

## **Title: 'Roller derby changed my life': sport as emancipatory potential**

**Author: Lisa Farrance**

### **Abstract:**

Social theory has a tendency to treat sport as a cultural terrain that is anathema to progressive social change. Sport has been criticised for distracting from more overtly political expressions - and thus operating as a kind of 'opiate of the masses' - and also for assisting in the intensification of the exploitation of labour by making bodies more fit for work. Its role in supporting highly corporatised and colonialist global structures has also been well-studied. While such criticisms are not incorrect, they capture only an aspect of what sport is. I am often struck by the contrast between a critical social theorist's view of sport and the expressed experiences of those who participate, either as audience or athlete. In this paper, based on four years of ethnographic field work, I explore why and how the critical traditions within social theory can and should be reapplied to an understanding of sport as potentially liberating. I do this through listening to the voices emanating from the radical, unapologetically women-led, sport of roller derby. I argue that such a re-theorising is important to a fuller understanding of not just roller derby or sport, but our cultural life under capitalism, and the contradictions we face daily between freedom and oppression, alienation and fulfillment. I argue that it is in and through these tensions, not by exaggerating or side-stepping them, that we find the possibilities for more far reaching political change.

### **Keywords:**

Marxism, feminism, women, sport, gender, emancipation, alienation, practice

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A group of women line up on the track. They know exactly where they are positioning themselves, having planned their initial moves before the last jam finished. Determined faces, some with war paint, bodies bent and crouched over as if in a sprint start but their feet tilted over onto toe stops. The positions look almost choreographed in their precarious stillness. Dressed in a mixture of standard team sports gear and theatrical additions, some with makeup, most with names on their back that reflect chosen personas, the skaters have something in common: a sense of strength and fearlessness, at least in appearance, that is celebrated by the mixed crowds. In this sport women dominate. This sport – from competitor through to spectator to trainee – is proud of that dominance (Finley 2010). In this sport the athletes rule. It is their sport and no-one else's.

### **The labour contradiction: between alienation and self-activity**

Social theory has a tendency to treat sport as a cultural terrain that is anathema to progressive social change (see for example: Coakley and Dunning 2000; Giulianotti 2004; Horne et al 2013; Carrington and McDonald 2009a; Shilling 2003). Sport is treated in social theory, particularly of the critical kind, as many bad things, but two approaches are very common. Firstly, sport is seen as a distraction from the main fields through which social change can occur. That is, it is seen simply as part of the corporatised leisure industry and seeks to distract people from the everyday exploitation and oppression they face, with spectacles and events to passively watch, and spend significant money at, as mere consuming audiences.

Secondly, sport is seen as a propagator of capitalist, nationalist ideology. That is, it promotes aggressive and even destructive ideals: of competitiveness between people and nations and winning at all costs. Sport is a promoter of the work ethic and of a particular body type and exemplar of the mild, white, straight, cis-gendered, male status quo. Following on from this, sport is almost militaristic at times in its nationalism, with sports events being run like military parades, celebrating distant heroes and encouraging hatred of national Others. In this model there is very

little room in sport for collectivity, mutual appreciation or any form of progressive change, even as a potential.

My response to these arguments is: of course this is what sport is; however this is not only what sport is. In fact, to view any cultural or social terrain as merely the pure product of global capitalism, without internal challenge, contradiction and with these, all the possibilities for change, is not only factually imprecise, it is a dangerous political standpoint from which to critique. Dangerous because the absence of recognition of potentials for change within social phenomena signifies a deep pessimism about the power of dominant structures and ideologies over us, not just within sport, but across other cultural fields. Also, sport need not be understood in this way. I am often struck by the contrast between a theorist's view of sport and the expressed experiences of those who participate, either as audience or athlete. My research explores why and how the critical traditions within social theory can and should be reapplied to an understanding of sport as potentially liberating. I also argue that such a re-theorising is important to a fuller understanding of not just sport, but the general contradictions we live daily between freedom and oppression, alienation and fulfillment.

