**Sport, Soft Power and Cultural Relations**

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Abstract

The contribution of soft power and sports to foreign policy has been an expanding area of research and yet a relative silence exists on the making of effective cultural relations through sport. Revisionist accounts of sport, soft power and diplomacy have provided a refreshing impetus that has enabled sport to have a 21st century voice in national conversations around foreign policy and international relations. An opportunity exists to make the case that sport is part of the essential toolbox for anyone involved in contemporary cultural relations. That sport can contribute to the common good. The purpose of this article is to make such a case. What is cultural relations and why is it needed now as a soft critique of soft power and diplomacy and the role of sport in making the art of the possible, possible?

Key words: sport, cultural relations, soft power
**Introduction**

Sport is not a solution in and of itself but it’s importance in helping to forge better cultural relations should not be underestimated. On any given day sport matters to millions of people around the world, is used politically and serves political functions. Accounts of sport, soft power and diplomacy have helped to provide sport with a contemporary voice in dialogues about foreign policy, international relations, creating influence and how attractive countries are or perceived to be.

In the aftermath of the 2020 American Presidential election jagged faultlines of inequality have been fought out in public spaces and public squares. Such faultlines, as exemplified in the actions of the Black Lives Matter Movement (BLM) found traction, far beyond the USA. Such faultlines are not the exclusive ownership of any one country for they are both socio-economic and geo-political fault lines that require solutions. In a fragmented and divided world this may not be the time for the United Kingdom (UK) or other countries to be cutting international aid budgets (BBC, 2020a, 21 March). It might be a time when we need effective tools with scale, reach and popularity that can help to rebuild trust, better cultural relations and a sense of an enlarged common purpose (British Academy, 2017; Jade, 2017; MacDonald, 2020b).

This article will return to the question of the common good and cultural relations but as an initial marker what is
offered here is the observation that cultural relations are reciprocal, non-coercive transnational interactions between two or more cultures encompassing a range of activities that are conducted both by state and non-state actors within the space of cultural and civil society. The overall outcomes of cultural relations are greater connectivity, better mutual understanding, more and deeper relationships, mutually beneficial transactions and enhanced sustainable dialogue between states, peoples, non-state actors and cultures (MacDonald, 2020a). An opportunity exists to make the case that sport should be part of the magic toolbox of any country, civil service, diplomat, international ambassador, or multi-lateral agency seeking to build mutual, long-term, co-operative relationships between countries. Four reasons might be given for such an assertion, there are more, but the current international context offers the following.

First the advent of the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) has provided sport with a legitimate international mandate, the political door has opened slightly (Commonwealth Secretariat, 2015; Lindsay and Chapman, 2017; UN, 2015). The Kazan Action Plan and considerable international effort is focusing upon helping countries deliver intentionally planned SDG outcomes through sport. An exercise that is helping to sustain a dialogue between countries, moves sport out of its comfort zone by forcing it to talk to a
range of non-sport agencies and Ministries and crucially help to
evidence the contribution of sport to delivering non-sport

Secondly, in an interview with the BBC Opel Tometi,
one of the founders of BLM, stated that she thought “our
movements are showing a whole other way is possible” (BBC
2020b, 30 November, p1). Tomati was referring to what she
saw as the impact of the movement on transforming how
politics works and making sure that more power is in the hands
of the people. BLM and the world of sport certainly connected.

Colin Kaepernick, Lewis Hamilton, Naomi Osaka, Megan
Rapinoe, Michael Jordan and Serena Williams being some of
the athletes who have spoken out following the death of George
Floyd. They are not the first to act through sport and the
platform that it gives them to call out the many injustices in the
world including racism. No one should be surprised by the
political and social leadership shown by sport (Boycott, 2016;
Jarvie, Trimbur and Xu, 2020; Kidd, 2020). While often
actively discouraged from critical comments, at times of crisis,
many athletes have taken their responsibility to represent their
communities seriously and their voices are being heard. The
Manchester United footballer Marcus Rashford has spoken
passionately about child hunger and helped to pressurise UK
politicians to do the right thing by extending funding schemes
to support food poverty interventions targeted at school
children (BBC, 2020c, 16 June). In the UK Rashford illustrated how to make a single issue a straightforward matter of conscience and get a government to change its mind.

It is not feasible to expect or suggest that despite its popularity, scale and reach sport can persuade, individuals, communities, or countries to recognise their mutual obligations. The world and the public can’t always depend upon athletic celebrities to galvanise sport’s reach to tackle social inequality, nor should it. Political parties can’t depend on sports people and celebrities taking it upon themselves to campaign for social inequality and the public can’t afford to rely on them. But they could recognise that they are contributing in a powerful way and that occasionally politicians follow their lead. The examples provided here are illustrative but the point that is being made is that a new, often younger, group of sports activists and philanthropists are using their voice, platform and in some cases wealth as a reminder that world is not necessarily the way it has to be.

