The Contested Terrain of the New Zealand All Blacks

Rugby, Commerce, and Cultural Politics in the Age of Globalization

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Preface

> I'm a catalyst for change. You can't be an outsider and be successful over 30 years without leaving a certain amount of scar tissue around the place.
> — RUPERT MURDOCH

One of the most fascinating propositions made by the sociologist Eric Leifer (1995) in his book, *Making the Majors: The Transformation of Team Sports in North America*, was the need for the major professional sports leagues to abandon traditional understandings that franchises represent distinct geographic communities, if any league – or popular franchise for that matter – was to be considered a truly global entity. Leifer further argued that the types of local/civic loyalties that were essential in the early days of spectator sport in North America – loyalties that could still be sustained and nourished as television networks sought to establish national audiences and markets – were now in conflict with the pursuit of global audiences and revenue streams. In other words, too many affluent and populous international cities were being neglected by the current structure of major league sport which requires teams to play half of their games in one locale. Leifer suggested that one strategy to cultivate a more prosperous international presence and overcome the barrier of place identity was to attach the brands of transnational corporations to teams that would compete on a global circuit. In this context, cities would bid to host scheduled matches among all teams that would take place in 'multisport stadiums ... as part of entertainment and shopping villages' (Leifer, 1995, p. 301). As Leifer explained, '[r]ivalries in the global marketplace could spill over into the field of sporting competition. Even the Americans might get more enthused over a showdown between Coke and Pepsi on the gridiron than another confrontation between Dallas and Buffalo' (p. 299).

Leifer's vision of a global sporting landscape has, of course, not fully transpired. Still, over the course of the last thirty years, new trade agreements, the deregulation of barriers that once restricted the mobility of capital, and a host of substantive technological developments have opened up new markets to the point that many of the most popular international sport franchises and clubs now have a global merchandise presence, established online followings, and sponsorship from some of the world's most powerful corporations. However, much of the optimism that accompanied the agenda of global expansion in the 1990s, and a belief that the most popular North American professional sports – the National Basketball Association (NBA), Major League Baseball (MLB), the National Football League (NFL), and the National Hockey League (NHL) – could succeed in locales around the world has been tempered in recent years. To be sure, each of these leagues has enjoyed some success in staging exhibition matches in many countries (with the NBA the most successful in terms of establishing itself as a global presence, most recently in China thanks, in part, to the country's long-established basketball structure), while the most well-known franchises (e.g., the New York Yankees) and celebrity athletes (e.g., Michael Jordan) have accrued global merchandise revenues that were simply unthinkable in an earlier era.

For the most part, though, sustained mass interest in North American professional sport has not been forthcoming and longstanding local traditions and sporting affinities have proven far more resilient than initially anticipated. For example, while the NFL may indeed have a brand and licensed merchandise presence in Mexico and Europe, gridiron football has failed to usurp other local sports (e.g., baseball and soccer in Mexico) and rivalries, while newly formed leagues like NFL Europe have collapsed altogether. Indeed, in 2007, the NFL – the world's richest professional sports league with over US$9 billion in annual revenues – cancelled an exhibition game between the New England Patriots and the Seattle Seahawks in China simply due to lack of interest. Still, the NFL is carefully trying to 'grow' its fanbase throughout Asia by focusing, at least initially, on more upmarket, male consumers who now aspire to consume the most prestigious global brands. As NFL China Managing Director Richard Young explained: 'We're not going after everyone ... [w]e're very much

more Louis Vuitton than the Gap. We're focusing on a smaller group of people and until that base is large enough we don't want to damage our brand equity' (Rutherford, 2012).

A more modest version of these ambitions is visible in New Zealand where the New Zealand Rugby Union (NZRU) – alongside its broadcast partner News Corporation and key sponsors (Adidas and, since 2012, the multinational insurance company, American International Group [AIG]) – has recently attempted to access and engage non-traditional rugby markets in Asia. For example, in 2008, the All Blacks played a Bledisloe Cup match against the Australian Wallabies in Hong Kong, and a year later these teams met again drawing large crowds in Tokyo. These developments, which have resulted in test matches being played in countries that are 'home' to neither team, perhaps point to a more subtle disruption of place identity in the global economy than those that were originally foreseen by Leifer. However, they do highlight the willingness of sport organizations like the NZRU to aggressively pursue new marketing streams and opportunities for visibility in non-traditional markets via partnerships with the world's largest media conglomerates and corporate sponsors. All of these types of promotional exercises – like the recent Bledisloe Cup matches in Hong Kong and Tokyo – bring benefits for all parties involved, including the NZRU, who profit from these lucrative revenue-sharing matches, but also through the promotion and visibility of the 'All Black brand' and the ensuing merchandise opportunities.

