The Soccer Field's Unfreedom

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Abstract

This paper was originally written for Dr. Maureen Kihika's LBST307 course. The assignment asked students to demonstrate a clearly conceptualized understanding of unfreedom under capitalism, by focusing on a specific issue that relates to this topic. The paper uses APA citation style.

This paper explores the unfreedom of the football/soccer industry in relation to African footballers. Inequality under global neoliberalism and contemporary capitalism shapes the conditions in Africa that push these players towards football as a means of social mobility. These structural imbalances also bolster European football over African football, creating a distinctly neocolonial dynamic between the two football industries. The desperation and aspirations of African players to chase their dreams of European footballing glory makes them highly vulnerable to exploitation and coercion from advantageous intermediaries. Post-career problems for African footballers are also detailed, demonstrating the durability of this unfreedom. Potential solutions to the football industry's unfreedom are suggested via the Right To Dream example, as well as various agreements and protections that should be put in place.

As a truly global sport, soccer/football has been central to shaping the lives of many around the world. Similar to many other fans of the sport, I had aspirations of becoming a professional footballer growing up. Packed stadiums, superstar lifestyles, being at World Cups – the materialism and presentation of the sport are alluring to a child's mind. These football dreams shaped my perception and admiration of the sport, inevitably blinding me to its exploitative undercurrents. As I've grown older, my cynicism towards modern football has begun to outweigh awe-struck wonder. The 2022 Qatar World Cup in particular was a turning-point, as the reports of migrant worker deaths made me truly question my attachment to the sport and whether I, as a consumer, was complicit in this brutality of unfreedom. What I've come to discover is that this unfreedom is not a bug or glitch in the sport, but a feature that is structurally and deliberately reproduced

akin to other forms of modern slavery under contemporary capitalism. Unfree labour in the football industry is most apparent when assessing the football trafficking of African footballers. The football dreams of these players make them susceptible to the worst kinds of coercion and exploitation, and it is a process that is exacerbated by an inherently unfree global neoliberal and contemporary capitalist environment. At the foundation of football's unfreedom is the sport's scale, commercialism, and prominent position in contemporary capitalism. The unfreedom and exploitation itself often comes in "the growth and increasing power of labour intermediaries and recruitment agents" (LeBaron, 2015, p. 9), a labour dynamic that mirrors other forms of unfreedom outside the sport. European football is entrenched as a hegemonic force, carrying with it allure and glamour that are the center of football dreams. The willingness of African footballers to enter situations of unfreedom is fuelled by the comparative economic uncertainty, marginalization, and poverty in their local contexts, and their aspirations to escape these conditions. Collectively, football as a sport is a highly illuminating domain of globalization. It provides sociological insights that closely reflect the wider global realities of the political economy, labor market migration, and unfreedom.

The power, influence, and stature of the international football industry gives it a stronghold in the global capitalist system. The eyeballs speak for themselves, with "nearly 50 percent of the world's population [tuning] in for at least one minute of the last World Cup" (Ume-Ezeoke, 2018, p. 24). The commercialization of football has been emboldened by neoliberal globalization, ensuring that football matches – the top European competitions (England's Premier League, Italy's Serie A, Spain's La Liga, France's Ligue 1, UEFA European Champions League) – are broadcast globally. Football's TV revenue, sponsorships, merchandizing, and values are all increasing far beyond other sports. However, this high level of commercialization attained by the sport in domestic leagues and continental competitions in Europe has eluded Africa's football industry. The disparity in wages is galling, with even the weekly wages of England's fourth tier league (League Two, £747) far outpacing Ghana's best paying team Kumasi Ansante Kotoko (£40) (Okwechime & Adetiloye, 2019, p. 389). In accordance with this imbalance, international organizations such as FIFA, UEFA and CAF tend to pander to the interests of the big clubs who generate the most money and attention in the sport. Despite the weak on-field quality of its domestic leagues, talent isn't a problem in Africa. From players in the 2000s/early 2010s such as Samuel Eto'o (Cameroon National Team, FC Barcelona) and