Thirdly, there is the advent of the coronavirus pandemic (covid-19). The virus has potentially caused a rethink about the world, the importance of community, technologically supported ways of meeting, doing business and working towards a new common good. When asked to provide one lesson from the pandemic one US sports Chief Executive Officer (CEO), replied:
Focus on the bigger picture. Most of the things we stress about in business and life are not worthy of the energy we spend on them. And being able to sleep in my own bed and have dinner with my family every night is pretty cool (SBJ 26 December 2020, p1).

In a recent account of how this pandemic is affecting society Aarts, Fleuren, Siyskoorn and Withagen (2021) anticipated a successful shift to the forging of a new common good and strengthening resilience at individual, community and societal levels. One of the consequences of lockdown is that many have had time to reflect upon the world we live in, see more of our common humanity, care about our interdependence and reflect on the possibilities of different futures.

Finally, the advent of a range of new bespoke sport diplomacy strategies suggests that in some countries a current intervention and dialogue has taken place about the value of sport to Ministries responsible for foreign affairs (MFAs). The attraction and questioning of the value of hosting mega sporting events has been well documented. (Grix, 2016; Jarvie, Thornton and Mackie, 2018). Several nations are signed up to the idea that mega sports events should be viewed as informal sport summits and a place where sports ambassadors can assist with public diplomacy opportunities (Murray and Price, 2020). There are a number of reasons why sporting events might be seen as attractive to nations. They can create the opportunity
for wider bilateral and multilateral conversations, alongside engaging with the sports event itself. This logic is like other unconventional diplomatic forums where leaders and influencers gather, such as royal weddings, inaugurations, or funerals. Regardless of the occasion, informal discussions between leaders can often lead to formal agreements between diplomats in the broadest sense of the term. 120 heads of state attended the £27m opening ceremony of the 2012 London Olympic Games, an event which the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) at the time saw as a “magnet for high value foreign investment” and “the biggest corporate networking event in the world (Murray and Price, 2020, p8). The programme of diplomacy included using British Olympic athlete ambassadors to spread the 2012 messages globally, a series of sector events, rolling trade expos and an on-site British Business Embassy. Such activity can exist without necessarily having a bespoke sports diplomacy strategy in place.

Australia launched its first sports diplomacy strategy in 2015 and its second in 2020. The aim of this journey was to ensure that Australia’s domestic culture, identity and love of sport was included in its diplomacy. Sport was identified by the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) as a key soft power asset. Working in tandem with Australia’s overseas embassies, posts and missions, sport, diplomacy and soft power
were seen as vital to help shape an environment that was positively disposed to Australian foreign policy interests and values (Murray and Price, 2020, p14).

What is being suggested here is that new opportunities and new voices, involving sport could build upon old opportunities, old voices and that different world contexts might have opened the door for sport to be taken more seriously beyond just the world of sport itself. The contemporary world needs spaces that can hold a plurality of politics and which engages with ordinary people and cultures, with all their varied histories and disagreements. Sport, it is suggested here, can be one such space. Sport itself should fully grasp the opportunity to be part of building more effective cultural relations and contributing further to the common good.

In advancing such a proposition this article is structured around (i) a recognition of the valuable research that has helped to situate sport more effectively as a potential agent of soft power; (ii) an addition to this debate by advancing the proposition that sport can be an enabler in the exercise of building better cultural relations and the common good and (iii) a discussion of the place of sport in making the art of the possible, possible and suggesting that the language that is used to talk about sport, soft power, cultural relations might be adapted in order to facilitate a much more effective and tight problematic around dialogue and co-operation between and
within countries and communities. The article concludes by providing an overview and some key messages.

The Exercise of Soft Power

One way in which countries have looked to manage the interface between international image and domestic reputation has been through the exercise of soft power. The fact that different international actors have looked to draw upon, as well as increase their soft power, is testament to the growing importance of soft power. Soft power is a much-used term in current day international relations (Macdonald, 2020a). Whether it be Europe (Haine, 2004), the People’s Republic of China (D’Hooge, 2015; Liu, 2020), the United Kingdom (House of Lords, 2014; MacDonald, 2020a; Pamment, 2016), Germany (Hillebrand, 2019; Szabo, 2017), Canada (Hilmer & Lagasse, 2018) or myriads of other international actors, soft power in the third decade of the 21st century remains a major ingredient within national power strategies.

