

# The Political Economy of Sport: Orwell's Critique of Nationalism, Commodification, and Competitive Culture

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## ABSTRACT

George Orwell's 1945 essay "The Sporting Spirit" offers a provocative critique of the relationship between competitive sport, nationalism, and human psychology. Although written in a period when professional sport was far less commercially developed than it is today, Orwell's argument provides a useful framework for examining the political and economic structures of contemporary sport. This paper re-examines Orwell's critique through the lens of the political economy of sport, arguing that the forces he identified-national rivalry, collective identity, aggression, and the desire for victory have become increasingly intertwined with commercial interests. The expansion of broadcasting rights, corporate sponsorship, sportsperson branding, professional labour markets, globalization, and digital media has transformed sport into a major global industry. At the same time, the financialization of sport has intensified pressures on sportspersons and spectators, while major international competitions continue to mobilize national identity as a source of economic value. Through an examination of the FIFA World Cup, Olympic Games, the National Basketball Association (NBA), and Formula 1, this paper demonstrates that contemporary sport simultaneously functions as entertainment, political symbolism, and a commercial commodity. The paper argues that Orwell's critique remains relevant not because modern sport is identical to the sport of his time, but because the underlying relationship between competition, identity, power, and economic interests has become more sophisticated. The paper concludes by proposing a humanistic approach to sport that places sportspersons welfare above the pursuit of commercial and political objectives.

**Keywords:** George Orwell, Sports economics, Nationalism, Commodification, Political Economy, Globalization, Sportsperson labour, Competitive Culture, Humanistic Approach

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## INTRODUCTION

Sport occupies a distinctive position in modern society, functioning simultaneously as physical activity, entertainment, cultural expression, economic production, and political symbolism. While sporting competitions can generate collective identity and social solidarity, they can also produce nationalism, hostility, exclusion, and intense pressure to win. These tensions are further intensified by the contemporary sports industry, which is deeply connected to broadcasters, sponsors, investors, media platforms, and commercial organizations. George Orwell anticipated many of these concerns in his 1945 essay, "The Sporting Spirit." Writing in the aftermath of the Second World War, Orwell challenged the idea that international sport necessarily promotes friendship between nations. Instead, he argued that competitive sport can reproduce hostility and nationalist sentiment, particularly when sporting victories become symbols of national superiority.

Orwell's critique is especially relevant to contemporary sports economics. Modern sport has evolved into a global industry shaped by broadcasting rights, sponsorship, sportsperson branding, transfer markets, and international investment. This paper examines how these economic developments have intensified the nationalism and competitive culture identified by Orwell.

It argues that commercialization has not replaced Orwell's concerns but has monetized and amplified them. Through an analysis of media rights, sponsorship, sportsperson labor, globalization, and selected sporting case studies, the paper explores the relationship between sport, nationalism, economics, and competitive culture. It concludes by considering whether Orwell's humanistic vision of sport can provide an alternative to an increasingly commercialized and politically influenced sporting system.

### **Sport as a Microcosm of Society**

For Orwell, sport functions as a microcosm of broader social relations. The sporting arena reflects human tendencies toward pride, tribal loyalty, status competition, and collective identification. The significance of sport therefore lies not only in what happens on the field but also in what sporting contests reveal about society. His famous observation that serious sport is associated with “hatred, jealousy, boastfulness” and disregard for rules captures his skepticism toward the assumption that competition necessarily produces virtuous behaviour.

This perspective challenges the idealized conception of sport as an institution that automatically teaches cooperation and fair play. Sport can certainly develop discipline and teamwork, but it can also reward aggression, cultivate fear of failure, and create hierarchies of success and failure. The transformation of sport into professional entertainment has made this contradiction more pronounced. Contemporary sportspersons compete not only for medals or trophies but also for salaries, contracts, sponsorships, rankings, endorsements, and institutional prestige. Spectators, meanwhile, are encouraged to form powerful emotional attachments to teams and national representatives. Competition consequently operates at several levels simultaneously. There is competition between sportspersons, between teams, between nations, and increasingly between commercial organizations seeking audiences and market share. Orwell’s insight is therefore useful because it directs attention away from the sporting contest as an isolated event and toward the social structures surrounding it.

### **Nationalism and the “Us versus Them” Mentality**

Nationalism represents the central political dimension of Orwell’s critique. International sporting competitions frequently transform sportspersons into representatives of entire nations. The individual sportsperson is no longer perceived merely as a competitor; their performance becomes symbolically connected to national identity. This process creates a powerful “us versus them” structure. Support for one’s own team becomes simultaneously support for one’s national community, while opposition to another team can acquire a political or cultural dimension.

