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A case for 'Collective Physical Activity': moving towards post-capitalist futures

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ABSTRACT

This paper makes the case for a post-capitalist oriented 'Collective Physical Activity' (Co-PA) to contribute to individual well-being and social change here and now, while working towards more equitable post-capitalist futures. We begin by underlining systemic issues that exacerbate inequalities, highlighting the need for a 'leisure for all' contributing to system change. We briefly critique dominant approaches to promoting sport and physical activity to target inequalities, suggesting three potential improvements: first, diverting attention from organized sport towards personally meaningful physical activities; second, focusing on bottom-up collective opportunities, rather than top-down ones; third, advocating for system change to foster hope and tackle societal issues at their roots. To this end, we propose Co-PA as an approach to physical activity for social justice, suggesting three core features: (i) meaning and enjoyment; (ii) collective engagement; and (iii) a post-capitalist outlook. Finally, we outline examples of how these principles could look like in practice.

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Introduction

Deepening global inequalities, recently exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic and climate change (Nanda 2021; Paavola 2017), highlight the need for a rapid shift in the way we approach social disparities but also, more broadly, in the way we organize our societies. Reports (e.g. IPCC 2022) show that unless we collectively move our focus towards building alternatives to the current socio-economic system, not only will inequalities continue to grow, but human life on this planet will likely become extremely difficult to sustain in a matter of decades, if not years. In such a challenging context, it is crucial that leisure, as well as many other aspects of society, starts adapting to the challenges ahead, rethinking itself and contributing to the dramatic shift necessary for humanity to survive and, ultimately, to thrive.

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In a seminal contribution to this topic, Fisher (2012) reflected on the importance of re-building the often-lost link between post-capitalist discourses and desire, creativity, and pleasure. Their suggestion of 'an alternative modernity, in which technology [and] mass production […] are deployed as part of a refurbished public sphere' (137), focused on ways to improve some Western economic paradigms, such as multinational corporations. While agreeing that desire must be central in any post-capitalist discourse – countering the all-encompassing force of what Fisher (2009) defines 'capitalist realism', namely a widespread sense that not only is capitalism the only viable system, but that it is now impossible to even imagine an alternative – we suggest that certain aspects of the current socio-economic system should be radically challenged rather than just adapted to serve the public good. We argue that, in a time calling for radical and shift change, present and future struggles cannot shy away from objecting to some aspects of modernity that harm the planet (in the example of mass production) as well as our well-being (such as capitalist-induced unhealthy behaviours). In doing so, we seek not to reduce the space for leisure, fun, and pleasure, but to increase it by engaging with alternatives, and contributing to finding new and sustainable ways to put well-being at the centre of our civilizations, instead of side-lining it in favour of a profit-driven economy.

For example, interesting alternatives to neoliberal capitalism have been emerging from Latin America, such as economic practices led by indigenous women and decolonial feminist movements, as well as the concept known as Buen Vivir (Harcourt 2014). The latter is described as a vision of well-being and good living based on new arrangements for society, the economy, the environment, cultures, and peoples, that moves away from Western-centric capitalist conceptions of development (Harcourt 2014; Gudynas 2011). Instead of prioritizing economic value by turning everything into commodities, different forms of value are found in cultural, historical, environmental, and aesthetic aspects of life (Harcourt 2014; Gudynas 2011). As an alternative to the neoliberal growth model, these approaches aim to create a social equilibrium based on harmony between humanity and nature. And in this perspective – as opposed to capitalist exploitation and competition – collaboration and reciprocity with other people and nature become key elements of a society in which well-being is prioritized (Harcourt 2014; Gudynas 2011).

In accordance with these views, and in the quest for a 'leisure for all' as a radical demand for social justice, we suggest that physical activity could play a more pivotal role in a future society organized around human prosperity as well as in current struggles striving towards it. We believe that social justice (intended as the fair distribution of wealth, health, and opportunities to live an enjoyable life) can only be achieved moving away from the classist, sexist and racist principles at the core of capitalism (Fraser, Arruzza, and Bhattacharya 2019). Therefore, we make the case for 'Collective Physical Activity' (Co-PA), proposing it as an approach to enable physical activity's potential to contribute to the shift towards more equitable, inclusive, and sustainable socio-economic systems, while also contributing to individual and community well-being in the here and now. We suggest a meaningful, collective and post-capitalist oriented physical activity as one of the components striving towards a society based on new value systems beyond inegalitarian and unsustainable capitalist growth.