It is likely that these types of overseas matches – in particular matches of significance like the Bledisloe Cup – will only take place sporadically for the time being. Moreover, the significant crowds that watched these matches arguably do not point to a substantial cultural or economic presence in these locales but, instead, underscore the appeal of particular sports and teams – like the All Blacks – for a segment of affluent, mobile young men who have come to fully embrace the language and discourse of a global consumer culture. Indeed, these types of one-off, cosmopolitan sporting events are clearly limited to those who can afford them and, in this respect, do not point to enduring changes in the habits of ordinary people, let alone the widespread transformations of regional or national cultures (see Gruneau and Whitson, 2001).

Nevertheless, it can be suggested that the differences between popular, longstanding national teams like the All Blacks and other commercial enterprises are becoming increasingly difficult to discern in the new millennium. These developments have been lauded by many of the businessmen who run New Zealand rugby, and other prominent entrepreneurs including Phil Knight, the CEO of Nike, who made the following candid observation: 'We see a natural evolution ... dividing the world into their athletes and ours. And we glory [sic] ours. When the US played Brazil in the World Cup, I rooted for Brazil because it was a Nike team. America was Adidas's' (as cited in Coakley and Donnelly, 2009, p. 439). Others, however, have lamented the intensive commodification of sport, including the Uruguayan-born journalist, historian, and political activist Eduardo Galeano, who offered the following commentary following Brazil's victory over Germany at the 2002 FIFA World Cup: 'The two countries have been finalists many times, but never before had they faced each other in the World Cup. Turkey took third place, South Korea fourth. Translated into market terms, Nike took first and fourth, while Adidas came in second and third' (2003, p. 226).

It is also worth noting that these promotional ambitions and, indeed, the push to attract upmarket global audiences by various corporations and the sport governing bodies who profit from exclusive sponsorship deals, regularly antagonize many local and less-affluent fans who resent the tendency of administrators and marketers to treat iconic teams like the All Blacks as 'brands' or commercial vehicles. So, too, has other criticism been directed at the decisions to limit access to live telecasts of All Blacks matches to those who can afford subscription television and more recently at the exorbitant costs of tickets to attend the 2011 Rugby World Cup (RWC), an event that the New Zealand government underwrote at a substantial cost to taxpayers. As rugby and the All Blacks continue to be transformed by these economic pressures, most New Zealanders, like sports fans in numerous nations around the world, are now well aware that they do not control or own 'their' team, and that the pursuit of global revenue streams and worldwide audiences increasingly trumps other longstanding loyalties, traditions, and aspects of cultural heritage.

These commercial practices have been commonplace in North America for many years, but have only fully emerged in New Zealand as 'common sense' over the course of the past two decades. This book sets out to explore the powerful economic and cultural pressures that are transforming rugby and rapidly incorporating the All Blacks into the circuits of a global promotional culture. These types of developments can be seen on a number of levels, including the landmark broadcasting deal between the South Africa, Australia and New Zealand Rugby Unions (SANZAR) and News Corporation in the mid-1990s, and the emergence of Adidas as the principal sponsor of the All Blacks in 1999, at the expense of long-time local sponsor Canterbury of New Zealand. Moreover, the development of a global sports labour market – in particular the inflated salaries on offer from wealthy French and English clubs – has produced a new set of challenges for the NZRU with respect to the retention of key players. The NZRU, for example, creatively granted celebrated All Black Dan Carter a six month 'sabbatical' in 2008 that allowed him to skip the Super 14 (now 15) Rugby Competition and play in Perpignan, France (where he earned £30,000 per game) to secure his future national playing services. The sabbatical option has, however, not been consistently on offer to other All Blacks although there are signs that the NZRU's eligibility rule that stipulates that players must play their professional rugby in New Zealand in order to represent the All Blacks is beginning to ease somewhat. These issues also speak to the accumulation of an associated, but different type of pressure; that is, the enduring pressure for the All Blacks to perform at the highest level in every test match for the team to retain its international appeal and popular reputation as the most successful rugby team in the world to further secure the value of the All Black brand. Indeed, despite the jubilant celebrations that erupted across New Zealand after the All Blacks won the 2011 RWC, the pressure to succeed on and off the pitch remains relentless in the new global economy.

