

We Should Critique the NBA as a Cultural Product

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In an interview with the *New Yorker* this past June, former National Basketball Association (“NBA”) player Jalen Rose criticized the NBA’s ‘data analytics movement’ for how it incentivizes organizations to “funnel jobs” to people with advanced technical degrees, but without basketball experience. Bomani Jones and Pablo Torre subsequently devoted an entire segment of their

ESPN show “High Noon” to discussing Rose’s qualms, and whether the movement signified that “the rich guys” or “the nerds” had won. This led to a follow-up *New Yorker* interview between Jones and staff writer Issac Chotiner in which they discussed, among other things, the lack of opportunities for people of color within NBA data analytics departments and front offices.

This article will make the case that this series of exchanges, both what it helps to clarify and what it conceals, harbors important lessons for those of us on the Left. It will analyze the data analytics movement as well as the issues taken up by Rose, Chotiner, Jones, and Torre, situating both within the contested landscape of neoliberal ideology.

The Data Analytics Movement, and the NBA as an ISA

The data analytics movement (“DAM”) refers to the NBA’s widespread adoption over the last twenty years of advanced statistical modeling and data analytic methods, in the context of both basketball operations management and gameplay strategy. The adoption of DAM has been concurrent with a “revolution” in how the game of basketball is played, and the steady growth in the NBA’s popularity. Still, debates over the overall benefit of the movement persist. Just this past year, Kirk Goldsberry, the former Vice President of Strategic Research for the San Antonio Spurs, wrote a book critiquing DAM for its adverse impact on the game. Goldsberry ultimately argues for “an analytical supplement to our rule making and to our game’s engineering that can create a very beautiful version of the sport.” While Goldsberry’s critique is as radical as they come, his prescription is managerial technocracy in its purest form. It accepts that DAM is problematic but never entertains a broader paradigm shift. Teams now invest heavily in internal data analytics departments and tailor their

respective rosters according to the dictates of these new analytic methods and statistical models.

In this sense, DAM should be understood not as a development unique to the NBA, but as an outgrowth of capitalism as it works through its latest stage of development.

Here, the work of Louis Althusser on ideological state apparatuses (ISAs) can be helpful. Broadly speaking — and so as to stay away from the myriad disagreements and theoretical entanglements which follow from Althusser's earlier writings — ISAs are distinct institutions which primarily function as sites through which social and political actors actualize the ideology of the ruling class and reproduce the relations of production. ISAs become increasingly vital as the internal contradictions of capitalism manifest in crises, and reconcile in new relations of production and new productive technologies. They function as sites through which the ruling class can preserve the conditions necessary for capitalism's continued existence. Just as Goldsberry cannot think past the technocratic logic foundational to his position as a managerial technocrat, crises of capitalism are routinely addressed through technocratic solutions. If ISAs are performing their functions, structural solutions to structural problems are routinely framed as too destabilizing to warrant serious consideration.

ISAs and capitalist class relations have a mutually reinforcing relationship. That relationship is worth a deeper analysis in order to understand how the NBA functions on behalf of the preservation of capitalism.

Interpellation, and the Logic of Optimization

The latest era of capitalist accumulation has been called "surveillance capitalism," or "big data capitalism." Whatever its name, it treats in the production of surveillance and data intelligence technologies which commodify behavioral data, whether collected in physical workplaces or digital spaces. This new form of capital accumulation grew out of the totalizing social and economic system of financialized capitalism. The highly profitable but more volatile system of financialized capitalism, necessitated what Barbara and John Ehrenreich called in 1977 the professional-managerial class (PMC), a class of people whose interests comport most closely with those of capital, and whose productive activity is to manage and optimize that of the working class. After the digital and technological development boom, the PMC grew into an ever-expanding panoply of managers and bureaucrats who use advanced technologies to surveil workforces and redistribute behavioral data to third parties, among other things.