The context: three pressing threats to a healthy and thriving humanity

Our advocacy for Co-PA stems from the needs to both address growing health inequalities – notion here used in its broader sense to indicate 'avoidable *and unfair* differences in health status between groups of people or communities' (NIHR 2022) [emphasis added] –, and to enhance physical activity's potential to bring about enjoyment in people's lives while contributing to a more just society. To highlight the significance of physical activity in the context of leisure, as well as to argue for radical system change, we start by briefly outlining some systemic issues currently exacerbating inequalities, namely the health-wealth gap, climate change, and the COVID-19 pandemic.

Reports show that global wealth inequalities, far from being attenuated, have been rising in recent years. Since 1995, the richest 1% have captured almost 20 times more global wealth than the poorest 50% of humanity (Lawson and Jacobs 2022). During the COVID-19 pandemic, while 99% of the people saw their income worsen, the wealth of the 10 richest men has doubled, with 252 men now possessing more wealth than all 1 billion women and girls in Africa and Latin America and the Caribbean combined (Lawson and Jacobs 2022). Concurrently, the overall health-wealth gap is widening in many Western countries, where more people should have supposedly benefited from capitalist economic growth: in the US, the richest men live 15 years longer than the poorest ones, while for women the difference is 10 years (Chetty et al. 2016); in the UK, the rich live on average 9 years longer than the poor (Bennett et al. 2018); in France, the gap is approximately 11 years (Blanpain 2018); in Italy, 4 years (Osservatorio Nazionale sulla Salute nelle Regioni Italiane 2018); with regard to Sweden, the difference between individuals with different educational backgrounds in Vårby Gård and Danderyd, two areas of Stockholm connected by the same metro line, is 18 years (SCB 2016). These vast and interconnected wealth and health discrepancies evidence a crisis that is far from being resolved.

If wealth inequalities were insufficient to question the current socio-economic system, climate change is forcing further and more urgent scrutiny. The latest IPCC report (2022) has emphasized that the window for action to stay in a climate safety zone is shrinking fast. The report suggests that while the world should cut by 2030 its total emissions by 45% from 2010 levels to avoid climate catastrophe, at current levels they are predicted to increase by almost 14% in the same period. Irreversible impacts will include frequent and intense weather events, biodiversity and ecosystem loss, as well as food insecurity and famines leading to forced migration and socio-economic instability. In addition, climate change will contribute from 9 to 83 million cumulative excess deaths by the end of the century (Bressler 2021). We know that these deaths, as well as chronic conditions and morbidities (Somanathan et al. 2021; Zivin and Neidell 2014), will not affect everyone equally, with disadvantaged groups continuing to suffer more from the adverse effects of climate change, in turn resulting in greater subsequent inequalities (Islam and Winkel 2017). These outcomes are direct consequences of the capitalist growth whose benefits have been captured mainly by the richest countries and people: currently, twenty of the richest billionaires are estimated to be emitting, on average, 8,000 times more carbon than the billion poorest people (Lawson and Jacobs 2022).

On top of the above-mentioned issues, the COVID-19 pandemic has contributed to millions of deaths, as well as long-term health consequences (del Rio, Collins, and Malani 2020). While governments around the world loosen restrictions and mitigations, urging people to 'learn to live with Covid' (Gurdasani and Ziauddeen 2022), new studies are highlighting the need for reinforced systemic strategies to avoid incalculable consequences in the years to come. For example, COVID-19 is associated with long-term health detriments even in people with initially mild cases, such as higher risk of heart disease (Xie et al. 2022), 40% increased risk of diabetes (Xie and Al-Aly 2022), reduction of grey matter and brain size (Douaud et al. 2022), and likely overall multi-organ and immune system impairment (Dennis et al. 2022; Ryan, Hope, and Masavuli 2022). Furthermore, the COVID-19 pandemic has disproportionately impacted vulnerable communities where life expectancy was already lower: for instance, in England the mortality rate for COVID-19 in the most deprived areas has been more than double the mortality rate of the wealthiest ones (ONS 2020), showing how the *laissez-faire* approach to the pandemic is itself a matter of social injustice. Of note, given the focus of this paper, common pre-existing morbidities in COVID-19 deceased patients include hypertension, cardiovascular disease and diabetes (Ng et al. 2021), all factors that can be positively affected by physical activity (Bassuk and Manson 2005).

