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For a life worth living



“The appeal of democracy has been used by the ruling class to mask their rule. The way to fight against this is not to reject democracy, but to demand more of it in every sphere of life. To put it simply: replace the illusion of democracy that benefits the few with the practice of democracy that benefits the many.”

-Michael Brooks (1983-2020)

On July 20th, 2020, the world lost a true hero. Michael Brooks was a contributor to Jacobin, The Majority Report, and the host of The Michael Brooks Show. His benefactions to the discourse are unquantifiable, irreplaceable, and will undoubtedly stand the test of time.

Brooks stood out in key ways that have immortalized his place within the progressive movement. He built his media following by providing nuanced and thoughtful analysis, and cared not for empty polemics. His worldview centered justice and human needs above all else, and he was ready and willing to patiently explain it to anyone willing to listen. Few approached the world with such love and moral clarity.

Michael Brooks was never in media for the money or the fame. His only

concerns were helping others and preaching the good word of equity, tolerance, and solidarity. Needless to say, this made Brooks unique in the current corporatized media climate. While everyone else was bowing to the dollar, he stood steadfast in his resolve, staying true to his deeply-held values and beliefs until the very end.

Michael Brooks made history and, in the process, left behind a model for the rest of us to follow. May we all bear the privilege of standing on the shoulders of a giant like him. Brooks' memory lives on, and he will be eternally missed.

This issue of Michigan Specter is dedicated to Michael Brooks. Rest in power.

-Elias Khoury

Michigan Specter is the official publication of the Young Democratic Socialists of America (YDSA) at the University of Michigan.

If you are interested in contributing to future issues, contact ydsauofm@gmail.com.

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On the Politicization of Sports: The Forgotten Story of Mahmoud Abdul-Rauf

By Mike Machesky

In June, Ben Shapiro made headlines when he complained on his podcast that conservatives have lost their safe space in professional sports. “My place of comfort has been removed from me,” he said. Shapiro made this comment after discussing Sports Illustrated’s decision to put Caitlyn Jenner on its cover in 2016, of NFL player support for protests led by Colin Kaepernick that same year, and of the recent support of the Black Lives Matter movement by much of the NBA. Shapiro claims that politics have invaded professional sports, but the opposite is true: professional sports have always been political.

Shapiro fails to realize that now is the first time in history a left-wing movement within sports has held popular mainstream support. Dating back to the birth of professional sports, the decision to ban black people from playing sports professionally was a political statement itself. Despite all men supposedly being equal under law, there were no black players in the NFL, MLB, and NBA until 1920, 1947, and 1950 respectively. When black players finally did enter these leagues, they faced horrifying discrimination from fans and other players. With the existence of Jim Crow laws, they were often not allowed to stay in the same hotels or eat at the same restaurants as their teammates.

After major American sports leagues began accepting black athletes, they began to use their platform to address social and political issues in order to make them, their voices, and their communities heard. At the 1968 Olympics in Mexico City, Tommie Smith and John Carlos famously raised their fists in the Black Power salute during the playing of the national anthem at their victory ceremony. On the protests, Smith told

BBC, “It is very discouraging to be in a team with white athletes. On the track you are Tommie Smith, the fastest man in the world, but once you are in the dressing rooms you are nothing more than a dirty Negro,” showing that well into the 1960s, racism was still a contentious issue in professional sports. The pervasion of racism into sports during this time was very clearly political, especially since these protests occurred four years after Congress passed the Civil Rights Act and black athletes still faced segregation. Shapiro might have argued, back then, that Smith and Carlos’ protest was politics interfering with sports, but it was actually a reaction to the very political discrimination these athletes already faced at the time as a result of their skin color.