As Karl Marx described in the *1844 Manuscripts* (1844), that which makes us human – our ability to act in and on the world around us, fully and creatively – is constrained under our current social conditions. During much of our life our labour is bought and sold to others, who manage the work we do. The products of that labour, be they intellectual or physical, are owned by others or turned into commodities for sale. This in turn means that our ability to live truly fulfilling lives, through the full expression of our human ability to be act in, be in and change the world, is limited. That is, much of our labour is sold to waged or salaried work, which limits our ability to apply this as we wish, and for truly social and fulfilling ends. This system of commodified labour even seeps into our most intimate and private lives, as Arlie Hochschild (2003) has described, resulting in relationships of exchange even at home and through leisure.

On the other hand, for Marx, “our living labour (also) appears as the... source of whatever dynamism the system has. The possibility of our self-activity rupturing capitalist efforts to harness it appears as the... path to revolution” (Cleaver in Carrington and MacDonald 2009a, xxix). This idea applies equally to the labour which exists within the system of waged slavery and outside of it; both within the capitalist systems of production and outside, in fields such as leisure, protest, the arts or the home. Therefore our labour outside waged work – that is, through sport, political activity, creative expression, even the labour of intimacy – is potentially the expression and source of our liberation and therefore also part of any revolutionary drive, even where this revolutionary drive is not yet organised or politicised.

So when this labour happens under our current, capitalist and patriarchal, social conditions, it is always BOTH alienated and liberatory. Our labour is a reflection of a constant tension and dialectic then, within ourselves: one moment it swings towards alienation and next moment is an expression of our freedom to act in the world. Like any dialectic, it constantly pushes towards resolution, even if this leads to only temporary and partial relief: through, for example, playing sport and experiencing the freedom and fulfillment of this. Therefore, far from sport simply being an extension of alienation, it is also an expression of our drive to freedom, away from alienation.

As both a Marxist theorist and activist, and a keen commentator of cricket, CLR James had a passionate appreciation of the role that sport can play in the lives of people (for example: CLR James 2005). He argued that: ‘the pleasures and longings, the flashes of wholeness and completion of which cultural forms at their best provide fleeting instances, were not the ‘other’ to political struggle’ (Smith 2011, 496), but the core of it. ‘Those pleasures, that desire for togetherness and the celebration of the human as an ability to act creatively in the world these things are what a truly popular politics is about’. As Andrew Smith (2011) describes, CLR James saw that:

‘The triumph of it (taking risk in sport), when it occurs, is that it demonstrates to the watching world for a moment something of the possibility inherent in human creativity, something of the human ability to transfigure and transform circumstance.’ (487)

Other writers have described similar experiences. Zach Dundas (2010), in his writings on 'renegade sport', draws the conclusion that:

'Sports exercise our higher social functions, fuel our dreams, and trigger the sensory animal pleasures that give our evolved consciousness its earthy roots. They remind us both of the body's capacity for excellence and its frequent and often hilarious fallibility.' (283)

Mischa Merz (2012), in one of her now two books on boxing, describes how she practices the sport 'like an artist, because I must, not to attain any particular goal, but because it is who I am' (x). This description runs in stark contrast to how much of critical social theory, especially that of the Frankfurt School, describes sport and physical activity.

In a rare type of reflection for a critical social theorist, Harry Cleaver in his forward to the collection of writings on Marxism, Cultural Studies and Sport (Carrington & McDonald 2009b) tells his own story about involvement in mountain climbing.

'At first, climbing seemed like pure self-valorisation; it heightened my awareness, developed me physically, provided an opportunity for close bonds with others, taught me about a part of the earth I had never know and I love it.' (location 616).

However, Cleaver recognises that there is a contradiction here; that this activity cannot be viewed and studied in isolation from his other life activities. If the energy he gains from this activity goes into his paid work, for example, then it is also contributing to the reproduction of his labour, and therefore to his own exploitation. Recognising this tension creates the space to turn this activity into a conscious political activity. He points out that an early slogan of the eight-hour movement was "eight hours for what we will". Movements for workers self-organisation are often connected simultaneously with movements for self-realisation and fulfillment (Carrington & McDonald 2009b, location 608). As with CLR James, Cleaver sees the potential for social and political change in "our self activity and struggles to escape domination" (Carrington & McDonald 2009b, location 575). Because within these moments are seeds for future society, the seeds of revolutionary activity and

of a world where human fulfillment is possible. Culture then, in all its forms, is absolutely a terrain of struggle, as the Frankfurt School and Cultural Studies have recognised (Carrington & McDonald 2009b, 591). In contrast to the Frankfurt School however, I argue that these seeds of revolutionary activity are also to be found in the cultural activities of sport. Further, that engaging the body through physical activity helps to overcome the mind-body divide so common in our modern forms of labour; the divide that was for Marx the source of all alienation from our human selves (1844).