The relevance of physical activity to, and its own challenges with, inequalities

While being physically active might not solve poverty, the climate crisis, or pandemics on its own, we know that the benefits deriving from an active lifestyle can contribute to making our bodies and minds more resilient to adversities (da Silveira, da Silva Fagundes, and Bizuti 2021). Furthermore, and more importantly from our perspective, we suggest that meaningful and engaging opportunities for physical activity can widen their scope beyond improving individual well-being, aiming to strengthen community health while contributing to wider social change. Here, we briefly outline some of the key evidenced impacts of physical activity, and how and why we argue it could have a stronger role to play in a 'leisure for all' and in fostering hope for a fairer and healthier future. We do so by adopting a salutogenic lens, considering health not as the simple absence of diseases or overweight, but rather as something dynamic, always in the process of becoming, and health matters as holistically including the whole human being in relation with the environment (Quennerstedt 2008).

First, in terms of physical health benefits, regular physical activity is effective in preventing premature death and several chronic diseases, such as cardiovascular diseases, diabetes, cancer, hypertension, obesity, and osteoporosis (Warburton, Nicol, and Bredin 2006). From a salutogenic perspective, the practice of physical activities strengthens aerobic capacity, motor skills and coordination, as well as the immune system, generating benefits in the response to viral communicable diseases (da Silveira, da Silva Fagundes, and Bizuti 2021) and generally supporting overall human health and well-being. Neuroscience has also demonstrated that mental health and cognitive abilities are optimized by physical activity, with regular exercise having a positive impact on treating post-traumatic stress disorder (Van der Kolk 2015), depression, anxiety, as well as preventing dementia (Hansen 2017). And, at the same time, physical activity enhances our mood,

the ability to focus and concentrate, memory, creativity, resistance to stress and, some have argued, our overall intelligence (Hansen 2017). Improvements can also include social aspects such as our ability to communicate, conflict resolution, prosocial behaviour, teamwork, empathy, respect for diversity, and social responsibility (Hermens et al. 2017) when physical activity is practiced with other people. Lastly, physical activity can promote democratic participation, engaging in empowering experiences, creating opportunities for involvement and joy, and fostering a holistic well-being that is experienced in movement, in ongoing activities and in the social relationships surrounding it (Quennerstedt 2008).

However, there are significant disparities in how people of different backgrounds and demographics can engage with sport and physical activity. While patterns of distribution of community assets in deprived and non-deprived areas are complicated, more affluent neighbourhoods have been shown to have a greater density of many resources associated with physical activity participation (e.g. parks, tennis courts; Macintyre, Macdonald, and Ellaway 2008). Consequently, while 71% of people in England's highest socio-economic group are active, this figure decreases to 52% in the lowest socio-economic group (Sport England 2021). Such stark inequalities result from the intersection of multiple factors related not only to economic aspects but also influenced by, among others, gender and ethnicity (Sport England 2021). But despite awareness of the influence of such social determinants, most physical activity interventions continue to focus on changing individual behaviours and fail to engage with the roots of inequalities and marginalization (Spaaij and Jeanes 2013). This somewhat narrow approach is, we suggest, a missed opportunity for sport and physical activity to meaningfully help tackle inequalities.

Analysing existing approaches to sport and physical activity

A considerable amount of work has focused on identifying the needs of marginalized people and people in lower socio-economic groups (e.g. Sport England 2018) to attempt to reduce their inactivity. However, many of those initiatives focus on individual strategies to cope with adverse circumstances without trying to challenge their structural causes (e.g. Lowther, Mutrie, and Scott 2002; Mason and Kearns 2013). In contrast to paradigms that aim to increase physical activity levels *despite* negative social determinants of health (SDH), we argue for an approach considering how those very SDH can be positively affected *through* physical activity. Next, we highlight three characteristics of conventional ways of using sport and physical activity to target inequalities and, for each, we suggest a different approach: first, diverting attention from sport towards physical activity more broadly; second, focusing on the importance of bottom-up collective opportunities, rather than top-down individualized ones; third, advocating for system change in order to tackle societal issues at their roots.

From sport towards physical activity

While there is a plethora of research mapping inequalities in relation to physical activity levels, intervention-focused work attempting to alter inequalities has to date been dominated by a focus on more formalized sports engagement (e.g. Hermens et al. 2017). Sport

has been demonstrated to be beneficial to the overall life skill development (e.g. cognitive and social skills) of those partaking in sport initiatives and programmes, for young people in particular (Hermens et al. 2017). However, doubts persist regarding the transferability of such skills to other settings (Hermens et al. 2017), and scholars have also noted that many standard sport and physical activity practices, despite good intentions, can end up generating negative experiences, marginalizing disadvantaged groups or promoting inactivity among the young people that disagree with the imposed system based on performance and competition (Beltrán-Carrillo et al. 2012; Bean et al. 2014; Edwards 2015; Thomson, Darcy, and Pearce 2010). For instance, inactive young people report negative feelings towards the focus on winning matches instead of well-being and enjoyment (Beltrán-Carrillo et al. 2012), with this aspect being reported as a major determinant of their inactivity. This is particularly relevant since such negative experiences continue to affect the desire to maintain a physically active lifestyle later in the adult life (Cardinal, Yan, and Cardinal 2013).