Shapiro also neglects the way in which sports were politicized by the American Right during the Cold War. Most Americans surely recall the 1980 “Miracle on Ice” and its dramatization in the 2004 film *Miracle*, which tells a very nationalistic story of the US victory over the USSR in the 1980 Olympic hockey championship. The media coverage leading up to the championship game was highly politicized in the United States and the team received a fan letter from a woman in Texas that simply read “Beat those Commie bastards.” Very clearly political and clearly right-wing, the “Miracle on Ice” is perhaps the most successfully politicized sporting event of all time. So much so that in 2018, *Going Vertical*, a Russian film chronicling the Soviet victory over the United States in the 1972 Olympic Basketball Championship and clearly inspired by the success of *Miracle* in the United States, became the highest grossing Russian film of all time. While not as clearly politically affiliated, the film was very much a nationalistic and politi-

cized portrayal of the game.

The truth is that long before Colin Kaepernick was blacklisted from the NFL for kneeling during the national anthem, a very similar controversy, largely forgotten by the general public, occurred in the NBA. In 1996, Mahmoud Abdul-Rauf, the point guard and leading scorer for the Denver Nuggets, became a national news story when fans noticed he would not stand during the national anthem and would instead stretch on the bench or stay behind in the locker room. The league decided that for every time Abdul-Rauf did not stand, he would be fined \$31,707 and was suspended from play until he worked out a compromise with the league where he would silently bow his head in prayer during the anthem. Abdul-Rauf’s decision not to stand for the anthem was partially inspired by his Muslim faith, which he converted to when he found it helped bring him to peace with his Tourette’s syndrome. He also called the United States’ flag “a symbol of oppression, of tyranny” and stated, “This country has a long history of that. I don’t think you can argue the facts. You can’t be for God and for oppression. It’s clear in the Koran, Islam is the only way. I don’t criticize those who stand, so don’t criticize me for sitting. I won’t waver from my decision” and “I just don’t look at the United States, I just don’t look at the Muslim issue. I look at the Caucasian American and I look at the African American being oppressed in this country and I don’t stand for that.”

Abdul-Rauf finished that season with the Nuggets and then moved on to play for the Sacramento Kings for two years before going on to play professionally in Turkey for a year, later stating, “After the national anthem fiasco, nobody really wanted to touch me.” Ab-

dul-Rauf then returned to the NBA to play for the Vancouver Grizzlies during the 2000–2001 season, but claimed that, after the terrorist attacks on 9/11, he could not even get a tryout with a team. Abdul-Rauf’s case of being blacklisted from professional sports for not conforming to the league’s nationalist norms is strikingly similar to the case of Colin Kaepernick and the story is often left in the shadows. Colin Kaepernick had led the 49ers to the Super Bowl in 2013 and the NFC Championship in 2014, yet just two years later he was supposedly no longer good enough to be even a second string quarterback for any of the league’s 30 teams? This seems highly unlikely and strongly suggests the reasons for Kaepernick’s extended free agency have been politically charged. Similarly, Mahmoud Abdul-Rauf was the NBA’s 1993 Most Improved Player, and in the season of the national anthem controversy he led the Nuggets in scoring and boasted the highest free throw percentage in the league yet two years later he was no longer good enough to earn a spot on any NBA team? This is obviously very fishy and strongly suggests political motivations at play in the league’s decision to blackball Abdul-Rauf, even after he had supposedly worked out a deal with the league.

While the contemporary cultural zeitgeists are certainly partially responsi-

ble for the greater success of the Kaepernick protests, it would be wrong to ignore that Abdul-Rauf’s faith certainly added another reason for him to be discriminated against. Similar to Muhammad Ali’s decision to change his name from Cassius Clay after converting to Islam, Abdul-Rauf was born Chris Wayne Jackson and changed his name in 1993 after converting to Islam himself. Abdul-Rauf had a very successful two-year college career at Louisiana State University and was named Southeastern Conference Player of the Year and a First Team All-American two years in a row before declaring for the NBA draft. He had made quite a name for himself as a standout player during this time, and thus his decision to later change his name became highly publicized and, consequently, politicized. After the national anthem controversy, Abdul-Rauf claimed he received death threats. Also, two radio DJs made headlines when they stormed into a Suburban Denver Mosque sporting turbans and playing the Star Spangled Banner on a trumpet and bugle. Such blatant acts of Islamophobia prove that the political response to Abdul-Rauf’s protests were at least partially inspired by religious bigotry. If Colin Kaepernick were a black Muslim rather than a black Christian, the right-wing outrage over his protests would surely be even worse.

