relations over economic benefits was a fundamental societal rule. In other words, it was impossible to argue that pursuing financial gain was "the governing principle" (Maertens 2008, p. 134) because strict society-based rules initially "absorbed" (Polanyi 2001) the economy. Instead, reciprocity and redistribution were two core tenets confirming solid social relations among various groups (Isaac 2005; Maertens 2008). That is, although economic actions were pursued to fulfill basic human needs, their main purpose was not to seek economic achievement but rather social connection. To illustrate this prioritization of non-economic relations over economic factors, Polanyi (2001) invoked Kula trade as a representative example, a gift exchange based on mutual trust. If a particular group of people first gives a cherished item to another group, the receiving group then once again grants what they have received to another tribe. After continuous circulation, the first group eventually regains what it initially provided by (re)affirming a firm trust foundation among disparate groups. As a result, such consistent reciprocal exchanges, as well as the redistribution of certain valuable items among particular groups, imply that the "price-setting market principle" cannot override social relations (Isaac 2005, p. 18).

However, while highlighting "the impact of the Industrial Revolution" (Polanyi 2001, p. 79) and the consequent development of "elaborate machinery and plant[s]" (Polanyi 2001, p. 78), Polanyi (2001) also asserted that the economy had "been disembedded from the social and political matrix" (Polanyi Levitt 2020, p. 35). In consequence, "institutional transformation" (Thomasberger 2020, p. 137) that occurred in the nineteenth century led to a "socially disembedded" (Thomasberger 2020, p. 138) "capitalist (market) economy" (Isaac 2005, p. 15). In other words, the self-regulating market system eventually diminished diverse activities to their "exchange value", solely intended for sale (Polanyi Levitt 2020, p. 22). Moreover, this vast transformation led to the commodification of land, money, and labor as the fundamental elements of machine-based production (Maertens 2008). That is, the three essential elements of society that previously never existed for sale were also affected by a rapid shift. As Polanyi (2001) noted:

> *Labor* is only another name for a human activity which goes with life itself, which in its turn is not produced for sale but for entirely different reasons, nor can that activity be detached from the rest of life, be stored or mobilized *land* is only another name for nature, which is not produced by man; actual *money*, finally, is merely a token of purchasing power which, as a rule, is not produced at all, but comes into being through the mechanism of banking or state finance. None of them is produced for sale. The commodity description of labor, land, and money is entirely *fictitious*. (pp. 75–76, italics added)

To rephrase, following the Industrial Revolution, labor, land, and money became fictitious commodities, meaning that all social elements, including components that "were either not produced at all, or not produced for sale" (Desai 2020, p. 78), became goods for purchase. Ultimately, the development of a self-regulating market transformed society into "an accessory of the economic system" (Polanyi 2001, p. 79), representing a total reversal of the relationship between the social and the economic.

Furthering Polanyi's (2001) claims, I argue that the September 11 attacks of 2001 are a particular event that incited the rapid rise of affective neoliberalism. As Butterworth (2017) pointed out, "the lens of 9/11 is decidedly US-centric" (p. 3); it is also indisputable

that simply depicting it and its aftereffects as "massive" is still not adequate. As Silk (2012) noted:

> This was a moment, then, in which the banal, the sporting popular, was harnessed, politicized, and, as an affective public pedagogy, deployed as soft-core weaponry in a hard-core militarized industrial complex, fighting wars on both a domestic and national stage. (p. 3)

In other words, after the 9/11 attacks, provocative militarization "further capitalized on sporting narratives" (Silk 2012, p. 3) that "centered around fear, terror, the military and an attack on democracy and civil liberties" (Silk 2012, p. 10)—not just inside the United States but also across the globe. Specifically, "the combined forces of globalization, neoliberalism, and militarization have profoundly affected both formal institutions and everyday popular culture in all regions of the planet" (Butterworth 2017, p. 3) as a central aftermath of this (trans)national incident that has constantly sparked a wide range of affective (re)actions, including but not limited to the internalization/normalization of anxiety in addition to an enduring internal/external state of emergency.