Reversing Karl Marx's four categories of alienation (1844), Harry Cleaver (in Carrington and McDonald 2009a) and puts forward four criteria for sport that would be necessary for it to be potentially liberating:

1. It should be run by the participants themselves;
2. The products of the sport – the events, the outcomes of the sport – should also be under the control of participants;
3. It should encourage social connection and bonds;
4. It should create the space for human fulfillment and development. (xxxii-xxxiii)

Roller derby at last partially meets all of these criteria. So I have conducted a four-year long ethnographic case study of roller derby, primarily focused in and around Melbourne. I've observed and participated in events such as bouts, bootcamps, conventions and national tournaments. I've spoken to organisers and visiting international coaches, to ask their opinion about what makes the sport so unique. I've noted my own experiences of training and competing. But most importantly, I've collected in-depth interviews with a range of women skaters who self-identify with the very common saying 'roller derby changed my life'.

## **Roller derby**

Roller derby is one of the fastest growing women's sports in the world (WFTDA 2014; Wikipedia 2014). Reforming in Texas in the early 2000s, the sport has undergone a complete makeover. The rules have changed, along with its governance, its goals and even the type of track it is played on. In 2002 the track went flat, down from the previous banked track. This assisted in the

democratisation of the sport because being on a flat track made it possible to train and compete on almost any flat surface: indoor basketball courts, outdoor concrete courts, in warehouses, showgrounds, skate rinks and even bars with concrete floors. This period also marked the beginning of a truly athlete-run sport. The saying 'by the skaters, for the skaters' is still an essential point of agreement between roller derby leagues. Some form of democratic internal structure is a requirement of leagues who wish to affiliate to the central governing body: the Women's Flat Track Derby Association (WFTDA 2014). The representatives on WFTDA committees are themselves elected. The rules of the sport are debated throughout the affiliates and changes decided upon on the basis of this discussion. Despite its substantial growth (WFTDA 2014; Wikipedia 2014) over the past 12 years, skater-run democracy has remained. This is possibly how it remains both accessible and a sport that promotes social change, particularly for women and for those who are queer (see for example: Vagine Regime 2014).

The whistle blows. Two skaters at the back of the pack begin to push. They have the jammer helmet covers on their heads, with a star either side. They are the point scorers. In roller derby no ball scores the points, a skater does. This is the first difference between roller derby and other sports. The 'ball' can fight back. The jammers can shift, and dodge, and weave, duck, and even leap past an opposition skater. It is therefore one of the only sports in the world where defence and offence occurs at the same time for both teams. While trying to stop the opposing jammer from getting through, you have to simultaneously try to help your own jammer get through the pack to score points for your team. This makes for a spectacular game to watch and an even more difficult game to play. The latter is what keeps skaters coming back, for mastering even a moment in the game is a rarely experienced thrill. Overcoming the chaos on the track can make you feel like anything in life is possible.

Roller derby is unique for an even more important characteristic: it changes lives. The saying 'roller derby changed my life' is so common it is trite. A song is written about it, the theme trails through almost every roller derby blog. At first appearance, the types of changes seem to differ: leaving abusive relationships; gaining a sense of physical strength; coming to terms with being gay or

bisexual or transgendered or gender questioning or 'just' plain queer; recovering from past sexual abuse; changing careers; or, developing a healthy relationship with the body. When explored further, it becomes apparent that these changes have much in common, around finding the strength to finally live a truer life, to live a life where body and self are reunited and to have the boldness to face challenges that were previously shunned or not even conceived of. In short, the changes reflect a shift towards living a more fulfilling life, one that pushes up against personal, social and physical boundaries and develops the self towards a fuller potential. For many, being involved in roller derby is emancipatory, even if this is partial and temporary.