It is germane to note that, since the mid-1980s, similar incursions of global capital have radically transformed New Zealand society, and it is against the backdrop of these developments that longstanding national traditions and meaningful aspects of national popular culture – like those associated with rugby and the All Blacks – are being reorganized. Although

New Zealand is a relatively small (population 4.3 million), semi-peripheral nation in the South Pacific, it offers a ripe and unique site to examine the multi-directional, but uneven, impacts of globalization, including the ascension of a host of ideological and political projects that have sought to establish new sets of meanings and identities associated with neoliberalism as hegemonic. Indeed, while we examine only one aspect of national popular culture, our analysis focuses on teasing out some of the broader and more complex interactions and contradictions as ordinary New Zealanders confront the intended and unintended effects of over three decades of deregulation, free trade, and a host of other neoliberal policies.

For many years now, rugby has been routinely mythologized as a powerful and, indeed, 'natural' element of national culture that has brought New Zealanders of all classes and races together and allowed people to imagine important and enduring points of connection. Of course, the values and cultural identities associated with rugby have always been socially constructed and contested, while the sport itself is not, in any sense, 'natural'; it is a human social and cultural product that New Zealanders have made and remade over a period of many years for a host of different purposes. Yet, to point out that rugby has been made and remade by New Zealanders begs an obvious question: made for what purpose and in whose interests? There are no simple answers to these questions and clearly rugby has been put to many different purposes by New Zealanders. Beginning in the 1870s, for example, rugby has served as a popular source of fun and recreation and, until very recently, an exclusive opportunity for boys and men to get exercise and compete casually. Indeed, for educators, rugby has historically been a site to teach New Zealand boys the masculine virtues of their generation; values of strength, toughness, humility, and fraternal loyalty, alongside other middle-class values of teamwork, self-discipline, respect for authority, amateurism, and the virtues of fair play. At the same time, over the course of many decades, New Zealanders have embraced local and provincial identities that have been derived from the sport's representative character in their communities. The sport has also historically served as a mythological site for Māori and Pākehā to 'play' together and represent a unified nation on the world stage despite enduring tensions and a host of inequitable

power relations. On this latter note, though, the national sport has also served as a politicized and contested terrain where these myths have been disrupted, if only temporarily, including the nation-wide protests over the 1981 South African Springbok tour that divided the country. As such, it is always crucial to remember that the values and cultural identities associated with rugby and nation have regularly been contested and subject to revision and interpretation at key junctures.

It is important to emphasize, then, that rugby has only recently been radically transformed as a professional sport, a global entertainment commodity, and a television spectacle, although for many New Zealanders, especially those who grew up in the 1990s and beyond, the current structure of the sport may simply be taken for granted and uncontested. In light of these developments, this book sets out to understand and critically interpret the issues and pressures that are changing rugby in the global era. In this complex, diverse, and ever-changing context, it can be tempting to long for a return to a 'simpler era' of both rugby and New Zealand society that exists in the warmth of nostalgic recollections that continue to hold considerable appeal for many New Zealanders, although these understandings of a common culture have always glossed over a range of structural inequalities. It is, incidentally, these idealized images of past national traditions and heritage that feature so prominently in the contemporary advertising campaigns of transnational corporations, like those of Adidas – the principal sponsor of the All Blacks.

The unprecedented commodification of sport and national popular culture is, of course, a development that is not unique to New Zealand. In their endless quests to conquer new markets, various transnational corporate entities perpetually seek out new alliances and engage in flexible forms of accumulation that enable them to adapt and localize within and across the world's national contexts. Sport, as an immensely popular cultural form that is generally accompanied by a host of unique traditions, cultural identities, and mythologies – not to mention masses of loyal fans and audiences – now plays a key, but contested, role in these complex dynamics of accumulation. All of these developments and, crucially, their related political debates associated with the commodification of culture and identities within nations themselves, necessitate new interpretations

and understandings of the current position of various national sporting traditions and mythologies – like those associated with the All Blacks and New Zealand rugby – in the new global cultural economy. It is in this spirit of critical inquiry that this book is written.