Ohnesorge’s (2020) review and critique of soft power is not the only recent review of soft power theory and practice, Winder (2020), for example, talks of soft power as the new great game in world politics, but it is arguably one of the most comprehensive and measured critiques of the conventional wisdom on soft power to date. Such an observation can be made while still recognising critiques of Ohnesorge by the likes of Froehlich (2020) who reminds us of the continuing need for
a diverse range of contextualised research, for example in relation to Brazil, before accepting Ohnesorge’s account as a one size fits all approach to soft power.

The work of Ohnesorge (2020) is used here because it provides for a relatively comprehensive and up to date account of thinking around soft power. Ohnesorge points to the origins of the term in classical antiquity and China; pays tribute to Nye and warns of a new soft power arms race. Soft power it is suggested is a conceptually limited term, elusive to measure, and difficult to compare (Ohnesorge, 2020, p13). The author goes on to argue that soft power is not normative but simply another form of power that can at times have a very hard edge (Ohnesorge, 2020, p56). The researcher talks about four components of soft power. These being resources (culture, values, policies and personalities) instruments (public diplomacy and personal diplomacy), reception (attraction, apathy and reputation) and outcomes (compliance, neutrality and or opposition).

On the last of these MacDonald (2020b) reminds of the importance of how soft power is received given that reciprocity is a key element of soft power. It is important to focus not just on what country A or B says through its soft power resources, but how others hear or interpret what it being said. A strategy for harnessing and use of soft power is certainly needed by countries that want to maintain and
enhance their reputation, but it remains problematic to see soft power solely in terms of the accumulation of soft power resources or seeing soft power as purely being framed by national soft power strategies that align with a country’s foreign policy.

On the question of diplomacy, Ohnesorge’s gives relatively equal emphasis to both public and personal diplomacy. The former has been covered extensively (Cull, 2008, 2009; Melissen, 2007, 2013; Ohnesorge, 2020) while the latter has been researched in relation to the role and relative importance of celebrities, influencers, having specific characteristics such as charisma and the role of individual, personal contacts and relationships in forging, sustaining, threatening and winning hearts and minds (Cooper, 2008; Ohnesorge, 2020). Taken together the two sets of soft power instruments of public diplomacy (including listening, advocacy, cultural diplomacy, exchange diplomacy and international broadcasting) and personal diplomacy (including components of foreign travels, speechmaking, symbolic acts and elite networks) offer opportunities for sport that have still to be fully realised (Murray 2012, 2018). The notions of public and personal diplomacy are flexible enough to allow for variants of public diplomacy, for example sports diplomacy strategies and/or sports personal diplomacy, for example, the role of the sports
ambassador or sporting diplomat or what Murray (2018) refers to as diplomats in tracksuits.

Ohnesorge warns us that an increase in the soft power of one actor does not necessarily result in the decrease in soft power by another (Ohnesorge, 2020, p299). The author agrees with Nye (2015, p.62) who pointed out that the development of soft power may not be a zero-sum game and that all countries can gain something from finding each other attractive. Both writers hint at the importance of mutuality and the possibility of the world being in a better place if the instruments of attraction gained further traction and replaced some of the tools of coercion. It is also pointed out that soft power interventions can invariably be short-term since the agencies, institutions, quasi-governmental organisations at arm’s length from government are often constrained by operational cycles that are increasingly tied to short-term funding and reporting horizons (Ohnesorge, 2020, p123).

The interest in use of sport and soft power is not new. It is more than 50 years since the British politicians, Chataway and Goodhart penned their account of international sport in War without Weapons (1968). It is more than 10 years since Victor Cha, the former Director of Asian Affairs for the White House, penned Beyond the Final Score (2009) and it is more than 5 years since The UK House of Lords Report into ‘Persuasion and Power in the Modern World (2014) pointed to the
necessary of balancing hard and soft power tactics and the role that sport could play.

However, more recently and certainly since about 2016, there has been a plethora of distinguished works on sport, soft power and diplomacy from which we can learn more (e.g., Burton, Chadwick & Widdop 2020; Grix, 2016; Grix, Brannagan, & Houlihan, 2015; Grix, Brannagan, & Lee 2019; Jarvie, Murray & Macdonald, 2017; Kramareva, & Grix 2018; Lee, 2019; Liu, 2020; Murray 2018; Murray and Price, 2020 and Rofe, 2016, 2018). They demonstrate that sport matters because it can (i) create influence and forces of attraction; (ii) develop feel-good factors- albeit only temporarily; (iii) provide access to specific and high net value networks; (iv) has an appeal that can cross linguistic and cultural barriers; (v) foster opportunities for conversations between countries and stakeholders that take place around sporting events and overseas visits by sports clubs and sports celebrities; and (vi) gradually move to a position where it can demonstrate normatively and substantively that it can intentionally deliver outcomes that are important to countries, embassies, foreign ministries and a range of national and international stakeholders and coalitions.