Whether as ushering in a new era of personal freedom in the case of the neoliberalization of the global economy, or aesthetic brilliance in the case of the NBA's DAM, both shifts in productive development were celebrated. They also both operate on the assumption that the point of their respective enterprises is to optimize workplace productivity — in the NBA's case, the on-court product. In the NBA, the logic of optimization is anchored to a similar set of productive technologies and production relations: the production of advanced algorithms and statistical models with which to analyze game-play; the recruitment of a technically skilled managerial class who reproduce and improve those models; the recruitment of players based on skill-sets the models deem optimizable; in turn, the creation of a labor market shaped by those models' outputs, etc. The NBA's PMC has expanded into a variegated strata of managers and data analysts who determine the career status and futures of the NBA's labor class. In order to achieve optimization, the PMC surveil, scrutinize, and manage the NBA players' experience as laborers. There is an entire conference, the Sloan Sports Analytic Conference (SSAC), where front office employees, journalists, academics and statisticians congregate to network and share insights and strategies. It is one of the key networking events for the NBA's PMC.

However, as with any of capitalism's stages of development, eventually its internal contradictions rise to the fore. Political and social arrangements under neoliberal hegemony construct human beings as atomized subjects in a marketplace of self-interested, rational consumers; they render widespread problems solvable only through means-tested, technocratic solutions; they cause depression and cast it as our own fault; they even jab their grubby tendrils in our dating lives. In the NBA, players who oftentimes overcome dire circumstances in order to reach the league, face similarly alienating conditions once there. They navigate a thoroughly bureaucratized market system which does not work on their behalf, only to have their attempts at exercising individual autonomy within that system referred to as "obnoxious" or as structurally destabilizing instances of "player empowerment." Their playing experience is determined less by their own collective talent and more by the dictates of advanced statistical calculations and predictive models. They specialize their skill development from an early age in order to mold their games to the dictates of these models, leading to taxing effects on the body which are only now being understood.

These contradictions might lead to change, maybe even emancipatory change, but ISAs play an instrumental role in maintaining ruling class ideology by mystifying class conflict. The Marxian economist Richard Wolff, and others, demonstrated how a similar process of mystification precipitated the rampant consumerism of the postwar era. Through what Althusser, Wolff, and others call interpellation, a process by which otherwise free subjects become, instead, constitutive subjects within, and subordinate to, ruling class ideology, workers were "called to think of (identify) themselves and everyone else as free market participants striving to maximize the consumption they could achieve from work." Through interpellation, NBA fans, as consumers of a massively popular global entertainment product, have united with NBA front offices in thinking of NBA players as individual assets in the optimization project of the PMC, rather than as laborers embedded in a contingent system of labor relations.

Instructively, at the same time as data analytics movement has assumed a hegemony within the league, the NBA has morphed into a panoptic entertainment experience which hides the actual game — and certainly the labor relations under-girding its production — under layers of commodification. During the league's trade deadline every February and free agency period every July, a flurry of transactional activity thrusts players onto new teams at the whim of their respective front offices. On Twitter, fans, reporters, players, managers, and other assorted entertainers all interact and participate in turning this process of worker upheaval into a virtual soap opera. Content creators turn gameplay into the proper object of reasoned, data-centric analysis. Fans either passively participate in this analysis, or develop commoditizable skills as armchair analysts or commentators. Twitter is effectively shut down every July during the NBA's free agency period, as fans and media types alike revel in the crude inner workings of the NBA's (restrictive and

exploitative) labor market. NBA players, thrust into situations of increased precarity, report increased levels of anxiety or depression only to have their salaries (tied to the 50-50 revenue split between players and owners) used to silence their testimony. NBA fans have effectively become handmaidens to the league's foundational logics, which are themselves derivative of ruling class ideology.

The aforementioned media circuit is instructive. ESPN and the NBA are partners, having recently agreed to a \$24 billion broadcasting rights deal. There is also a pipeline to and from the NBA and ESPN, with former league executives routinely finding second lives as talking heads, and vice versa. Through these reciprocative relationships, the NBA's PMC shape the broader conversations around the league — always around the ideology of the ruling class.

