

Deflategate: What Does it Tell Us about America?



Deflategate has driven virtually every other story off of the news shows and talk shows for several days now. At the center of the controversy is Tom Brady, quarterback of the New England Patriots, who, a National Football League report says, very likely knew that Patriot employees were involved in deflating several footballs to give Brady and the Patriots an advantage in the American Football Conference Championship Game of the 2014 season. Pundits have called the Brady and his team "cheaters" and "liars," though interestingly Governor Chris Christie—also accused of being a cheater and a liar—defends Brady, saying people are just jealous of those whose lives seem so perfect.

Why do the media and so many Americans find Deflategate so fascinating and become so passionate about the issue? Perhaps the strongest strand of the American ideology of democratic capitalism is the notion of equality of opportunity. We often say that there should be a "level playing field" so that all have a fair change, so no one has to run uphill. And on that playing field Americans believe that everyone should be using a football inflated to exactly the same pounds-per-square-inch. No one should have a ball that's easier to handle, otherwise the game will not reveal who is really the best. As in football, so in society, Americans believe we should all go down on the field to compete as equals.

So the Deflategate controversy and the criticism of Brady and the Patriots are really an affirmation of the American ideology of democratic capitalism, but ironically the level playing field and the equally inflated footballs are only for the sports world. In American society, we know, not only the 1% but a much larger percent of prosperous people, go into the game with all sorts of advantages: greater assets, higher incomes, disproportionately lower taxes, better school, more higher education, personal, social and political connections. We are all well aware that the field is tilted, that their balls are so soft that you can grab them like they had a handle, while most people's balls are so hard that one can hardly get or keep a grip on them at all.

Would that some of the concern about fairness in sports would spill over into a concern about fairness in American society. Equality of opportunity would be a good starting point for a better society, if not a democratic socialist ideal.

We as socialists, no fans of economic and social competition, want not only equality of opportunity but also equality of outcomes. Everyone should know that whether or not they are the strongest, smartest, or the wildest, they will get a fine education, have good housing, and excellent health care, a stable climate and a healthy environment. We should go down on the field of life, not to win, but to play the game and enjoy it, making it a wonderful experience for all who play and great entertainment for all who watch.

Americans don't criticize Brady out of envy, as Christy suggests. We criticize him and his team because we believe in fairness. Let's see the same indignation the next time we hear about a plant closing and a mass layoff, about home foreclosures and evictions, about the police using racist violence against young Black men. No cheaters, no liars. Fairness. An even playing field and all the balls equally inflated. Let's start there.