It is important to keep in mind that the exercise of sport and soft power is not the same as the exercise of sport and cultural relations. MacDonald’s (2020a) discussion of a nuanced
distinction between soft power and cultural relations, drawing on the earlier work of Nederveen (2003), is of value here. Thus, it might be argued that sport and cultural relations consists of both direct and indirect interactions between cultures. Direct cultural interactions in the sense that they can denote both physical and virtual encounters with people and objects of another culture and indirect cultural interactions involving ideas, values and beliefs proper to a specific culture and often featured in philosophy, literature, music, art and sport that can act as cross-national tools that have the potential to foster and strengthen intercultural dialogue. An understanding of cultural relations therefore requires an understanding of contemporary cultures. This includes the political, economic and social roles of sport in culture and in cultural markets, development, institutions and specific contexts. A potential challenge for governments interested in advancing effective cultural relations through sport is not to exclude sport from delivering cultural outcomes by adopting elitist or non-inclusive cultural portfolios that do not position sport as a potential deliverer of cultural relations or the common good.

Yet, to return to the advances made in the exercise of sport and soft power and in particular the use of sports diplomacy, one of the countries at the forefront of innovation is France. A sports diplomacy strategy was launched in 2014 by Valérie Fourneyron, the then Minister of Sports. The French
Ministry of Europe and Foreign Affairs first established a working group consisting of government departments, sporting federations, major sporting businesses and the National Olympic Committee. The sports industry was then mapped and measured and further innovations followed: the world’s first Ambassador for Sport (Philippe Vinogradoff), an Office for the Economics of Sport, and a new French Olympic Committee whose aim is to promote French sport internationally, increase French presence in international sporting bodies, and ensure French continues as the official language of the Olympic Games.

Looking forward to 2024 and the Olympic Games in Paris, a new role for French sport is envisaged, one that: delivers not just health outcomes but is to be a driving force for educational and civic engagement, is an enabler for solidarity, equality and inclusion and helps to intensify the positive impact of sport in societies across the world. The latter is assisted through Sport En Commun, launched in September 2020 and supported by a coalition of Public Development Banks and partners. It will enable the sustainable development goals through funding projects that will deliver specific outcomes through sport. Given the historical links between France and Africa one specific strand of activity will be to support sports investment through a Pan African platform located in Senegal.
In simple terms *Sport En Commun* will fund, support, connect, advocate and promote French soft power through sport.

One final point to be made here is that both policy and strategy for soft power operate at the interface between domestic and foreign policy and is something that can be partly managed within a policy and strategy framework. Soft power mainly derives from the institution, culture and people embedded in civil society, act internationally, are diverse in nature and are accountable to their own communities. It is one of the paradoxes of soft power that such a potential degree of independence from the state or policy direction helps to give soft power legitimacy and credibility and yet it is often the case that national soft power strategies often try to harness a country’s soft power assets to work on behalf of a nation or a particular foreign policy direction. If sport is to assist with soft power outcomes and/or forging sustainable cultural relations it might be mindful of the tension between supporting and embodying short-rem national policies and the desire for long-term cultural engagement. Sport might be able to do some of its best work by keeping one eye on a longer time-horizon than a government ‘of the day’ or an ambassador on a three or four year posting or a short-term funding cycle.

*The Exercise of Cultural Relations and the Common Good*

A recent study notes glumly that ‘there is no universally agreed definition of cultural relations’ (British Council, 2018).
Cultural relations dawdle at the edges of public diplomacy and soft power and loiters at one end of full spectrum diplomacy. The phrase describes the whole infinitely varied fabric of unofficial international contacts between people and institutions around the world. Something that the world of sport practices in abundance. Effective cultural relations have three fundamental characteristics: it is non-governmental, it is long-term, and it is mutual (Rose and Wadham-Smith, 2004).

Soft power maybe seen as the pursuit of influence through attraction, but cultural relations is different. If soft power is the pursuit of influence through attraction, cultural relations is the creation of the conditions for sustainable collaboration between like-minded countries for mutual benefit (British Council, 2020). Both are essential but they are different and they require different strategies, arrangements and skill sets. Soft power shapes perceptions and preferences while cultural relations enable long-term partnerships and support reputational resilience. Soft power is a useful way to talk about non-coercive practices of influence as long as its limitations are understood. When we are talking about cultural relations, according to MacDonald (2020b) we are talking, in part about purposeful engagement and collaboration across borders for the common good. Consequently, in agreement with MacDonald (2020b), it is argued that the term cultural relations is both vital
and needed and preferred to the idea of soft power because of its all-embracing nature, emphasis on the idea that culture matters and focus on long-term relationship building.