Just as mainstream media ignore and even exacerbate conflict, they cling to the obfuscating promise of inclusion within unjust or exploitative systems. For example, in their show's treatment of Rose's

New Yorker interview, ESPN's Jones and Torre end up ignoring the substantive critique undergirding Rose's concerns. Rose is primarily concerned with technical skill carrying more weight on the job market than "being in the foxhole, in the huddles, and out on the floor." Rose is asserting the normative worth of playing experience and its being most essential to the sport, per se, in comparison to the "productive activity" of the owners and managers. On their show, Jones and Torre started a conversation over whether the data analytics movement is sufficiently inclusive of technically skilled people of color. The logic here harkens back to the "diversity and inclusion" programs and discourses which have historically collapsed systemic structural critique into, instead, calls for a more diverse PMC.

Jones and Torre even stumble upon a useful description of the PMC when they discuss whether "the nerds" (the managerial class of data analysts) or "the rich guys" (the capitalist class of owners) had won. Clearly, both had won. After the aforementioned broadcasting rights deal, the NBA was flooded with money and became an attractive speculative endeavor for rich venture capitalists. As team valuations exploded, each team was able to significantly expand their front-office staff and invest in newer surveillance and intelligence technologies. In the words of Bomani Jones, as "a lot of private equity money is now buying these NBA teams," the owners "are taking the approaches they learned in the [private equity world], and then applying it ... to basketball." In an episode of his

ESPN-affiliated "The Right Time" podcast, Jones details the cold logic of DAM, which turns players into "puzzle pieces" within a larger team-building operation. This has culminated in a marriage between the investor and managerial classes and a hegemony of optimization logic, both of which redound to the benefit of ESPN and its affiliates. Unsurprisingly, Jones and Torre both gloss over the essentially alienating quality of that system, instead offering the fully neoliberalized critique of racial liberalism.

Searching for Worth, Challenging Neoliberal Hegemony

In the NBA, an expanding but ultimately contingent PMC routinely clash with an indispensable class of laborers. Historically, these tensions between the league's PMC and players tend toward crisis. In between formal clashes or labor disputes, these crises uncover chinks in the armor of data analytics hegemony and reveal the merits of potential alternatives.

The Houston Rockets and Philadelphia 76ers both made analytics and asset-maximization their *raison d'être*, and they serve as cautionary tales. The Rockets, run by Daryl Morey, a co-founder of SSAC with a background in computer science and consulting, dragged the insights of advanced analytics to their extremes. Their fidelity to player efficiency models incentivized their near habitual chase of star players, with the long-term effect being their players working in a perennial state of precarity; writers put together entire flow charts to track all of the players traded by Morey. Morey once described his job as the Rockets' general manager to be fundamentally about how to "better understand and manage the risk" of building teams according to quantitative analytics. While their playing and managerial style afforded them a modicum of success, the team has been defined by near-constant squabbling and chemistry issues. At the same time, fans criticize the team and its star, James Harden, for their playing style and shameless focus on prioritizing scoring efficiency over aesthetic brilliance. The team recently acquired Russell Westbrook, their third co-star for Harden, after previous co-stars Dwight Howard and Chris Paul wore out their respective welcomes. On their part, the 76ers were run from 2013-2016 by Sam Hinkie, a Morey protege described as "fluent in the dispassionate language of expected value and probability." The 76ers were mediocre by NBA standards, and Hinkie, most influenced by the Silicon Valley start-up mentality according to which the "mediocre middle is to be avoided at all costs, immediately sloughed off the team's established players in exchange for future draft assets. His team-building strategy even earned the kitchy name "The Process" due to its grinding, long-term focus. Hinkie's teams won only 47 of the

246 games played under his watch, and his players openly wondered whether they would be the next martyr to The Process. While it drew far too much attention to the ruthless NBA business — the league’s owners literally staged a coup d’etat of Hinkie’s position, installing in his place Bryan Colangelo, the failson of friend-of-the-NBA Jerry Colangelo — Hinkie’s strategy has become the league’s dominant operating method.

If the Rockets and 76ers are cautionary tales in the cold, dispassionate logic of the data analytics movement, the San Antonio Spurs and Memphis Grizzlies may serve as examples of the value which its hegemony conceals. While the Spurs won a championship in 2014 and have maintained two-decades of sustained brilliance, their coach Greg Popovich has railed against increased

three-point attempts and the heavy focus on data analytics. He attributes the Spurs’ success to their having built a team culture which makes players feel a part of something greater than themselves. The Memphis Grizzlies played a notoriously antiquated style and never won at the highest level.