The game on the track that night finishes on a tie breaker. I had been watching the local roller derby games - called bouts - for several months. I had appreciated so much about them: the themed nights with awards for best costume; the skater names; the early Saturday night timetabling which meant it was simultaneously a great family night out and a warmer for those wanting to hit bars and clubs afterwards; the variety of women's bodies fiercely competing on the track. The latter was a shock, even for a cultural studies student. It made me realise just how limited, sterile and constructed the public representations of women's bodies are. Representations of women and their bodies, including that of athletes, do not reflect the diversity of bodies that really exist. Yet here, in the hockey stadium in Reservoir, women did not have to fit into a stereotype of what an athlete looked like in order to play a highly competitive and entertaining game. In fact, large hips and thighs were a distinct physical advantage on wheels because of the lower centre of gravity: large butts are symbols of strength and power. As one author notes, in roller derby "the butt is resignified" (Carlson 2010). So are women's bodies in general.

This night was different however. It was the bout that won me to roller derby. It was an interstate competition in mid-Winter in 2009, before the release of the Drew Barrymore directed movie about roller derby, *Whip It*. The stadium was packed. Tickets were selling out for interstate games even then and the hundreds now standing on their feet felt a little like we had discovered a secret: this crazy game where women smash each other on roller skates.

Until my friend joined I had never heard of it. These were still mainly word-of-mouth days. The sport rarely made it into papers and then only as spectacle. Tonight we were celebrating roller derby not simply as spectacle, but as serious sport. It was a grudge match between two leagues that had been battling it out for top league in the country, but in a time before we had anything like a ladder. It was before the biannual Australia-New Zealand tournament, *The Great Southern Slam* (TGSS 2014). It was raw and mean and worthy of the name *bout*. As the standing crowd roared you were reminded of other underground sports held down dingy streets and in warehouses: the fighting sports. That this was women made meant it was all the more exciting and that little bit rebellious. This sport was founded on a different terrain to so many others.

Adelaide won, but through a controversial referee's call. While this mattered to many of the skaters and long term spectators, I was touched by how little it mattered to everyone else. I was in tears of joy and excitement. Others were too. These kind of events are rare in any location, when the possibilities of the human body in movement are pushed and witnessed. They occur where the relationship between spectator and athlete become intertwined and the room becomes something else through the cheering and incredible skill of athlete and the momentary experience of everyone being part of something bigger: a moment where we witness and feel human endeavour. It was reminiscent of concerts and festivals, theatrical performances, many art exhibitions, and for me, of united protest. It is, arguably, about that drive towards human emancipation.

### **Sport as emancipatory potential**

A key question for this research is, *what are the conditions in which such change and liberation can occur?* I have some preliminary findings. Firstly, that inclusivity matters. You need to be able to be yourself, whatever that is. For some women this means putting on a persona, for their real life selves have become some constrained by being 'the good wife' or the 'good mother'. Roller derby creates spaces that open up possibilities for what it means to be a woman. Secondly, that it is run by the athletes themselves, so they control their training, their competitions, how the sport is run. Thirdly, that it provides mutually supportive place for learning new ways of moving and

experiencing the body. Roller derby is a complicated sport to play. Everyone comes to it needing to learn something. And this learning can have a profound and long lasting impact on women's relationships to their bodies and to themselves. As international coach of 20 years, Dirty Deborah Harry, explains, when a woman learns a new skill, her entire way of being in the world changes.

Under certain conditions then, sport changes lives. Far from being the 'other' to social change and freedom, sport can be central. Just as social movements, critical art projects and workers' self activity can create a space for resistance to dominant social structures, to alienation from our labour, and to the ideologies that surround these, so can sporting cultures. And this is important. As Bentley Le Baron (1971) describes, the struggle for emancipation is never solely about directly changing those social structures, it is also about 'the self-activity of becoming other than we are, the activity of surpassing the given (which is ourselves), and of beginning to be new people, creating new kinds of social relations' (561). As this case study of the radical, women-led sport of roller derby demonstrates, this absolutely does occur within the places of physical activity as well.

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