Cultural relations seek to create a relationship. The medium of exchange is culture, and what is created is a relationship, something that should be mutual but is not always so. Sport, as alluded to earlier, is not always afforded the same status as other aspects of culture and confusion continues to exist in many countries about what should and should not be included in cultural missions and visits. The role of the arts has long been recognised and celebrated in European culture as a valuable social tool. Sport should be afforded the same status as other facets of culture in European cultural relations. Such debates about elitist and exclusive definitions of culture pervaded the sociology of sport literature in the 1980s and 1990s (Jarvie, 2006, pp66-72) and many aligned to the culture of ordinary problematic within Williams’s *Resources of Hope* (1991). Thus if cultural relations is to be effective it should embrace what sport has to offer not just in terms of its qualities of reach and scale but because of its capability of delivering outcomes beyond simply relationship building and doing this through culture.

Sport is readily acknowledged as having an important part to play within Ministerial health or education portfolios, although it does not usually have a parity of esteem within
these portfolio’s. It should also be an important and funded part of any Culture and External Affairs portfolio. Far too often sport is positioned and funded to primarily deliver on health alone. This is a missed opportunity. For the world of cultural relations sport raises a number of important questions? Can sport offer a sustained continuum of solidarity, shared practice and international fellowship? Can the cultural gatekeepers embrace a more complete world and definition of culture? How can cultural relations use sport as a tool to help build and sustain long-term mutual relations and conversations?

The potential of sport to make a difference, carry a message, deliver statements on a scale that few other areas of public life can, support social movements (including inter-racial movements) provide a platform for social and political advocacy as well as support a new generation of sporting activists, should not be underestimated. It is acknowledged that sport is an uneven socio-economic and geo-political resource. But what should also be acknowledged is the choices around how countries choose to harness sport as part of a broader social contract that works for outcomes not just within countries but between countries. The sports proposition is a real one, it builds bridges for countries because: it is a pillar of connection; of its popularity, scale and reach and because it can assist with building resilience, reconciliation and rehabilitation (Cardenas, 2013).
If you have a tool that is a language and has characteristics of scale, popularity and reach then why would countries, non-governmental agencies not exploit it fully to build mutuality and trust that works for the common good. Global impact studies tell us that 1 in 5 people in the world connect with sport (Global Impact, 2015, 2026, 2017). If sport is to advance its case as a contributor to the common good through building better cultural relations then what is required is a flexible normative framework that intentionally delivers outcomes and spaces that work in politically smarter ways. This proposition builds upon suggestions made by Bell (2017), Pospisil (2016), and the British Academy (2017) that spaces, particularly public spaces, are desperately needed to open up the possibility of dialogue involving the interests of more than one group or one state or one community. Such spaces could be provided through sport.

The following illustrates the potential of sport to forge cultural relations, dialogue and co-operation while also illustrating the dangers of advancing any particular cycle of foreign policy goals and the need to think and act beyond short-termism. Under President Obama, diplomatic ties between Cuba and the USA were restored in 2015 having been severed in 1961. Some trade restrictions had been eased and the White House had been lobbying the US Congress to terminate an economic embargo that had been in place for decades. It was
baseball that finally brought Cuba and the United States out from half a century of a cold war deep freeze, as Barack Obama’s historic visit concluded with a frenzied, but friendly, sporting clash. They have been playing baseball in Cuba since 1864, but there can have been few more eagerly anticipated games than that between the Cuban national team and the US Major League Baseball side the Tampa Bay Rays. Major League Baseball had been lobbying hard for the relaxation of US labour laws so that it could hire some of Cuba’s top talent to play in the US.

The Americans were the first nation to introduce a specific sports diplomacy operation. The U.S Department of State’s vanguard initiative was the Sports United programme, which was born after 9/11. It focused on three main activities: sports envoys, sports grants and sports visitors. In a 2013 study conducted by Management Systems International and the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs Office of Policy and Evaluation, 92% of respondents said that their views of the American people had improved after participating in SDD programming. According to the report sports exchanges increased dialogue and cultural understanding between people around the world. The use of sports as a platform exposes international exchange participants to American culture while providing them with an opportunity to establish links with U.S. sports professionals and peers. In turn, Americans learn about
other cultures and the challenges young people from other
countries face today. (Jarvie, Trimbur and Xu, 2020).