Still, the team cultivated a powerful relationship with Memphis by playing a style which reflected that of the city. The team’s era of success was dubbed “Grit and Grind,” a mantra which became a lasting ethic even after the team’s core players departed.

The Spurs and Grizzlies can’t be replicated through the transactional logic of “The Process,” nor through the mathematism in Houston. Still, they demonstrate the value of workplace arrangements premised on continuity and which function in the service of their players. Throughout NBA history, there are a bevy of examples of teams who never won at the highest level, but who maintained close ties both among themselves or among their fan-bases. Those close ties, the camaraderie, and the sense that everyone’s collective activity is going to something greater than the sum of their parts — those are what persist as team-building norms irrespective of the tools and methods in vogue at a given time.

It matters that we take heed of that lesson.

In the 1980s, British prime minister Margaret Thatcher infamously earned herself the nickname “TINA” for insisting that “there is no alternative” to the neoliberal free-market economy. While defeatist, her sentiment was broadly felt at the time. Later that decade, Fredric Jameson said that “it’s easier to imagine the end of the world than to imagine the end of capitalism,” and Francis Fukuyama declared just a few years after that the Soviet Union’s collapse signaled the triumph of capitalism and “the end of history.” In many respects, the feeling persists in the present moment — certainly in the United States, where calls at the national political level for basic social democracy are met with cynical haranguing over divisiveness and pleas for pragmatism.

While these declarations have proven wrong, they extended out of the totalizing nature of what some call neoliberal hegemony: a set of normative assumptions about the world which the dominant classes asserted after rejecting Keynesianism in the late-1960s, and which have been naturalized in the structure of existing financial, political, and social institutions. Under neoliberal hegemony, our governing institutions mediate human experience through increasingly individualizing bureaucratic structures. Economic and political inequality, a collapsed union movement, the descent of the political state into fascism, and individual alienation from social and political life, among other things, have all followed suit.

Apart from its implementation in and through concrete social, political and financial institutions, neoliberal hegemony is also expressed and routinized through social and cultural production. Our music, movies, art, and sports all deal in the conditions of our daily lives. If they function properly, they express the same message: there is no alternative. Not only does the NBA as one such cultural

product reproduce itself by adapting and naturalizing existing labor relations and productive technologies, but it tests these relations and productions for other industries, like energy and healthcare. In so doing, it serves as one area through which capitalism reproduces its fundamental class relations.

The late Mark Fisher wrote extensively on neoliberalism's intractability, but he also implored us to remember that what now seems inevitable was once considered impossible. Basically, that there is an alternative to neoliberal hegemony, and it can be culled together by establishing what Nancy Fraser calls a "counterhegemony" — a set of assumptions asserted by the dominated classes to undermine and replace those established by the ruling class to naturalize its domination. In both the NBA and in our broader political and economic situation, laborers are subjected to a system of production which does not work according to their interests. In the NBA, of course, the stakes are much lower than in politics; players are paid handsomely, and the league is an entertainment industry that might actually be too big to fail.

However, the low stakes are exactly *why* we should be critical over the league's hegemonic logics. If we accept our political order's internal contradictions when it might not matter, we prefigure our resignation when it does. At the political level, nothing less is at stake than the livelihoods and futures of those excluded from profiting off of the scant fruits of neoliberal hegemony, or from determining the trajectory of its development. Insofar as the NBA is one site wherein neoliberal hegemony is produced and reproduced, its tensions, contradictions and crisis points should be challenged and excavated for the values otherwise concealed. By that same token, we can and should be critical about existing workplace arrangements and bold about formulating alternatives.

Investigating the aporia of neoliberal hegemony is our best chance to contest its status as a system without alternative. Insofar as exposing the contradictions of the NBA can help us to chip away at the foundational assumptions of neoliberal hegemony, we can posit the NBA, as an ISA, as a potential site of class struggle. Eventually, we can outright replace neoliberal hegemony with social and political arrangements that follow out of a different set of assumptions. We can build a world premised on the value of collectivities, interdependence and freedom from need.