In light of this, we advocate for the importance of enabling people to experiment with different forms of physical activity beyond mainstream competitive sports. Less formal activities could include rollerblading, skateboarding, hula hooping, street basketball, walk and talk, spontaneous dancing, ultimate frisbee, BMX and mountain biking, to name but a few. Importantly, in order to emphasize values of excitement, spontaneity, non-conformity, sociability, and creativity (Thomson 2000), we suggest facilitating the exploration without imposing practices from the top down. Therefore, collective bottom-up opportunities for physical activity would be necessary to allow people to engage with new and personally meaningful ways to be physically active, while at the same time engaging in civic and democratic practices with the potential to enhance the transferability of learned skills to other aspects of life.

From top-down individualized opportunities towards bottom-up collective ones

As previously mentioned, physical activity has the potential to reduce the burden of various diseases – for example, coronary heart disease, ischaemic stroke, diabetes, colon cancer, and breast cancer in women (World Health Organization 2002) – as well as being helpful for the promotion of mental health and well-being (Saxena et al. 2005). However, public health discourses that solely focus on individual choices and behaviours have been increasingly critiqued (e.g. Sniehotta et al. 2017) as they may fail to engage with system and social-level barriers. Indeed, the fact that people from lower socio-economic backgrounds experience barriers to physical activity related to costs and limited provision of facilities and opportunities in their local neighbourhoods has been repeatedly evidenced (e.g. Alliott et al. 2022). Aligned with perspectives that recognize the importance of social, system based, and systemic barriers, we argue that community-based approaches can represent a valid alternative to individualized ones, given they aim to meet local needs while promoting deeper and broader citizen participation. For example, Edwards (2015) found value in the role of sport in community capacity building, and Shilbury, Sotiriadou, and Green (2008) argued that sport can be rightly positioned in community development efforts to contribute to overall community well-being. Sport programmes have been argued to have an 'intrinsic power' to activate people and remove barriers between groups (Schulenkorf 2012, 6), while parks and sport centres

can represent shared spaces to foster collective identity and community building (Glover and Bates 2006). Furthermore, the fact that people feel psychologically more comfortable in sport and recreation spaces increases opportunities for dialogue (Autry and Anderson 2007) as well as awareness of community issues and social justice beliefs resulting from social interactions that are not commonly available in other aspects of public life (Arai and Pedlar 1997).

However, traditional sport practices governed by national or regional bodies tend to favour more rigid top-down approaches (Vail 2007) and, additionally, sponsor objectives sometimes override local preferences (Chalip 2006). Some critical scholars have also noted how even sport-based initiatives that aim to address inequalities are sometimes used as a form of social control, focusing on the development of personal responsibility and accentuating passive forms of citizenship (Parker et al. 2019). Therefore, we suggest that it is crucial to experiment further and deeper with participatory and bottom-up approaches that include reflective dialogic activities as well as the co-design of sport and physical activity opportunities. These could be seen as chances for radical and liberating democratic engagement with the aim to meet different individual and community needs related to physical activity, while enhancing the community's ability to act collectively towards tackling structural inequalities.

According to Coalter (2010), the practice of sport for community development is usually presented in one of these three forms: *traditional sport* (assuming that sport participation has inherent developmental properties for participants); *plus sport* (where sport is used to attract participants to a programme where other types of education are primary); and *sport plus* (in which sports are supported with extra activities in order to maximize developmental objectives). While acknowledging the relevance of all these strategies, we suggest it is important to focus on *sport plus* approaches in order to encourage collective action beyond sport and physical activity, reinforce shared value systems, and develop critical learning cultures (Edwards 2015). Given the above, we argue that it is relevant to apply dimensions of community capacity (Wendel et al. 2009) to sport and physical activity actions, adding aspects of Freirean critical pedagogy (Freire 1972) to empower active citizenship. In essence, to 'challenge the status quo and offer marginalised groups the opportunity to enhance their agency' (Spaaij and Jeanes 2013, 442). Specifically, we seek to make a case that doing so can strengthen civic engagement and community networks and in turn foster mutually-reinforcing relationships with well-being. We know that SDH strongly influence people's physical activity levels (Sport England 2018), therefore we suggest that interventions targeting solely individuals and their behaviours, without challenging the structural causes of their inactivity, limit their scope to damage control rather than exploring the full potential of physical activity. And we argue that, in order to explore this potential, it is necessary to engage with more egalitarian alternatives to the capitalist system, especially given the urgency of the multi-faceted crises discussed above.