The former President’s visit to the Estadio Latin-American was intended to celebrate a sporting passion that has been shared on both sides of the political divide through decades of conflict. The game was seen as a symbolic opening of more than just sporting ties. Following the Baltimore Orioles in 1999, the Rays were only the second Major League team to play in Havana since the Cuban Revolution of 1959. They came amid a rising tide of interest in the island’s baseball scene, a scene financially impoverished, culturally rich but also rich in talent.

Sometimes, when there is nothing else to build on, sport can present a jumping off point. In his book, The World as It Is: A Memoir of the Obama White House (2018), Ben Rhodes, a senior adviser to President Obama, depicted the White House’s efforts to put on the exhibition baseball game between the Tampa Bay Rays and the Cuban national team as a beginning of the process of opening the doors of cooperation between Cuba and the United States. Obama stayed on to give television interviews and let baseball do the work of détente. Baseball working in a softer less aloof way than formal press conferences and speeches that often struggle to convey social and political messages that are mutually supportive of forging long-lasting cultural relations.
During the 2020 US election campaign the then President elect Donald Trump tweeted that he would "terminate" Mr Obama's policy on normalising relations with Cuba at a time when thousands of Cubans queued to pay their respects to Fidel Castro. On 16 June 2017, President Trump announced that he was suspending what he called a "completely one-sided deal with Cuba". Trump characterized Obama's policy as having granted Cuba economic sanctions relief for nothing in return. Cuba denounced the roll back of policy stating that "The government of Cuba denounces the new measures toughening the embargo,".... But it also reiterated "its willingness to continue the respectful dialogue and cooperation". It remains to be seen if the incoming Biden administration will attempt to finish what Obama had started.

To talk of sport, cultural relations and the common good means that sport is recognised as part of a set of commitments and practices aimed at using public power to deliver public goods to people, regardless of their personal identity, political affiliation, and/or geographic location. Sport as an enabler of better cultural relations can be a cost-effective set of social tools and resources through which conversations can take place between countries, communities and individuals. In this way sport can position itself in spaces where, for example, transitional justice is being forged (Duthie, 2017). Sport was part of the truth and reconciliation process in post-apartheid
South Africa and part of the forging of a peace process in Columbia and Northern Ireland (Cardenas, 2013). Thus, sport, cultural relations and the common good might be best understood as a project of ongoing political construction, rather than a pre-commitment to any one or new political order or utopian ideal (Jade, 2017).

Sport is not just a commodity, but can be an immensely powerful vector of change, value, principle, solidarity, a symbol, means and arena through which a plurality of views can be listened to. The challenge is a tough one for it requires cultural gatekeepers to be less aloof about what is seen as culture, diplomats to be less aloof about the contribution sport can make and countries, communities and individuals to work across contexts to seek mutuality and forge and extend the common good. However, if we agree that sport can work for the common good in the face of the urgent questions facing different communities across the world then surely using sport to facilitate better cultural relations can be seen as a valuable normative proposition worth forging. That is if cultural relations through sport can be seen to be enabling the common good and therefore cultural relations through sport is a means to an end then this would be progress.

The Art of Making the Possible, Possible

As alluded to earlier, the Welsh writer Raymond Williams penned an important intervention called *Resources of Hope*
(1991). The writer reminded us of the need to champion commitment to a new social world and that the resources to do so could come from a myriad of sources, art, music, political organisation, education and the culture of the ordinary (Williams, 1991, p7). It is ironic of course that given the significance of sport to Wales, that Williams failed to talk about the possibilities of sport to help forge coalitions with other stakeholders that could help to position Wales in the Global arena. Some thirty years later this would be picked up in *Towards a Welsh Sports Diplomacy Strategy* in which Murray and Price (2020) remind us of the extensive benefits of sports diplomacy to Wales, including formulating long-term relationships, amplifying a nation’s culture, developing reciprocity between stakeholders, utilising sports ambassadors as diplomats in tracksuits and aligning sport with the Welsh Government’s approach to Global Wales (Murray and Price, 2020, p9). Yet, to return to Williams and the point being made here (and exemplified in the Murray and Price intervention) is that artists, writers, academics and others have to balance their freedoms with a duty to strive to help others – what he called in an essay on the practice of possibilities – making the art of the possible, possible (Williams, 1991, p 314).

