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Sports, Spectatorship, and Classism: The Cultural Environment of the New Stadia and Arenas in the United States

James H. Wittebols

A recent news report claimed that over 20 billion dollars had been spent on new professional sports facilities in the last decade. The recently opened “Safeco Field” in Seattle cost over a half billion to build. At a time when conservative ideology strives to have government “do less,” local and state governments have been eagerly underwriting the cost of these mammoth projects. By 1997, over one half of the country’s 115 pro sports franchises had plans or had built or renovated their facilities. Why have all these new stadia and arenas been built in such a compressed space of time? What are the social and cultural implications of these projects—what kind of social environments do these public spaces create?

This paper reviews the political economy of stadium building, provides a “tour” of common elements in these buildings and examine how they reflect the cultural milieu of the times. George Ritzer (1999) terms the malls, theme parks, airports, and casinos that have been built recently as “cathedrals of consumption.” As we shall see, today’s new stadia and arenas fit nicely into that concept. My visits to

new stadia and arenas in Baltimore, Chicago, Seattle, Detroit and Buffalo have evidenced a consistent set of qualities and characteristics which revolve around privileging the affluent.

The Politics and Economics of Stadium and Arena Construction

The wave of stadium and arena building in the last decade and a half is the product of particular social and economic circumstances in the United States. This brief review is largely drawn from Joanna Cagan and Neil deMause's excellent *Field of Schemes* (1998). It provides an analysis of the political struggles involved in these projects. It also provides insight into the resistance many fans of these teams have engaged in to prevent the abandonment of grand old baseball parks throughout the country. Another book detailing the resistance of fans in Detroit to the replacement of Tiger Stadium is Betzold and Casey's (1992) *Queen of Diamonds: The Tiger Stadium Story*.

Although many writers cite the departure of the football Baltimore Colts for Indianapolis in 1984 as the beginning of franchise jumping and stadium building, the proverbial barn door was opened some three decades ago with the building of Texas Stadium, the home of the Dallas Cowboys. Cowboys' owner Tex Schramm's invention of "Personal Seat Licenses" (or "Charters") to bring more revenue for his team was the first shot in the war to escalate revenues in professional sports. Essentially, up to this point, the visiting team got a cut of the gate from each game they played outside their home stadium. When Schramm was able to get the rest of the league to agree that revenues from these PSLs would stay with his team rather than become part of the league wide revenue sharing scheme, it virtually insured that each team would eventually be forced to follow suit. With the "PSL", the revenue from the suites, the rules change allowing the home team to keep all the revenue generated from these special sources rather than split it with the visiting team or the league as a whole, brought substantive changes on and off the field.

The increased revenues from these changes enabled the bidding wars for star players and the skyrocketing level of pay for the superstars in each sport. (It has also lead to a growing gap between the highest and lowest paid players, but that's another story.) Thus, in order to compete, in order to put "championship" caliber teams on the field, teams would have to either build suites in current stadia or build new facilities with suites. Thus new facilities, largely financed by taxpayer dollars, were built to provide conveniences and amenities for affluent sports fans —socialism for the wealthy and corporate America. The revenue from those facilities was then given to a small number of athletes in the form of superstar salaries. In other words, public monies now routinely subsidize wealthy patrons of sports, and salaries for players who have little connection to the communities in which they play.

Buffalo and its Bills

In Buffalo, twenty-seven-year-old Rich Stadium was renovated at a cost of 90 million dollars to provide, among other amenities, more suites, and heated "club" seats. The ownership put a gun to the head of the Western New York region by mandating that more than \$11 million dollars in commitments to purchase the suites and club seats be secured before the team would sign a new lease on the stadium. Even though the length of the lease is 20 years, there are escape clauses based on attendance which would allow the team to leave the area after just five years in the renovated stadium.

While an alliance of business interests, politicians and team owners pushed for this renovation, the involvement of the local print and broadcasting media in pushing the "importance" of this expansion for the larger community is even more instructive. At a point in time when this drive was lagging, powerful business interests formed a "Buffalo Backs the Bills" committee which was chaired by none other than the publisher of the Buffalo News. This committee proceeded to acquire mountains of free media in the form of ads (space donated by the Buffalo News), regular articles devoid of any

news other than to boost the campaign and corresponding pseudo-stories on local television news.

Furthermore, in the midst of the campaign the owner of the *Buffalo News* and one of the richest men in the world, Warren Buffett, made a rare visit to the city where his newspaper produces over \$40 million in profit per year. His visit was designed in part to implore the citizens of Western New York to perform a civic duty and purchase suites and club seats. The \$11 million seat campaign and indeed, the \$90 million renovation, would be chump change for a man worth \$30 billion—but there he was, telling the largely blue collar population of Buffalo to invest a significant portion of their yearly income in seat commitments.