From systemic change towards system change

Scholars in the field of sport for development (SFD) have examined the use of sport to exert a positive influence on public health, the socialization of children, youth and adults, the social inclusion of the disadvantaged, and the economic development of regions and states (Lyras and Peachey 2011). However, even when traditional sport programmes are

successful in improving prosocial behaviour, collaboration and empathy (Hermens et al. 2017), these values are at odds with the principles that are promoted in the wider society by the capitalist cultural hegemony based on competition for survival and success. To use a sport metaphor, it is like learning how to play football and ending up in a swimming pool to play water polo. As warned by Spaaij and Jeanes (2013), interventions leaving unchanged the root causes of deprivation and marginalization may amount to little more than a political instrument for regulating the poor, failing to contest this order and to open up alternative realities. SFD approaches have often adopted a perspective based on Western capitalist ideology (Edwards 2015; Hartmann and Kwauk 2011; Kay and Bradbury 2009) and the term 'development' itself evokes capitalist terminology connected to perpetual growth and Western cultural hegemony. We argue that an economic system based on exploitation (Buchanan 1982), colonialist practices and accumulation of wealth for the few based on artificial scarcity and impoverishment of the many (Hickel 2020), is at odds with SFD's view of a just and equal world.

Spaaij and Jeanes (2013), using a Freirean lens, have critiqued existing pedagogical strategies in sport for development and peace (SDP), highlighting how they currently don't go far enough in providing a transformative educational experience. They define a truly liberating education as one that should 'strive to promote authentic and lasting social change by fostering critical consciousness and facilitating transformative action in order to challenge broader social structures and power dynamics' (Spaaij and Jeanes 2013, 451). Aligned with this view, a post-capitalist approach is here considered necessary not only to promote *systemic change* (within the boundaries of the capitalist system) but also to envision *system change* (starting within the capitalist system but being oriented beyond it), challenging the deepest causes of inequalities and collectively aiming to build alternatives to the status quo of oppression. And exploring whether this very process can prove beneficial in the here and now, within capitalist structures.

We therefore suggest that sport and physical activity actions aiming for social justice would benefit from engaging with post-development theory (Matthews 2017), as well as degrowth (Escobar 2015) and other non-Western propositions such as Buen Vivir (Harcourt 2014), promoting a language of possibility as well as hope in radically different futures (McGregor 2009). This can contribute to the transition towards socio-economic practices prioritizing well-being over profit, and in which sport and physical activity, as well as leisure more broadly, would become central and accessible to all. In other words, we recommend that physical activity – while contributing to improving physical and mental well-being – should also be considered as a means for wider empowerment and civic engagement. Therefore, we now propose and outline the principles of Co-PA as an approach for exploring physical activity's potential to further social justice in the here and now, contextually working towards building alternative futures.

Collective physical activity: an approach for social justice

While believing that approaching physical activity collectively and from the bottom-up is to be welcomed in any shape or form, here we want to suggest three core features that could guide future attempts at transformative physical activity actions aiming for social justice: (i) meaning and enjoyment; (ii) collective engagement; and (iii) a post-capitalist outlook. We hope that such reflections could serve as a general approach, inspiring an

ongoing process of shared learning and efforts to be potentially carried out by scholars, institutions, community organizations, as well as independent groups of people.

Meaning and enjoyment

Tangen (1982) suggested that being physically active only for the sake of physical health cannot be said to promote health from a holistic and life-long perspective. Instead, focus should be directed towards the meaning in the activity, as well as in what surrounds it. Therefore, sport and physical activity become more relevant when they allow empowering experiences, create involvement and joy, and foster social relationships. While not advocating for the eradication of competition and performance altogether, which can be enjoyable for some, we propose diversification to promote sport and physical activity's more pleasurable and social aspects, widening the chances to participate in and create diverse and non-standardised opportunities to be physically active. At the same time, this would allow more people to experience first-hand how pleasure in life can derive also from activities that are more sustainable and fulfilling than mere consumerist practices – physical activity being one of many (alongside the arts) but arguably the only one to have such unique and powerful effects on our physical, mental and social well-being.