Shapiro’s comments on the supposed politicization of professional sports clearly ignore and disregard the blatantly political racism and bigotry that has been a part of these sports since the leagues were formed. Because we are in a moment where there is broad support for more left-wing causes among athletes and some of the leagues and teams themselves, conservatives like Shapiro have lost what has long been a right-wing “safe space,” where players like Colin Kaepernick are fired for voicing their concerns on issues affecting millions of Americans. Furthermore, the story of Mahmoud Abdul-Rauf especially displays how professional sports have long been dominated by right-wing ideology and that, without popular support for left issues, the league had the power to blackball those who spoke out against it. If Ben Shapiro and the Right cared about American ideals like free speech as much as they claim they do, they too would be appalled at the way the NBA and NFL treated Abdul-Rauf and Kaepernick, respectively. The truth is that professional sports have been politicized from the moment they were conceived, and it is only now that the Left is beginning to successfully fight back against oppressive team owners and league bureaucrats who have long kept them silent. 🗣️



Photo: M. Spencer Green/Associated Press

The Looming Threat of Surveillance in a Time of National Upheaval

By Mahnoor Imran

In 1731, the Common Council of New York City passed a law mandating that black and indigenous enslaved people carry a lantern after sunset if they were not accompanied by a white person. If enslaved people failed to make themselves visible and locatable as the law required, they faced a violent punishment of up to forty lashes. This racialized form of monitoring ensured that enslaved people could be easily identified, controlled, and constricted. It also responded to the specter of insurrection which threatened to disrupt the economic status quo at that time. Fast-forward a couple of centuries, and surveillance practices are still deeply embedded within our country and deeply predicated on white supremacy.

In our country, mass upheaval has historically mobilized the apparatus of surveillance technology. When the viability of institutions is endangered, law enforcement surveillance becomes a means of suppressing dissent, especially when LGBTQ+ communities and communities of color are the ones dissenting. Though technological advancement is adulated as reflecting the modernity of our society, it is also something that may warrant trepidation. For an issue like mass surveillance that barely leaves any sort of paper trail and surreptitiously entrenches itself within our legal framework, we must open our eyes to this nefarious complex and work to uproot it.

If you've been going to the protests against police brutality lately, you may have been given advice on how to protect your digital privacy. Leave your phone at home if possible. Police use

Stingrays to mimic cell phone towers and intercept information about their locations. Turn off the biometrics on your phone. Using Touch ID and Face ID on your phone may compromise your Fifth Amendment protections if police officers try to intimidate you into consenting to unlock your phone. Turn off location services. Even if your data is encrypted locally, the police can still access information from other apps using location services by obtaining a geofence warrant. Do not photograph or live stream with protesters' faces visible. Although recording police transgressions is important, capturing any of the protesters' faces and posting it to social media can lead to companies like Dataminr tipping off police. This may put your fellow protesters at risk of being arrested, charged, and further surveilled.

Surveillance itself is an indispensable mechanism of the prison-industrial complex and more broadly, of the state. Its intent is to quell rebellion and extinguish potential threats to law and order by whatever means necessary. It targets black activists dissenting against institutional racism and indigenous movement leaders fighting to protect their lands. It racializes Muslims, Arabs, Sikhs, and South Asian Americans as threats to western values and national security. It also presents a lucrative market for rapacious corporations to commodify our personal data.