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Didier Drogba (Cote d'Ivoire), to superstars in the modern game like Mohamed Salah (Egypt National Team, Liverpool FC) and Victor Osimhen (Nigeria National Team, Galatasaray), African footballers have excelled in Europe and are some of the best players in the world. However, because the power in the sport is so skewed towards Europe, this labour is drained at a young age from the continent for Europe's gain. European football clubs implement scouting networks, academies and affiliations with clubs in Africa to secure the best talents on the continent. This process specifically targets minors, because younger players represent good value for clubs to further develop. In the case of even smaller European clubs, this is especially financially beneficial because selling players to bigger clubs in future sales is a vital source of revenue for clubs outside the top leagues. The dynamic between European football and African football even prompted FIFA's former president Sepp Blatter to call out the "neo-colonial European football clubs for robbing the developing world of its best players" (Ume-Ezeoke, 2018, p. 24). European clubs, as the colonial core, use their power within the sport to develop Eurocentric rules and regulations to strengthen their position with little or no consideration for the detrimental consequences of their African counterparts on the periphery. Using their power and financial might, they hold a near-monopoly over global footballing talent. This maintains the one-way labour migration path from Africa to Europe that players hope to embark on.

The inequality between European football and African football is ideologically internalized by African footballers, and it configures their football dreams. The scope of this dynamic is a combination of the local and the global. The local context of Africa is a severe lack of opportunity and structural milieu, created and maintained by global capitalism and neoliberal globalization. The shift towards neoliberal policies in Africa has forced young people to take individual responsibility for any hopes of social mobility, with the state's duties taken over by private interests and the extended community being eroded. Opportunities in the "formal labour market are dwindling, and state welfare for the unemployed borders on the nonexistent" (Esson, 2015, p. 20), and the average yearly income for many West Africans is below $1,000 (Ume-Ezeoke, 2018, p. 24). With the socio-economic uncertainty present in Africa, football migration abroad represents the "best way to lift an individual and therefore vicariously their family out of poverty" (Esson, 2015, p. 7). African footballers who carve out careers in Europe are seen as breadwinners and a source of social mobility for those around them, as lots of their income earned from football labour goes towards a larger family network. The sheer desperation to climb upwards on the global capitalist

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ladder in the footsteps of their footballing idols in Europe makes these aspiring footballers easier to coerce and exploit. The main culprits are intermediaries or agencies who either commodify African footballers and then sell them at a profit to the European continent, or simply scam and extort the players. All the way back in 1999, the United Nations Commission on Human Rights warned about the "danger of effectively creating a modern day 'slave trade' in young African footballers" (Esson & Drywood, 2018, p. 61). Fast-forward to 2024 and the problem is only deepening rather than lessening, with the Culture Foot Solidaire group (CFS) estimating that "15,000 young African players [are] taken abroad every year under false pretences" (Okwechime & Adetiloye, 2019, p. 396).

Football's slave trade of African players usually plays out in similar patterns of unfreedom, coercion, and exploitation. In order to be recruited to attain their football dreams, youth leave their homes and head to cities that host showcases for supposed scouts. There, an intermediary claiming to be a football agent or talent scout identifies the player and proposes the opportunity of a trial with a foreign club in Europe. The lofty ambition of the players usually blinds them to the illegitimacy of the intermediaries they enter into labour relationships with. After handing over money – usually the result of selling family possessions, removing siblings from schooling, or taking out loans – to those claiming to be legitimate football agents, the player is promised a playing contract or trial abroad. Generally, the alleged interest from a foreign club is fiction. The footballer arrives in a destination country with temporary passports, forged visas, and fake birth certificates obtained by their agents. From here, it's typical for the intermediary to seize the player's documents and money under the guise of safe keeping. Whether the player has an unsuccessful trial or no trial at all (the latter is more common), the agent abandons the player in that country. The agent takes the player's documentation and money with them, leaving the player stranded as an illegal immigrant in a precarious situation with no means to return home. Upon abandonment, many of these African footballers must seek menial labour for survival or become social delinquents in the European cities they find themselves trapped in. It's clear the relationship between agents and footballers isn't equal, it is a power dynamic of dependency built on coercion with the promise of helping fulfill their football dreams. Akin to any other form of unfree labour, football clearly links "spaces of accumulation with spaces of vulnerability" (Taylor & Rioux, 2018, p. 136). As these intermediaries hold near total ownership over the player, they are able to completely restrict the freedom of the athletes to exit this

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labour arrangement. It's this coercion and exploitation that naturally draws the comparisons of football agents with slave merchants.