Soper (2020) coined the term 'alternative hedonism' to delineate a new and ecologically sustainable vision of the good life, one that could help us delink prosperity from capitalist endless growth. Existing empirical evidence demonstrates that GDP growth is ecologically unsustainable and, past a certain threshold, tends to have a negative impact on social indicators and human development, happiness, and well-being (Hickel 2019; Easterlin et al. 2010). Conversely, post-capitalist alternatives based on a fair redistribution of income, investments in public services and guaranteed living wages, would enable people to live well while working less and in more meaningful jobs for the well-being of their communities (Hickel 2019). At the same time, these societal shifts would allow more free time to have fun, cooperate with other people, care for loved ones, enjoy nature, and exercise more (Hickel 2019). From this perspective, meaningful and enjoyable physical activity could be one of the aspects gaining a more pivotal role in a society in which people's well-being is centred, as opposed to their capacity to generate profit. In our opinion, envisioning and contributing to the creation of a future that allows for more free time, and less conventional and more creative and enjoyable ways of using it, is not only desirable but also necessary if we want humanity to win the fight against capitalist-induced climate change and, ultimately, if we want humanity to thrive. To maximize this process, it is also important to promote a shift from primarily individualistic to more collectivized practices, in which individual enjoyment is not overshadowed but rather reinforced by meaningful interactions with others.

Collective engagement and social justice

In the same way that promoting meaning and enjoyment should not replace competitive forms of sport but rather be strengthened alongside them, focusing on collective ways to organize physical activity opportunities does not mean discarding individual ways to exercise. However, here we advocate for the transformative potential of allowing people to

get together (more or less spontaneously) and engage with each other as well as with a variety of ways to be active. These collective opportunities would serve a twofold purpose: on one hand, meeting the diverse physical activity needs of individuals and communities; on the other hand, actively experimenting with democratic and civic practices. We suggest enhancing the focus on such collective processes will broaden opportunities to experience directly how 'life in a truly democratic society might be like' (Graeber 2012, 170), in turn strengthening people's ability to envision how a more egalitarian and socially just society could work. At the same time, allowing people to act collectively can also help to advance social justice and equality in the here and now, by centring the diverse needs of otherwise marginalized people.

Physical activity and sport have long been connected with principles of achievement and success presenting typically Western capitalist traits that are not only classist but also racialized, gendered, and often ableist. Historically, drilling and exercising were used, especially in state-financed schools, to teach obedience to the working classes (Kirk 2011). Even when competitive games came to dominate, they still retained an underlining purpose of social control (Kirk 2012), as well as being predominantly gendered, with boys and girls taught separately (Armour and Kirk 2008). Still today, corporate curricula and public health agendas emphasize a certain performative culture of the body (Evans et al. 2008) that tends to reproduce whiteness as the 'norm', relegating ethnic-minoritized people to be marked as 'deficient' (Azzarito 2009; 2019). In this regard, we suggest that open and collective pedagogical opportunities should aim to defy such classist, racialized, gendered, and ableist norms, promoting difference not in negative terms, but rather with a positive value (Azzarito 2019). For example, engaging with the 'least heard' people in our communities can be an important opportunity to understand, platform and support their perspectives, potentially enriching and diversifying the landscape of sport and physical activity for everyone. However, we argue that this involvement should not be limited to partially ameliorating their conditions without challenging the very structural causes of their oppression (Lankshear 1993). Rather, it should aim to build alternatives to the status quo that has generated their disadvantage in the first place. In this regard, we suggest that it is crucial to engage openly with alternatives to capitalism.

A post-capitalist outlook

The capitalist system is based on inherently exploitative and colonial features (Buchanan 1982; Hickel 2020), as well as on the ecologically unsustainable promise of perpetual growth (Raworth 2017). Furthermore, the concentration of private capital and an increasing deregulation of markets have considerably inhibited democratic governments' ability to govern (Merkel 2014), so the assumption that increased poverty, homelessness and mental health issues can be reversed simply by designing appropriate policies (Taylor-Robinson, Barr, and Whitehead 2019) has become increasingly questionable, especially seeing how democratic interests have been repeatedly subjected to corporate ones. Moreover, as Badiou (2001) argued, we currently live in a contradiction in which the profoundly inegalitarian state of things created by capitalism is presented to us as inevitable. And since it has become increasingly difficult to suggest that this system is ideal, the focus has shifted towards promoting the idea that alternatives are either dark totalitarian societies or utopian dreams impossible to achieve. As Harvey (2013) suggests, it is

precisely because people have been told for so long that there is no post-capitalist alternative that envisaging one becomes so important.