International football provides perhaps the clearest contemporary example. During the FIFA World Cup, national flags, anthems, symbols, and narratives of national pride become central components of the spectacle. The commercial value of the tournament depends partly upon precisely this emotional identification. Viewers are not simply consuming football; they are consuming narratives of national competition. The relationship between nationalism and commercialization is consequently mutually reinforcing. National identity increases audience engagement, while media and sponsorship industries monetize that engagement.

This dynamic complicates the conventional belief that globalization necessarily reduces nationalism. Contemporary sport is highly globalized economically while remaining intensely nationalistic symbolically. A World Cup match may be watched simultaneously by millions of people across the world, yet the emotional structure of the competition remains organized around national teams. The paradox is thus that while the sports industry has become increasingly global, the emotional appeal of international sport remains deeply national.

### **The Economics of Modern Sport**

The development of professional sport has created a complex economic system in which athletic performance is converted into multiple forms of commercial value vis-à-vis the broadcasting rights, sponsorships, sportsperson labour markets, and globalization.

Broadcasting and sponsorship have become central to the economics of modern sport, transforming sporting competitions from local events into globally distributed commercial products. Television and digital platforms allow matches to reach audiences across continents, making viewership, advertising, subscriptions, and digital engagement important sources of revenue. Consequently, scheduling, formats, and event structures are increasingly influenced by media and commercial considerations. At the same time, corporate sponsorship has transformed sportspersons and teams into valuable brands, where performance, personality, appearance, and social-media presence can all contribute to commercial value. This development has created a tension between athletic achievement and marketability, as sportspersons are increasingly valued not only for their sporting abilities but also for their potential as commercial assets. From a political-economic perspective, professional sportspersons are therefore both workers and commodities whose labour, skills, bodies, and public identities generate substantial economic value. The economic value of a sportsperson can thus be calculated in several ways- salary, transfer value, endorsement potential, merchandise sales, audience attraction, and contribution to franchise valuation. Such calculations represent a form of commodification. Athletic ability becomes an economic asset that can be bought, sold, exchanged, insured, and monetized.

Although professionalization provides sportspersons with opportunities to earn a livelihood from their abilities, significant institutional and financial power remains concentrated among leagues, clubs, broadcasters, sponsors, and investors. Thus, modern sport illustrates Orwell’s broader concern that competition can become shaped by interests beyond the sporting activity itself, with athletic performance increasingly integrated into systems of media, branding, and commercial profit.

Globalization has transformed sport into a transnational industry. Major leagues seek international audiences, clubs establish global brands, investors purchase sporting organizations, and broadcasters distribute competitions across national boundaries.

### **Globalization and Economic Inequality in Sport**

The globalization of sport has expanded international participation and visibility, but it has not eliminated economic inequality. Major leagues, clubs, and commercial organizations remain concentrated in wealthier regions, particularly North America and Western Europe, while athletic talent from Africa, Latin America, South Asia, and other regions is often recruited into more profitable sporting markets. This creates an unequal economic exchange in which talent is developed in lower-cost environments but generates greater financial returns elsewhere. Although international competitions can provide Global South nations with symbolic recognition and opportunities to challenge established sporting hierarchies, the underlying economic structure of global sport remains unequal. Sport can therefore promote political and cultural equality on the field while simultaneously reproducing economic inequalities beyond it.

### **Case Studies**

**FIFA World Cup** demonstrates the intersection of nationalism, media, sponsorship, and global commerce. The tournament depends upon national identification to generate audience interest. At the same time, its worldwide audience makes broadcasting rights and sponsorship highly valuable. Host nations also use the World Cup to pursue broader political and economic objectives, including tourism, infrastructure development, international reputation, and soft power. However, the economic benefits of hosting major sporting events are often difficult to separate from substantial public expenditure.

The World Cup therefore embodies Orwell's central paradox. A competition marketed as a celebration of international sport depends upon intense national rivalry, while that rivalry is simultaneously transformed into a highly profitable global commodity.

**Olympic Games** represent both the beauty and complexity of international sport. Although they promote friendship, cooperation, and peaceful competition, medal counts become symbols of national pride and prestige. Hosting the Games requires major public investment in infrastructure, security, and facilities, often placing significant responsibilities on local communities. For sportspersons, however, the Olympics are deeply personal for behind every medal is years of discipline, sacrifice, hope, and human effort. The Games therefore remind us that sport should not be valued only for national success or economic gain, but also for the courage, dignity, and shared humanity of those who participate.

**NBA** similarly demonstrates the relationship between sportsperson labour and commercial valuation with a marked shift from the sportsperson as employee towards the sportsperson as a multidimensional commercial asset. Professional basketball has developed into a global entertainment industry supported by broadcasting agreements, sponsorship, merchandising, international audiences, and rapidly increasing franchise values. Superstar sportspersons illustrate the increasingly independent economic value of personal branding. Their income can derive not only from playing contracts but also from endorsements, media appearances, merchandise, and digital platforms.