Although you can take precautionary steps to protect your personal privacy if you want to take to the streets, it must be noted that surveillance is not

necessarily something that can be circumvented for a couple of hours. The neoliberal focalization on personal agency neglects the quotidian omnipresence of surveillance in our society. Surveillance is everything from Google commodifying our human experience into predictive behavioral data to the FBI drones flying above our heads behind fictitious company names. With that knowledge, we must reject the neoliberal notion that the individual is the fundamental catalyst for change and redirect our energy toward the institutions, corporations, and industrial-complexes that continually endanger our privacy and exacerbate injustice.

Ironically, corporations have shared statements of solidarity with the Black Lives Matter protests using palatable language about unity and solidarity as if these entities are not directly complicit in feeding the flames of systemic racism. In an interview with *Wired*, Simone Brown, the author of *Dark Matters: On the Surveillance of Blackness*, asserts that corporations are simply "marketing in this moment of black grief, black rebellion, and black insurgency and seeing it as a branding opportunity, while they're still part and parcel of the problem of anti-black racism." Unfortunately, these responses successfully trick people into thinking that corporations are engaging in the movement for change when in reality, these same corporations refuse to sever their police partnerships and divest from surveillance technology.

Take Amazon Rekognition, for example: the facial recognition software that once wrongly matched 28 mem-

bers of Congress to a mugshot database. Though Amazon has issued a one-year moratorium on the police use of Rekognition, this is not enough to stymie valid concerns about their tight-knit partnerships with police departments. Amazon Ring, another one of their privacy-encroaching innovations, is a doorbell with a built-in security camera that effectively transforms neighborhoods into sites for increased surveillance. According to internal documents reviewed by *The Intercept*, Amazon Ring formulated plans to utilize facial recognition software to create neighborhood watch lists that notify users if an individual deemed "suspicious" was captured by their cameras. Mohammad Tajsar, an attorney for the American Civil Liberties Union of South California likens this to a form of "digital redlining" that unifies police officers and homeowners in creating "lists of undesirables unworthy of entrance into well-to-do areas." Although a representative claimed that the features are not currently in development, a corporation developing plans to entangle people in a surveillance network without due process is undoubtedly reprehensible.

Facial recognition technology is often touted as having promising potential. However, this burgeoning development in surveillance capitalism is inherently dangerous. In an article for *The Atlantic*, Malkia Devich-Cyril, the lead founder of *Media Justice*, articulates that automated facial-recognition software is "rooted in discredited pseudoscience and racist eugenics theories that claim to use facial structure and head shape to assess mental capacity and character." Moreover, the National Institute of Standards and Technology reported that facial-recognition algorithms are more likely to misidentify people of color than white people, and that women were more likely to be misidentified than men. Evidently, facial recognition is an inequitable technology reflective of human bias that can be misused in egregious ways, effectively supercharging police abuse of power in this country.

In the emerging debate over whether the police should be defunded, reformers believe that the reach of police departments can be curbed in a manner that leaves the institution of policing in-

tact. On the other hand, abolitionists like myself are more concerned with materially dismantling the mechanisms that operate the complex of police surveillance. We fear that the #DefundThePolice movement will be co-opted and contorted into measures of "e-carceration" and new forms of policing that deviate from the intended goals of decarceration and excarceration.

Reformers might argue for body cameras, neglecting the possibility that body cameras can be morphed into devices of surveillance that target the communities they claim to protect. *Wolfcom*, for example, is the first major police body camera vendor in the United States to embrace facial recognition software in its latest "Halo" camera. In spite of unanswered questions and growing apprehension over its accuracy, the company is apparently moving forward with this frightening technology. Reformers may also see a benefit in investing in electronic monitoring devices that use GPS tracking to monitor people's locations. Electronic monitoring, however, is simply incarceration behind different walls.

Camden, New Jersey is often hailed as a shining example of a city that has successfully disbanded its police department. But instead of being a model for structural change, Camden is an impediment to that change. The new Camden County Police Department uses license plate reading cameras, ShotSpotter gunshot detectors, aerial surveillance, thermal imaging equipment, a mobile observation tower, and widespread CCTV cameras to pacify its population. Increasing the technical capacities of the police to that extent feels like a nightmarish dystopian form of social control and as such, Camden should not be considered a paradigm for structural change. Any allocation of funding toward surveillance technology that simply alters the authoritarian aesthetic betrays the foundational objectives of defunding the police.