Consequently, if Polanyi identified the influence/evolution of the Industrial Revolution and more sophisticated machinery as the prime facilitator of the great transformation that launched the development of initial industrial capitalism, as described in Figure 1, I argue that the September 11 attacks and their far-reaching consternation sparked *the greatest transformation ever* that safely settled the "'there is no alternative' (TINA)" philosophy (Andrews 2019, p. 71) in relation to affective neoliberalism. More radically, "[w]hat gets destroyed is the capacity to be human in any other way than that which [affective neoliberalism] requires and dictates" (Harvey 2014, p. 262). In addition to three fictitious commodities of labor, land, and money, which were never designed for sale, affective neoliberalism, especially after 11 September 2001, has led to the *soul*—one of the most pristine affective entities in the world—being constantly regulated by the "satanic mill" (Polanyi 2001, p. 77), and consequently disembedded from both society and the public, as illustrated in Figure 2.
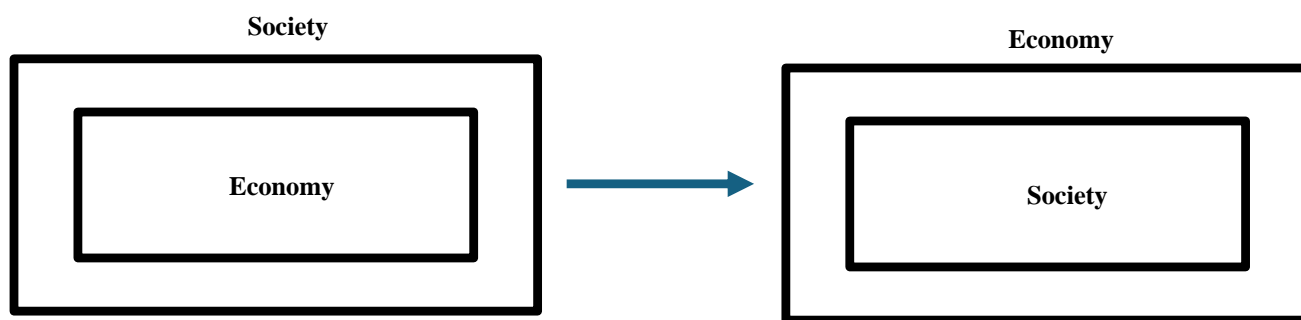
Figure 1. Karl Polanyi and *The Great Transformation*.
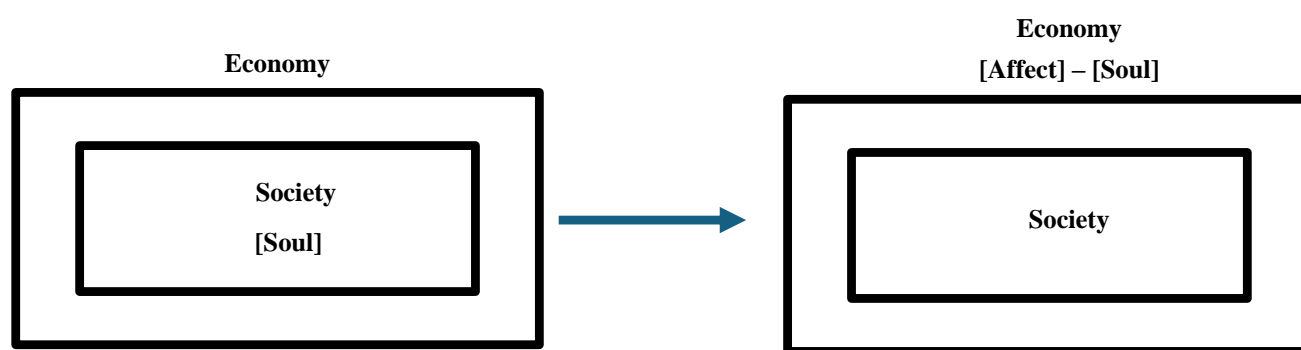
Figure 2. Affective neoliberalism and *The Greatest Transformation*.