Therefore, to move away from Western-centric and patriarchal capitalist perspectives, we suggest looking towards alternatives to neoliberal capitalism that are emerging from other parts of the world, starting with place-based practices built on justice and equilibrium between people and with nature (Harcourt 2014). Engaging with these perspectives could help us pave the way towards more sustainable and egalitarian futures in which resources are collectivized, humans do not exploit the planet elevating their needs above everyone else's, and society can be finally centred on people's well-being. Already now most interactions in our life are based on solidaristic principles (e.g. in our families, among co-workers, etc.), but the capitalist cultural hegemony stands to convince us of the impossibility of organizing our society on those same principles on which we base our amicable relationships. Therefore, bottom-up democratic processes can act as opportunities to experiment with different paradigms, allowing us to experience compassion and solidarity beyond the boundaries of our own social groups, as well as democratic engagement (and the challenges coming with it) beyond the mere act of voting in elections. In the belief that, as eloquently expressed by Chamberlin (2012), 'if despair is perceiving an undesirable future as inevitable, one glimpse of a realistic, welcome alternative transforms our despondency into a massive drive to work towards that alternative' (45).

In relation to our proposition of Co-PA, we argue that prioritizing meaning and enjoyment (over productivity and performance) as well as promoting opportunities to engage collectively (rather than individualistically), are post-capitalist traits in and of themselves. Therefore, when promoting activities within the Co-PA approach, we suggest making these aspects explicit and allowing participants to reflect critically on the potential to extend such ways of enjoying and collaborating to other aspects of their own civic life, as well as society more broadly. In accordance with Spaaij and Jeanes (2013), we believe that it is crucial to start from the issues arising from communities, using active and dialogical learning methods to engage participants in collectively determining their own needs and priorities. These shared pedagogical experiences can go beyond sport fields or classrooms and may take many different forms, so long as they are integrating problem-posing dialogue with collective action aiming to transform people's social reality (Wallerstein and Bernstein 1988). Drawing on Freirean principles of critical pedagogy, we believe it is important to offer an approach that not only challenges the status quo but also articulates a language of possibility (Spaaij and Jeanes 2013, 444), suggesting that viable alternatives to widespread inequalities and climate catastrophe are not unrealistic, but rather conceivable if we look beyond capitalism and collectively work in that direction.

Co-PA in practice

After articulating the principles of Co-PA, we consider what this might look like in practice. Here, we discuss three different examples in which the principles of Co-PA have been enacted, albeit to varying extents, and then consider their characteristics in relation to our articulation of Co-PA.

The first one is the People's Cup in Brazil (Darlington 2014), a one-off sporting event created by and for communities facing resettlement as a result of the 2014 FIFA World Cup Finals and 2016 Olympic games. The protest tournament attracted over 3,000 families to a temporary squatters' settlement and was intended to pressurize the government to alter its development and housing policies that were perceived to be a way of forcibly acquiring excessive land for real estate and profit accumulation. While this one-off opportunity differs from more enduring participation opportunities, it is interesting to notice its explicit focus on pursuing a more equitable future, how it emerged from bottom-up community driven action trying to challenge capitalist practices, and how it fostered collaboration between under-threat neighbourhoods in order to co-host the tournament.

The second one, Spiral Freerun (2012) began as a group of teenagers free-running in their local area. It then developed into offering coaching to schools and their wider community, until the group expanded and became a Community Interest Company (meaning all profits are reinvested in the business and the community it serves) with over 300 members. Such an approach demonstrates how physical activity opportunities can develop from the bottom-up, focus on enjoyment rather than competition, promote inclusive and collective engagement, be grounded in the community both physically (free-running involving interactions with public spaces, street furniture and buildings) and socially, and be run in a way that challenges capitalist 'for-profit' models.

Lastly, an example thoroughly analysed by Milan and Milan (2021), is of boxing *palestre popolari* in Italy, where self-organized 'community gyms' repurpose abandoned buildings to create spaces where sport is experienced as a political practice based on 'self-organisation, inclusion and accessibility' (733). These independent projects recover vacant spaces previously appropriated by capitalist urbanism and return it to local residents, embodying an alternative model of urban development centred on people rather than profit. And, doing so, they play an important role in movement building, reaching out to people that would otherwise not engage with similar political movements or ideas. Milan and Milan (2021, 734) stress how 'they contribute to spearhead novel relationships at the individual, gym and neighbourhood levels, namely: they involve marginalized subjects giving them agency, forge politically aware individuals, and reach out with mutual aid interventions addressing their social surroundings'. However, politics is not necessarily an explicit topic of discussion at theses venues, where the focus remains on sport (Milan and Milan 2021).