Revenue Streams

Seating arrangements, revenue from parking, and high opportunity costs for conspicuous consumption have become part of the money grab that pro sports engage in these days, and sports franchises are working to secure all revenue related to the team. A few years ago, the Bills moved aggressively to thwart small business people of their right to sell t-shirts and the like. What was once a thriving game day business for people of modest means on the perimeter of the stadium grounds has been wiped out so that fans are more or less forced to buy such items once they get inside the stadium. In other cities, new stadia are surrounded by fences and gates which help cut down the number of vendors selling t-shirts, peanuts and the like outside the stadium, thus insuring more dollars are spent once fans are inside the gates.

So, the political economy of professional sports is yet another good example of corporate welfare and socialism for the rich as folks of modest means are priced out of attending the games in person in favor of making game day a playground for the affluent—both on the field and in the stands.

New arenas are significant for the communities which have professional sports franchises for reasons beyond the considerable tax subsidies surrounding these projects. Sports in the last century helped define the life and the spirit of a community. People tend to take "ownership" and to express a great deal of pride in the place where they live if it has had a strong identification with its local pro sports franchise. Furthermore, to my experience, there are few places left in today's society in which people can experience what I call the "power of the collective." That is, beyond mass demonstrations, people do not frequently gather as a collective or as a community. The empowerment one experiences from participating in a rally with throngs of others is rare. As those of us committed to social change well know, people need to experience the effectiveness of their collective power in order to become change agents.

Stadia were once a place where people could feel like they were a part of something larger. The home field or court advantage is said to turn largely on the way the spectators in the stands become participants and have an impact on the game by virtue of the noise they can make. Because of the suites that are built in new stadia, fans are less "on top" or near the action. The new indoor arenas take up about twice the space as old arenas thus dissipating the noise the crowd can make and the effect it has on the game. Thus, the empowerment fans used to experience in helping their team on the field is less possible. The social segregation enabled by the exclusive suite and club sections provides a conspicuous class-based division that was not readily apparent in classic ballparks and stadia.

I suggest that the particular set of values surrounding the building of stadia as described above is also diminishing the sense of belonging to something larger when one goes to a sports event these days. In the past when the President or other significant figure attended a sports contest, they were usually seated close to the field and near many regular folks

also attending the game. The social and economic segregation which is endemic to new stadia and arenas removes that element of populism. The treasured seats are now no longer those close to the action. Indeed, the suites are often far removed from the field of play. These days, when the president attends, he does not sit among the people but in the owner's or a campaign contributor's suite. The contrast was no clearer when the Baltimore Orioles played an exhibition game in Havana last Spring. The cameras showed Fidel Castro and his North American guests sitting in the stands—the "socialist" Cuban stadium lacked VIP amenities.

Access to the areas of suites and club seats is also heavily restricted in any new facility which is less than ten years old. The enforced class segregation is rather remarkable. At the new arena in Buffalo, you must have a ticket on the club level also to have access to the club level. Such a ticket can get you into a suite or club level seat. In this area, you also have access to a full service restaurant and bar. A club level seat provides you with wait staff service which will take your order from a special menu unavailable elsewhere in the building. And of course in the suites, you can arrange for special catering and entertaining at prohibitive prices (i.e. \$30 for a six pack of beer).

In open air facilities (outdoor baseball and football stadiums) club level tickets allow you to escape the elements to enjoy a more comfortable environment. The suite level in Baltimore is like an airport lounge. Nicely appointed bars, and carpeted lounges with comfortable couches and seats surround large television monitors. And of course the suites and club level amenities are all climate controlled, thus sparing patrons any unpleasant weather. As this level is quite above the field of play, there are places on the perimeter where you can literally spit, or at least look down on the "riff-raff" below.

Discussion and Conclusions

We have seen that the building of new stadia and arenas is a reflection of the upscale world so ubiquitous on television and other media. The stock market boom of the 90's has

Wittebols: Sports, Spectatorship, and Classism: The Cultural Environment of exacerbated the severe social and economic stratification of American society. While professional sports were once a source of pride that everyone in the community could relate to and access on a regular basis, they have become elite playgrounds where one can flaunt social status. If sports were once part of a tradition of American populism, they have devolved into socially segregated and elitist centers of culture. This has been evident for some time in the marquee events such as the World Series, Super Bowl, and for the international jet set crowd, the Olympics. The last two decades has seen it creep into local and regional sports. It is a "premium" world where exclusivity can be bought if you have the financial resources.

The evolution of sports in American society reflects the growing class divide and social disaggregation. As players jump franchises in search of more millions of dollars in salary, local sports fans are challenged to maintain loyalty to teams they grew up with. The yearly change in player rosters breaks the hearts of young fans as they see their favorite player jump ship. The rising cost of tickets excludes families of modest means from giving their kids the annual thrill of seeing their favorite player in person.

In short, the building of these expensive facilities is both an expression and aggravation of the growing class divide. There are fewer and fewer genuine expressions of the collective conscience as the new facilities serve to remind people of their status in relation to others rather than their status as a member of a larger community. If pro teams used to be a source of community pride, they are now more and more (falsely) seen as vehicles for economic viability. And rather than learning how hard work and the pursuit of athletic excellence can make a community feel pride in itself, kids following today's professional sports learn more that "greed is good."

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