4. Discussion and Conclusions

This paper explored the ultimate mystification process of sport and physical culture. It proposed a concept called affective neoliberalism while expanding upon two innovative conceptual frameworks: (1) Boykoff's (2014) celebration capitalism and (2) Grossberg's (2018) affective landscape. It first investigated the evolution of the Olympic Games—which was initially appropriated by Pierre de Coubertin—into the widely known Disneylimpics that has prompted an international proliferation of corporate forces across the event. This study applied Boykoff's (2014) concept of celebration capitalism to examine the distinctive, Disney-like, affective circulation prevalent within the contemporary Olympic Games. While shedding more light on neoliberalism's affective and ideological operations, it captured the condensation/coexistence of affective reverberations within the Olympic Games, including both celebration and suppression. Additionally, this paper highlighted Boykoff's (2014) humanist perspective on the imbalanced nature of public and private partnerships (PPPs). It purposefully blurred the lines of these unequal relationships by broadening their scope. This expansion covered the interaction between public and private domains, the dynamics between privileged groups and underrepresented communities, and between various business sectors and the environment. Thus, affective neoliberalism is a complex combination of various affective reflections in response to celebratory and repressive contextual conditions, primarily disseminated through extensive media coverage. However, it reinforces unequal power relations between the privileged and underrepresented by selectively amplifying positive and generalized images that support its ongoing enlargement. In short, affective neoliberalism employs strategic "washing" (Skey 2023) techniques throughout various aspects of the Olympic Games. This approach aims to preserve the status quo by preventing the potential spread of negative representations.

In addition to the multi-scaled movement of affective neoliberalism within the Olympic Games, this paper addressed how affective neoliberalism can exude its impact beyond this gargantuan sporting competition by embracing Grossberg's (2018) notion of affective landscape and his interpretations of the state of urgency concerning anxiety. While distinguishing anxiety as one of its main targets, affective neoliberalism intensifies an affective desolation by normalizing three predominant individual tendencies that are difficult to contradict: (1) self-consciousness and relativism, (2) a twofold conceptualization of society, and (3) temporal and spatial estrangement from reality. Consequently, affective neoliberalism causes individuals to objectify complex socio-historical, technological, and political issues, which may initially encourage individual agency but eventually preserve a deep sense of helplessness. Hence, the mystification process of sport and physical culture can persist because various sporting spaces offer people ostensibly harmless affective havens from prevailing macro- and micro-level senses of failure. However, it is crucial to acknowledge that this affective propensity arises from a multilayered movement of affective neoliberalism that simultaneously rationalizes replicative corporatization, expansive commercialization, creative spectacularization, and intensive celebritization of sport and physical culture. Ultimately, these factors contribute to the depressive depoliticization of society (Andrews 2019).

This paper also delved into the historical development of affective neoliberalism by referring to Polanyi's (2001) account in his influential book, *The Great Transformation*. His examination of the significant societal changes in the nineteenth century focused on the emergence of a self-regulating market economy by scrutinizing the (dis)embeddedness of the economy within society. Under the influence of the Industrial Revolution and the development of increasingly advanced machines, massive institutional-level conversion emerged by transforming three major societal essentials—labor, land, and money—into fictitious commodities that society never deemed available for sale. Consistent with this description, the rapid inflation of affective neoliberalism was probable due to the 11 September 2001, attacks (Butterworth 2017; Silk 2012). This process amplified feelings of emergency and mistrust by intensifying the provocative militarization beyond sport and physical culture. It also cemented the "'there is no alternative' (TINA)" tenet (Andrews

2019, p. 71), leading to the greatest transformation ever and restructuring the soul into an additional fictitious commodity alongside labor, land, and money.

In contemporary society, sport and physical culture are enormous enterprises "too serious to be taken seriously" (Allison 1998, p. 2) or "*too big to fail*" (Andrews 2019, p. 7, italics in original) as a result of a longstanding mystification process. My main concern is that introducing a new idea about neoliberalism in relation to sport and physical culture might deepen "neoliberal fatigue" (Andrews 2019, p. 63) in academia. This condition reflects "an 'enough already' sensibility" (Andrews 2019, p. 63) toward discussions on this topic, suggesting that scholars have already completed sufficient studies. Although I believe this is a fallacy because sport, physical culture, and neoliberalism-centered projects still share a determinate relationship with "the dominant, *yet evolving* political ideology" worldwide (Andrews 2019, p. 63, italics added), I acknowledge that the research should not be meaninglessly determined by adopting "an essentialized and universalized notion neoliberalism" (Andrews 2019, p. 64). As Grossberg (2017) stated:

> Sometimes these labels simply describe new practices or logics, and sometimes they are more radical claims about the changing essence of the epoch, as if, for example, "neoliberalism" described a new totalizing logic that has reshaped the entire field of life. (p. 138)

Following Grossberg, neoliberalism, as an academic concept, should not be "understood as a singular and global phenomenon" (Clarke 2023, p. 64) by underestimating its "historical variations" (Clarke 2023, p. 64). Indeed, neoliberalism has strategically modified its presentation by aligning itself with various forces in society. Clarke (2023) aptly identified a current transnational trend in this regard as follows:

> What may be distinctive about *this* conjuncture is the way it foregrounds one of those spatial formations—the nation—as both the focus and setting of political-cultural contestation. The idea of the nation emerged as a focal point for conflict and mobilisations, not least in the proliferation of imaginings of the 'way forward' that demand the restoration of the nation—making X great again. (p. 30, italics in original)

Neoliberalism in general and affective neoliberalism, in particular, sways its extraordinary clout in present-day society by eliciting various affective effects, including those of "giving voice to 'rage' against the elites, expressing 'loss' in relation to ways of life, asserting 'pride' in personal, community and national histories, and announcing a condition of 'righteousness' (about almost everything)" (Clarke 2023, p. 56). In short, they operate alongside and amplify established (trans)national doctrines, such as populism, nationalism, ethnocentrism, androcentrism, militarism, and totalitarianism.

Thus, I argue that a subtle but, at the same time, "palpable shift" (Silk and Andrews 2012, p. 6) is in the process—following Hall ([1979] 2019b, [1998] 2017)—as "the great moving right show" or, put more succinctly, "the great moving nowhere show", as it steadily loses its relevant controlling directions across different countries. For instance, the seemingly progressive but conservative, transnational geopoliticization of sport and physical culture is now conspicuous. This phenomenon is predominant in Gulf nations, such as Qatar and Saudi Arabia, where their oil-based, abundant resources are utilized as a central power to magnify their authority (cf. Burton and Naraine 2023; Chadwick 2022; Chadwick et al. 2023). Given this unique context, it is crucial to critically discern both individual and collective positionality because "[r]ecognizing what is now ending and what is beginning can help us respond to the predicament of living in the fissures between one epoch and another" (Davies 2018, p. 2). Therefore, it is necessary to acknowledge that "there is complexity everywhere and at every level" (Grossberg 2018, p. 31) by regarding sport and physical culture "as being connected to society, culture and business, though as a part of much wider networks of interconnecting relationships" (Chadwick 2022, p. 695). That is, the question of how to more effectively confront complexity, contingency, contestation, and multiplicity, while persistently wrestling with the temptations of falling

into fundamentalism, simplification, essentialism, and reductionism, should be the primary focus (Grossberg 2010, p. 54; Grossberg 2020).

Hence, studying sport and physical culture can commence by focusing on specific domains within the field; however, I do not believe that this intellectual process should simply end within them. Specifically, by using Braidotti's (2013) term, the research can stem from a personal "epistemophilic yearning" (p. 11) for sport and physical culture. However, the ultimate destination should be critically concerned about different; new; and, hopefully, better possibilities. Assorted struggles could be ongoing; they are "almost never in the same place, over the same meaning or value" (Hall [1981] 2019a, p. 357). More importantly, "[b]etter stories open new possibilities. Better stories create more spaces. Better stories make [them] more seeable and sayable. [Thus], [b]etter stories narrate the overwhelming complexity of a present stitched together from way too much" (Behrenshausen 2019, p. 69). However, it appears that affective neoliberalism is boundless even in academia as the "sense of urgency is intensified by the combined and ugly pressures of contemporary academic life, of career making and of the increasingly commodified processes of publishing" (Clarke 2017, p. 79). Many scholars "have bitten, vampiristically, into endless necks" (Atkinson 2023, p. 775) of "an unyielding and enduring publish or perish culture" to survive (Atkinson 2023, p. 780). In short, typical scholarly responsibilities have become unusual nonsense in contemporary intellectual work in concert with affective neoliberalism.

Consequently, following Atkinson (2023, p. 793), the initial fundamental step in countering affective neoliberalism is to contemplate how to reorient oneself toward "unapologetically theoretical, artistic, expressive, thought-provoking, conceptually unsafe, philosophical, and experimental research" while simultaneously rethinking the most pertinent positionalities that we should take within the present context. Hence, a modest anticipation of this paper is to engender a continuous rumination of two interconnected questions: (1) where are we now? and (2) how can we more wisely respond to this particular present context at this particular present moment?

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: No new data were created or analyzed in this study. Data sharing is not applicable to this article.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

Note

1. For example, South Korea is now in a rapid neoliberalization process with established national creeds, including Confucianism, nationalism, and developmentalism (cf. Cho 2008; Lee 2021; Kim and Park 2003; Song 2024).

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