Sport can help to make the art of the possible, possible. The BBC correspondent Olivier Guiberteau recently reminded us of the role that the footballer Didier Drogba, the current
Vice-President of Sport for Peace, played in helping to avert civil war in Ivory Coast in 2005 when he stated “please lay down your weapons and hold elections” (Guilberteau, 2020, p1). The Colombian city of Medellin, once home of Pablo Escobar and a notorious drug cartel did not have the best of reputations. Crime, violence, drug cartels and murder were all characteristics of a troubled past, with 6,349 killings in 1991 alone (this was a rate of 380 per 100,000 people). Since 1991, the city has won international awards for innovation, and the murder rate has reduced by 80 per cent. It has been highlighted as one of the Rockefeller Foundation’s 100 Resilient Cities and investment in sport has been part of this transformation. Some eighteen sport complexes in the city made high-quality sport and physical activities accessible to deprived and hard-to-reach communities that previously had an option of entering gang culture. They have a dual purpose: as social projects that allow all ages and abilities to participate in sport and for talent development and performance at an elite level. The social projects have had a focus on co-existence, aiming to develop respect, tolerance, responsibility, discipline and equality between different groups. Doing this through sport has been celebrated for helping facilitate greater peace across the city’s communities (Parnell, 2014). In other words, sport has been a space through which the enabling of a greater common good
has helped to forge resilience and in some cases reconciliation and better cultural relations between cultures.

Although Samantha Nutt failed to comment upon the role of sport in the peace building process (for example, Kenyan women athletes such as Tegla Loroupe, founder of the Tegla Loroupe Peace Foundation) the Canadian activist has been one of the most intrepid voices in the humanitarian arena. As the founder of War Child and author of *Damned Nations* (2012), a book of uncommon power, she aimed to shift awareness levels about the failure of international aid and highlight the role of women in some of the most challenging of circumstances. Nutt’s work covers decades of searching for answers to what can and should be done to help communities and countries caught up in conflict as she describes the many well intended international aid interventions, paved with good intentions, that went wrong (Nutt, 2012, p99). She reminds us of the great resilience, courage and strength in countries and communities where none ought to exist because of the atrocities they have suffered and that for those seeking to make a difference it is not about interventions paved with good intentions, but making the art of the possible, possible and sustainable.

With each world problem there is a temptation to simplify matters, find a quick solution and identify, sometimes wrongly, aggressors, transgressors and or victims. But
humanity like power politics, is not that simple. The issues to be confronted in the contemporary world may be imposing in their scale and expansive in their reach but they must be faced with fortitude, commitment and with a co-operative and collaborative spirit. Consequently, foreign diplomats, ambassadors, civil servants, cultural agencies, communities, countries and individuals need to recognise that they have a wide variety of tools at their disposal, not just to win friends but maintain and foster relationships and understanding. Sport should be recognised much more than it is as one of these tools.

We need to take advantage of sports global currency. Economists tells us that it is this development of human, social and cultural capital that may help to close the inequality gap. The role of sport in serving multi-lateral organizations or working to an international humanitarian agenda or being used as a diplomatic tool to carry national or international messages is not new. But what is new is the realization that in today’s fractured societies and communities, it is often the local context that shapes approaches to long-term sustainable relationships. What is new is the contexts in which we live today and the mix of tools at our disposal to address problems. Top-down interventions tend to be short-term fixes rather than sustainable solutions. Organizations dependent upon government funding tend to operate in short-term cycles and this article has
articulated and drawn attention to the role of cultural relations in developing long-term solutions through sport.

It also draws attention to the fact that the language around sport, soft power and foreign policy could be more effective. Hard power, soft power, cultural diplomacy, cultural relations, cultural policy, foreign policy, public diplomacy and much more are all complex terms that need to be understood in a multitude of different contexts. To be able to cut through complex terms and help make them applicable within different contexts perhaps a simpler language around soft power, cultural relations and sport would be helpful. Perhaps it would be simpler to talk of dialogue and co-operation. Such an advance would allow space for further common ground to grow through cultural relations building by using sport to enable help more countries realise mutual long-standing obligations to other countries. The following terms would be an important contribution that could help to frame priorities:

*Connectivity*

Connectivity happens at all levels and sport can create the opportunities for people, cities, countries to connect and communicate formally and informally. From the social events and meetings that take place around the regular calendar of planned major sporting events to the international connections forged through clubs, individuals and non-governmental sports organisations sport is a valuable vehicle of connectivity.
Long-Term Relationships

Cultural relations are about forging relationships through culture. Sport can position itself in spaces where cultural relations can be forged. Relationships are formed through sport and because of sport. Sport helps foreign leaders to meet and form relationship, often in more informal settings. However, such relationships are built up over time, do not need to be transactional and may not be mutual or trusting in the first instance, but they can still help. Building sustainable relationships allows countries and cultures to talk to each other at a multitude of different levels but for cultural relations to be effective relationships need to be long term.