**Formula 1** provides a clear example of the integration of sport, media, technology, and corporate sponsorship. Teams operate within an economic structure involving sponsorship, broadcasting, prize money, technological investment, and global marketing. Races increasingly function not merely as sporting events but as international entertainment properties. The globalization of Formula 1 demonstrates how sporting organizations actively seek new audiences and markets. Its expansion illustrates the extent to which commercial considerations influence the geographical organization of contemporary sport.

### **The Psychological Costs of Competitive Culture**

Orwell's argument is not exclusively political or economic but also psychological. Competitive sport can generate significant positive experiences, including discipline, achievement, belongingness, physical health, and personal development. However, high-performance environments can also generate anxiety, burnout, fear of failure, and a sense that personal worth is dependent upon performance. The financialization of sport intensifies these pressures. A sportsperson may compete not simply for personal achievement but while carrying the expectations of teammates, coaches, sponsors, fans, media organizations, and national institutions.

The economic consequences of failure can also be substantial. A poor season can affect contracts, endorsements, rankings, team selection, and career opportunities. The spectator experiences a different but related psychological dynamic. Strong identification with teams can generate a sense of community and belonging, but it can also produce hostility toward rival supporters. Digital media further intensifies these pressures by making sportspersons subject to continuous public commentary. Success and failure are no longer experienced only inside stadiums but are also debated instantly across the globe. The sportsperson therefore becomes simultaneously a sports performer, media producer, and commercial brand for fans and sporting institutions. Fans are no longer passive spectators. They generate content,

participate in online communities, purchase merchandise, follow sportspersons, and contribute to the circulation of sporting narratives making attention itself an economic resource.

Further, sport is neither economically neutral nor politically isolated. Governments and wealthy investors increasingly recognize the value of sporting organizations as instruments of international visibility and soft power. Hosting major competitions, investing in clubs, or developing national sporting programs can enhance international reputation. Sport therefore operates as a form of symbolic diplomacy.

This development extends Orwell's argument about nationalism. Whereas Orwell primarily examined the emotional antagonism generated by national competition, contemporary sport demonstrates how governments and investors can deliberately incorporate sporting institutions into broader strategies of political influence.

### **Humanistic Political Economy of Sport**

Orwell's critique does not call for the rejection of professional sport or commercialization but for a balance between economic interests and human values. Professionalization, broadcasting, sponsorship, and globalization have created valuable opportunities for sportspersons and audiences, but problems arise when profit becomes more important than the spirit of sport. A humanistic approach should therefore prioritize sportspersons welfare, fairness, competitive integrity, accessibility, and respect while ensuring that they receive a fair share of the wealth they generate. Economic institutions should support, rather than dominate, the values of sport. Ultimately, the question is not whether sport should have an economy, but what that economy should serve.

Reading Orwell through the contemporary political economy of sport reveals a significant continuity between the sporting world of 1945 and that of the twenty-first century. Orwell identified nationalism and competitive hostility as forces capable of transforming sport into something resembling symbolic warfare. Contemporary sports economics demonstrates how those emotional forces can also become sources of commercial value. National rivalry attracts viewers that attract broadcasters and sponsors which increases revenues. Rising revenues increase the economic stakes of competition. Higher stakes intensify the importance of winning. This produces a reinforcing cycle between emotion and economics.

The most important contribution of Orwell's essay, therefore, may be methodological rather than predictive. Orwell encourages readers to look beyond the apparent innocence of sport and examine the political and social forces embedded within it. Contemporary sports economics extends this insight by revealing the institutions that convert sporting emotion into economic value. The commercial system does not simply exist around sport. It increasingly shapes how sport is scheduled, presented, consumed, and experienced.

At the same time, Orwell's analysis should not be accepted without qualification. Sport can genuinely produce cooperation, friendship, discipline, cultural exchange, and collective joy. International competitions sometimes create meaningful encounters between societies that might otherwise have little contact.

The challenge is therefore not to determine whether sport is inherently good or bad. Rather, it is to understand the institutional conditions under which sport produces solidarity or hostility, empowerment or exploitation, enjoyment or psychological pressure.

### **CONCLUSION**

George Orwell's "The Sporting Spirit" remains highly relevant to understanding the political and economic dimensions of modern sport. While commercialization, globalization, broadcasting, and sportsperson branding have transformed sport into a major global industry, they have also intensified the nationalism and competitive pressures Orwell identified. The FIFA World Cup, Olympic Games, NBA, and Formula 1 demonstrate how sport now intersects with national identity, commercial interests, media, and political power. However, commercialization need not undermine the value of sport if economic institutions remain accountable to sportspersons and sporting principles. Orwell's humanistic vision therefore calls for a balance in which competition and commercial success coexist with fairness, enjoyment, dignity, sportspersons welfare, and human connection. Ultimately, the future of sport depends on ensuring that economic and political interests support rather than overshadow the human value of the game.

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