Even for the very select few who are able to remain in Europe and maintain a footballing career, their precarity remains intact regardless. The football industry is full of contractual insecurity, a general lack of health care benefits, and no guarantees of pension. Given the short lifespan of most football careers, the lack of post-retirement protections is a significant problem. It's exacerbated further by the dearth of other career options that are available to these footballing migrants. The football clubs they play for and the governing bodies in charge of the sport don't try hard enough to help their players navigate barriers related to education, cultural capital, language, and citizenship. Firstly, racial discrimination in sports is structurally hegemonic. Be it the lack of diversity in European clubs' positions of power in the board room and the coaching ranks, to the racist attitudes that persist among fanbases and punditry, racism shapes the "problematic structures in the global football business that disadvantage migrant players and their attempts to reproduce social mobility after career ending" (Ungruhe & Agergaard, 2021, p. 347). African footballers are seen as more expendable than their Western counterparts, with little worth beyond what they do on the field. The narrow focus on footballing performance, combined with limiting options for players to embark on dual careers, leaves very little avenues available to facilitate future job opportunities. African players are also especially prone to being underpaid and on short-term contracts, which creates a precarity that further hinders their ability to accumulate the cultural capital needed for life beyond their football careers. While residence permits are bound to contracts with clubs and so they must also be held accountable, the state fails to assist the players and deprives them of long-term political and legal rights. This may cause a player to depart soon after a contract expires or after retirement no matter how long they've lived in a country. Professional footballers from Africa struggle to parlay their physical capital into other forms of social, economic and cultural capital, exemplifying the longevity of labour problems they face under contemporary capitalism.

In response to this unfreedom in African football, several solutions can be proposed. One may already exist, in the form of Right to Dream. Founded in 1999 by Tom Vernon (a former scout for Manchester United) in Ghana, Right to Dream is a non-profit academy and football organization. It merges footballing training with education, with state-of-the-art facilities for both purposes. Participants, who join starting at the age of ten and are scouted from across

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Africa, are offered scholarships in addition to their football development. This operation has expanded to Egypt and will also begin in America starting in 2025, with the advent of Right to Dream's new MLS franchise San Diego FC. Players take several paths following graduation from the Right To Dream academy. Some jump straight into professional football clubs across Europe, usually starting in Denmark at Right to Dream's satellite club FC Nordsjælland. Most graduates of Right to Dream go the educational route, finding spots in international universities, colleges and boarding schools thanks to their educational experience in the academy. This focus on education solves the issues of post-career prospects and cultural capital accumulation that often plague African footballers, providing a holistic combination of personal and footballing development that opens doors to opportunities. Furthermore, because Right to Dream deals directly with high profile registered clubs and agents certified by FIFA's transfer system, the precarity and coercion of intermediaries that hamper the sport is mostly out of the equation.

However, Right to Dream on its own can only serve as a partial solution to such wide-ranging problems. The bulk of the responsibility must be placed on the governing bodies of world football, namely FIFA. While FIFA has guidelines that criminalized the transfer of youths under 18, they are clearly not enforcing these rules. Given the global hegemon that it is, FIFA undoubtedly has the power to play a critical role in protecting these young footballers. African football bodies such as CAF and its respective national football associations are also culpable, as they fail to implement proper protections for the footballing minors in their countries. If institutions and governing bodies of football can't hold themselves accountable, the exploitation of young African footballers in their migrations to Europe will continue. There also needs to be more rules in place to ensure the security of trialing, in terms of trying to protect against abandonment or players that are unsuccessful in their attempt to make a team. The financial burden of these trials must also be corrected, with restrictions barring families to commit obscene sums of money to have their children go to Europe. At a baseline level, if clubs believe a player can be a valuable addition to their team, they should be willing to cover costs upfront as opposed to the poor and marginalized families that players come from. Finally, inspiration for an important standardized solution can be drawn from fair trade agreements. In the same way that there are fair trade agreements to ensure ethical production and export of bananas, chocolate and coffee, an "'ethical transfer charter' could reduce cases of irregular football migration" (Esson & Drywood, 2018, p. 65). By signing and upholding such a

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charter, clubs would thus agree to only recruit footballers who had been ethically sourced and effectively ban recruitment from spaces of exploitation that infringe on children's rights. The solutions to football unfreedom are similar to the solutions to other forms of unfree labour, which only illustrates the pervasiveness of exploitation across contemporary capitalist contexts. Most of us unknowingly consume goods and services made with labour that was coerced, and the football industry is not immune to this. These are not individualized or isolated cases, rather it is a structural relationship of precarity and exploitation. The exploitation of African footballers proves that unfree labour is not "discordant with the economic structures and long-term interests of modern liberal capitalist societies" (Davidson, 2015, p. 16). What begins as football dreams are turned into football nightmares of unfreedom and exploitation.

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