Mutuality and Trust

It may be a normative proposition that sport can help with building mutuality and trust, but there is enough evidence to suggest that involvement in and through sport can lead to higher levels of social capital. The idea of sport building mutuality should not be dismissed. Co-operative, mutual philosophies work best when there is a clear opportunity and incentive to work closely together for practical mutual interest. Sport itself has much work to do in terms of how it builds trust through openness and integrity and by demonstrating a commitment to values and ethical behaviour. The building of effective cultural relations is not a one-way process, but a two-way process founded upon enabling mutuality and trust. It
Involves individuals, communities and countries exercising a degree of trust through taking on mutual obligations and working towards common agreed goals, such as working towards SDG outcomes through sport.

*Influence and Resilience*

This is the soft power, public diplomacy route where sport can be seen to procure soft power outcomes where soft power is seen to be the pursuit of influence through attraction. Not always but invariably this is often a one-way process often guided by a nation’s short-term foreign policy goals or key messages that a country wants to convey at a particular point in time. It is at times not always about talking but about listening and through listening influencing risk levels of conflict and tension.

*Inter-cultural skills, perceptions and competence*

Effective cultural relations are also about perception and projection. Sport can help us understand the impact of globalisation on culture and culture on globalisation. We need to ask how the language of sport or the inter-cultural tool that is sport helps you to talk to the other and the other to talk to you. We need to know more about how sport projects an image of place but more importantly how others perceive and act upon that image. We need to continue to ask what foreign diplomats need to know in order to do their job effectively in the world today and are equipped to understand what sport can and
cannot deliver. We also need to ask what sport ambassadors need to know in order to become more effective diplomats. Finally, a country’s reputation is in part derived from its competence and how it instils confidence through performance, reliability and its ability to respond effectively to a crisis. Sport in a multitude of different ways has been seen to respond positively to, for example, the Covid 19 crisis, child poverty and calls for social justice. The Tennis player Coco Gauff stated that:

> You need to use your voice, how big or small the platform is. I saw a quote from Dr [Martin Luther] King that said: The silence of the good people is worse than the brutality of the bad people (Jarvie, Trimbur and Xu, 2020, p1).

The footballer Raheem Sterling stated: “This is a time to speak on these subjects, speak on injustice” (Jarvie, Trimbur and Xu, 2020, p2).

**Common Good**

Sport and the common good may best be understood as a project of ongoing political construction. It responds to contemporary calls for sport to serve humanity (Hain and Odendaal. (2020). Making sports policy, sports investment, sports research, sports advocacy, commitment, sport and civil society can work for more people, places and communities more often. The value of such an approach being that it allows
for a negotiated common good, that it offers the possibility of a much more shared concept of the state and/or community; one that can serve a broader set of interests operating beyond that of the individual, community, single interest group or country. Sport can be a space that facilitates the construction of a common good while fractured communities and societies move through phases of transitional justice. To talk of sport and the common good means that sport is part of a set of commitments and practices aimed at using public power to deliver public goods to people, regardless of their personal identity, political affiliation, and/or geographic location.

Conclusions

Sport will not solve the world’s problems, nor should it but it can make a more effective contribution. If sport can help with the making of safe places, magic circles, in which things happen that could not happen elsewhere then why should such a tool not be used or even valued. There are times when sport can and does lead. A new wave of sporting activists and philanthropists are on the march and need to be supported long after the protests fade. Sport has always been political. Athletes have always had social and political consciences. The public can’t always depend on sport stars to tackle social injustices alone, nor should they. The world needs them, but they also need others. The advent of the coronavirus crisis, the SDG’s and movements such as BLM have all helped to generate a
springboard for reshaping the debate about the social and geopolitical value of sport as an agent of change, as an agent of social good, an agent of the common good.

So, to answer the question that was raised at the onset of this article, can cultural relations through sport build bridges, the answer is yes; should culture exploit the popularity, scale, reach and language that is sport, the answer is yes, and should we press the argument for sport as culture the answer is yes but to do that the cultural battle still needs to be won in some places. In this way sport can position itself as a crucial space where cultural relations can be forged. Thus sport and the common good is best understood as a project of ongoing political construction that countries should enable in smarter ways and the building of cultural relations through sport can be an important enabler.

The global balance of power is tense, in a state of flux and countries and cities need effective cultural relations. Sport has a part to play in helping with global and local tensions and perhaps more importantly, winning friends in a mutually supportive way. This article has tried to suggest that matters of mutuality, trust, connectivity, dialogue and co-operation are important if sport is going to move further beyond the idea of soft power and diplomacy being a one-way street delivering foreign policy on behalf of one country. Those working in and through sport are well served by the notion of sport enabling
cultural relations, forging an enlarged common good and being
seen as a resource and public space which can help with
making the art of the possible, possible.

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