Locally, the movement is blooming and flourishing. The Metro Detroit chapter of the Democratic Socialists of America has been tirelessly organizing to end an invasive surveillance program called Project Green Light and end facial recognition software usage by the Detroit Police Department. Several weeks ago, a facial

technology algorithm mismatch led to the wrongful arrest of Robert Williams. Despite this appalling news, the program was left unscathed.

In a report released by the Detroit Community Technology Project, researchers concluded that "surveillance and data collection was deeply connected to diversion of public benefits, insecure housing, loss of employment opportunities, and the policing and subsequent criminalization of the community members that come into contact with these surveillance systems." Clearly, mass surveillance is not a means to ensure public safety. It is a praxis that marginalizes already marginalized communities and diverts funding away from the public services that they desperately need.

The just course of action is to forgo these harmful surveillance programs and forgo this reliance on dangerously problematic big data. In the ongoing discourse of how we can end police brutality, we must reject the neoliberal establishment's attempts to dilute bold demands into easily digestible chunks of "reformed" carceral structures that continue to perpetuate the surveillance state. We must be vigilant about technocratically lustrous programs that are framed as "community partnerships" or "counterterrorism measures" to mask deleterious actions at the hands of law enforcement officials. We must oppose surveillance programs that encourage neighbors to surveil one another, thereby fracturing trust within the community.

We are at a point in our history where we can demand more than we have ever imagined before. We can pressure our elected officials into protecting us from harmful technology that interferes with our privacy. We can advocate for initiatives that truly put community safety at the forefront. We can take strides toward sustainable ways of living and thriving. In the fight to transform our society, we must ensure that divesting from police departments does not precipitate an investment in insidious surveillance technologies that will further imperil our livelihoods. We cannot let ourselves be confined to the very injustices that we are trying to escape. 🌱

Profits Over Pandemics

By Elias Khoury

The dreaded “second wave” of COVID-19 has arrived in full force. Actually, there is a good case to be made that the first wave never ended. After all, the curve did not flatten as hoped. At any rate, after plateauing at around 20,000 in early June, the United States is now closing in on 80,000 new cases per day. As a result of premature reopening and anti-mask culture, the disease’s recent uptick has hit Southern states the hardest. On July 12th, Florida shattered the record for a single-day increase in any state with a staggering 15,300 new cases. Louisiana, Georgia, Texas, Arizona, and Alabama have also been hit especially hard.

And so the devastation continues. At least, that is the case for most people. There is one group, however, that seems to be doing alright through the pandemic. In fact, by many metrics, they are better off now than they were before. Indeed, the ultrawealthy have used these historically hard times as an opportunity to further enrich themselves. While more people than ever before find themselves in a financially precarious position, the rich just continue to get richer — often-times doing so by means of direct ex-

traction.

Rising healthcare costs are one process by which wealth is transferred upward. Gilead Sciences, a pharmaceutical company worth nearly \$62 billion, recently announced that their coronavirus treatment, Remdesivir, would cost a colossal \$3,120 per person. Keep in mind that Remdesivir only costs about \$10 to produce. That is a 31,100% markup. Also consider that, in 2019, 40% of Americans could not afford a \$400 emergency. That percentage is, without question, significantly higher now as a result of record levels of permanent job loss.

But the plight of working Americans does not seem to concern Gilead Sciences in the slightest. At least 142,000 Americans have died from COVID-19, yet Gilead Sciences has made the conscious choice to make their treatment totally unaffordable for the vast majority of people. But Gilead Sciences is not just doing this because they are run by mean people. Remdesivir’s absurd price tag is the output of a cold, hard calculus motivated by one consideration that stands above all others: profit maximization. The drive to turn the largest profit possible is

simply what the capitalist business model both incentivizes and necessitates. That is the way it is designed. Many of those who fall ill with COVID-19 and cannot afford Remdesivir will die, but that only matters to pharmaceutical companies insofar as those deaths affect future profits.

