

With Walkouts, a New High Bar for Protests in Sports is Set - THE NEW YORK TIMES - Aug. 27, 2020

SYNTHÈSE – PROPOSITION DE CORRIGE

As the past few months have been stained by yet new cases of police brutality in the US, with – among others – the murders of George Floyd in May and the shooting of Jacob Blake at the end of the summer, popular protests have spread through the entire world. Black Lives Matter marches have been organized in various countries, symbols of the oppression of black citizens, such as monuments to historical slavery figures, have been vandalized and national debates over historical racial inequalities have been sparked. In America, the protests took another turn two weeks ago, when pro athletes took the loudest stand in history after Jacob Blake was shot seven times in Kenosha, Wisconsin, and organized a clear boycott of NBA games, paralyzing the world of sports and the economy it feeds.

In this article depicting the impact of this protest, the journalist presents the exceptional stance that sports players have taken and goes on to analyze the deeper social issues at stake.

1. An earthquake in US sports

1- National walkouts

- Sports protests have shaken America since the 1960s → already used to denounce racial inequalities (1960s = Civil Rights Movement)
- NBA players took clear & radical action by refusing to play & forcing games to be postponed → reveals the urgency & gravity of the current situation
- Walkouts have spread to predominantly white sports → shows that the concerns over police brutality are universally shared

2. A new form of protest

- 1st time such boycott of the games is organized: impactful gesture is "high bar" for protests → unprecedented movement = strong impact of the message conveyed
- Athletes have moved on from dignified & discreet protests & are now challenging social norms by refusing to play → shows evolution of society in general & of activism in particular
- Movement has paralyzed sports world → America had no choice but to listen to what the athletes had to say = radical action guarantees efficiency

While the boycott movement has clearly shaken America and seems to have made the message heard, what it truly reveals are complex social issues deeply rooted in the country's culture and institutions.

2. Deep & complex social issues

1- Police brutality

- Enumeration of victims + emphatic writing style 1st paragraph = insistence on accumulation → shows the inacceptable
- Players are both activists (C. Kaepernick, LB James) & victims of police brutality (cf S. Brown's 2018 violent arrest) → no one is safe → police brutality is so common that even notoriety does not protect black athletes
- Current movement denounces both injustice against black people & lack of action despite years of protests

2. The American representation of patriotism

- 1968 Olympics protest + C. Kaepernick 2016 kneeling protest sparked great controversy → violent backlash & condemnation against protesters criticizing America's institutions
- 2020 sports walkout happening at the same time as Republican Convention = opposition of two Americas, conservatism VS racial & social progress → the people VS the institutions?
- New generation of black athletes / activists = new movement & new actions → new values which may finally bring change?

The journalist insists on the storm caused by this silent protest, opposing the silence to the outrage America should feel in front of the accumulation of police brutality and the oppression of its black citizens. But beyond this year's exceptional activism in sports, the US should heed its new generation in order to have a chance at finally making things change.

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COMMENTAIRE – PROPOSITION DE CORRIGE

This latest sports protest has had a particular impact because of the exception it represents. It was a new form of political opposition, a new form of power. This can lead us to think about the new forms of expression of democracy that can currently be observed in the world. While these movements reveal the oppositions between institutions and the people they represent, they don't always have the expected effect.

1. Institutions VS power to the people

a- Challenging social norms

- Numerous current international popular movements: Belarusian election protest, Black Lives Matter demonstrations, marches for climate in the entire world for the past year... → new waves of expression, people demanding change → democracy = constant reevaluation of norms and practices
- *cf article "emboldened generation", "vanguard" of protesters: initiators of protest movements are depicted as social sentinels → athlete protests are setting the tone, particular protests can initiate popular movements and gain global support → change needs challengers to spark protests, but massive support is essential to effectively challenge the institutions

b- Revolutions & major changes

- Some popular movements have indeed brought significant change: cf US Civil Rights movement in the US and end of Segregation : civil disobedience, sit-ins in "white only" restaurants... → unprecedented expression of popular resistance
- Democracy = power in the hands of the voters / power to the people → popular movements can have legal & political consequences : cf France Yellow Vests movements & government backpedaling on fuel tax project
- *cf article: "a high bar for protests has been set" : there's a hierarchy in the impact & efficiency that different types of protests can have → prefigures limits of people's power even in a democracy

While popular or more targeted forms of protests do seem to have brought tremendous change in the previous decades, these expressions of democracy do have their limits. The balance of powers can't always be tilted, and the emotional content of many popular movements can affect their efficiency.

3. Limits & Opposition

a- The power balance

- *cf article: "a clash of 2 Americas" : reveals the weight of conservatism & institutions VS evolution of society & population → can the two be reconciled? → balance must be found between maintaining order to manage the country and adapting to new norms
- Does the status quo weigh heavier than social change? *while police brutality & discriminations against black people are still tragically common in the US, much has evolved in terms of integration since the 1968 Olympics protest → but no real improvement of black people's consideration by police & institutions → power of habits VS population's needs? Is it still a true democracy when the elite's needs are put first?

b- Emotion VS reflection

- Constant news + social media = immediate reaction is expected when sth happens → cf JK Rowling transphobic tweets controversy & need for Harry Potter cast to immediately mark distance & disapproval → no reflection & risk to fall into the trap of public shaming without reflection & true justification
- *Similar to immediate statements from star athletes after Blake shooting: emotional reaction in that case was able to spark significant action, but allowing a protest movement to be ruled by emotion only can lead to more nefarious consequences: cf violent Black Lives Matter riots in Wisconsin
- Emotion used as a communication strategy: cf Nike campaigns (C. Kaepernick, M. Rapinoe: use of figures of sports activists) → playing on popular emotion about police brutality, using popular engagement as marketing strategy → similar to populist politics: using emotional popular protests to gain support

Notoriety and new media have indeed affected the ways the popular voice is expressed nowadays, bringing a new dimension to politics and democracy in general. While this allows challenging unjust practices and denouncing some social patterns, it is not necessarily the most efficient way to achieve long-lasting, significant social change. Some middle ground between passionate popular movements and more traditional expressions of democracy should be aspired to.