But charging exorbitant fees for potentially life-saving drugs is not the only way to get rich off of a crisis. Since the pandemic began, at least 29 Americans have become billionaires — none of whom work in the pharmaceutical industry. Jeff Bezos in particular has had a good past few months. While continuing to subject his employees to unsafe and degrading working conditions, leading many of them worldwide to go on strike, the Amazon CEO’s net worth has increased by around \$40 billion since the pandemic’s onset. Bezos became \$13 billion richer in a single day on July 20th. He is now easily the world’s richest man, beating out second place Bill Gates by nearly \$50 billion, and is on pace to become a trillionaire by 2026. But do not feel too bad for Mr. Gates. He has still managed to increase his net worth by at least \$11.5 billion since March 18th. In total, as of over a month ago, American billionaires had gotten \$584 billion richer during the pandemic — a roughly 20% increase in total wealth. That gain covers the losses suffered by humanity’s poorest half during the same time frame twice over, even though as many as 527 million people have been added to the ranks of global poverty.

Compare the tremendous windfall of American billionaires to the economic state of their compatriots. Nearly half of the United States population is jobless, and unemployment claims top 52 million since March 20th. And, as a result of employer-based insurance, at least 16.2 million Americans have lost

their healthcare. While the plutocracy further consolidates power and wealth, the masses are immiserated. By March’s end, American households had already lost an astounding \$6.5 trillion. This sum is about the size of the GDPs of Germany and France combined. And, to put a cherry on top, a coming wave of evictions could force 28 million Americans into homelessness.

This enormous, and growing, divide between rich and poor is why Warren Gunnels, staff director for Senator Bernie Sanders, has concluded that “America is an oligarchy.” And Mr. Gunnels is not alone in his assessment. A landmark 2014 study out of Princeton University supports his claim. In the words of researchers Martin Gilens and Benjamin Page, “economic elites and organized groups representing business interests have substantial independent impacts on US government policy, while average citizens and mass-based interest groups have little or no independent influence.”

This should come as no surprise to the average working-class person, and explains why the federal government has played such a huge role in aiding and abetting growing inequality. Take the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act, for instance. Signed into law on March 27th, this supposed “stimulus” bill gave Wall Street up to \$1.8 trillion in helicopter money, with United States taxpayers footing the bill. Had those funds been used more responsibly, each American household could have been given

\$13,600. This would have been enough to pull everyone through the ongoing crisis. Instead, those in power opted for yet another massive corporate bailout despite Wall Street receiving an additional \$1.5 trillion from the Federal Reserve just two weeks prior. The CARES Act also contained a \$70.3 billion tax break for a small group of business owners making over \$1 million a year. It is clear that the problem is not a lack of money. The problem is a gross misalignment of priorities, and massive corruption at the highest levels.

With each new development in the political economy, one fact becomes ever more clear: we have enough to take care of everybody. Scarcity is not the source of our troubles. Nor is the vaunted myth of “overpopulation.” The fundamental problem of the current economic system, both at the national and global level(s), is that the few are allowed to

hoard wealth and resources to the detriment of the many. In the process of billionaires enriching themselves, working people are often denied their very humanity. Indeed, the result of excessive capital accumulation is untold levels of preventable suffering and death.

In these calamitous times, capitalism must be examined critically. Analysis should not start nor end with the romanticized musings of wealthy academics and market fetishists like Friedrich Hayek, Ludwig Von Mises, or, more recently, characters such as Steven Pinker and his ideological ilk, who cravenly bend over backwards and engage in mental gymnastics to sanitize and cover up for the worst elements of the status quo. Clearly, this does nothing to make the world a better place. The proper approach is to judge the existing economic system by its fruits. 🌱

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Photo: Andrew Harrer/Getty Images