We suggest three things are notable about the above examples. From an implementation perspective, the minimal economic and political support required (indeed, in some cases even political opposition is present). From a conceptual perspective, that post-capitalist ideas are rarely discussed explicitly, which is a valid strategy but also a point of difference to our vision of Co-PA. Lastly, from a research perspective, it is notable that because these actions often emerge informally with dynamic involvement, it can be challenging to capture and explore their emergence; as such, it would be interesting to creatively develop – with communities – ways of understanding further their dynamics and effects.

There are signs of growing research interest in these kinds of interventions, and we signpost interested readers towards recent work (e.g. Stone 2018; Rich, Misener, and Dubeau 2015; Dolk and Kuhn 2015; Webster 2022). We believe that future explorations of Co-PA should draw on the inspiring bottom-up examples mentioned above and the

many more existing all over the world that we may not be aware of, as well as seeking to understand the genesis of these approaches. In our preliminary attempt to operationalize Co-PA, we are collaborating with young adults living in marginalized areas of the North-east of England. Our current work is experimenting with ways to link critical reflection with action aiming to transform society, using a Freirean notion of pedagogical dialogue in which the researcher seeks to provide participants with democratic opportunities to express ideas, while at the same time operating as an active and critical educator (Spaaij and Jeanes 2013). In these activities, we reflect on societal issues (such as climate change, wealth and health inequalities), not only focusing on increasing awareness, but also providing an empowering sense of agency. Discussions concentrate on what could be done to solve such issues at an individual, community and societal level, while examining pragmatic alternatives to the capitalist status quo (such as cooperative ways to run businesses, 'community wealth building' and degrowth paradigms that use social and environmental well-being as indicators of prosperity in place of GDP growth). Throughout all the discussions, attention is paid to physical activity's potential role in connection to the topics and circumstances analysed. Finally, the project culminates in an action that consists of co-designing physical activity opportunities *with* the participants *for* the community, based on their preferences, knowledge of local contexts, and themes emerging from the conversations.

However, this is just one potential way to engage with Co-PA and we hope that many adaptations or alternatives could stem from the imagination and expertise of scholars, as well as community organizations and independent groups of people. Therefore, we advocate for experimenting with different and creative ways to allow a meaningful, collective and post-capitalist-oriented physical activity to gain a more central role in striving towards a society organized around people's well-being, rather than profit and productivity. We advocate for this in the belief that transformative actions can and should have the potential to lead to alternative realities (Spaaij and Jeanes 2013, 448), and that such a potential should be valorized and strengthened by hope in the possibility to build more equitable and enjoyable futures, as well as civic empowerment to contribute to their realization.

Conclusion and next steps

In conclusion, having considered how socio-economic disparities, climate change and the COVID-19 pandemic are affecting and exacerbating inequalities, we argue that there is an urgent need for sport and physical activity actions to enhance their focus on contributing to radical system change. At this historical moment, leisure should join forces with other sectors and social structures to focus on finding ways to tackle inequalities and save humanity from capitalist-induced climate catastrophe. In this context, we suggest that physical activity, without eclipsing other efforts, should nonetheless be considered an important lever, given its unique and wide-reaching positive effects on physical, mental, and social well-being. To maximize its potential, we suggest: diverting attention from organized sport towards personally meaningful physical activities; focusing on bottom-up collective opportunities to experiment with physical activity, rather than top-down individualized ones; and envisioning radical system change to foster hope and tackle societal issues at their roots. Therefore, we propose Co-PA as an approach

suggesting (i) meaning and enjoyment, (ii) collective action, and (iii) a post-capitalist outlook as features to guide diverse future physical activity efforts aiming for social justice, adapted to the specificities of local contexts.

Considering the historically and currently weak political response to the above-mentioned crises, we believe that relying on the design of appropriate policies to reverse structural inequalities (Taylor-Robinson, Barr, and Whitehead 2019) might not be sufficient. Therefore, we suggest Co-PA with a double concurrent aim: on one hand, to promote the creation of physical activity opportunities benefitting communities in the here and now; on the other hand, to empower individuals and communities in undertaking wider bottom-up political action. In other words, Co-PA can be an opportunity to foster critical consciousness and wider empowerment, trying to replace despondency with hope in the power of collective action. Overall, we argue for Co-PA as one approach to tackling long-standing inequalities and the increasingly pressing climate crisis, by contributing to the creation of necessary forces for change, be it through local community actions, community co-operatives, activism or other forms of small- to large-scale political engagement.

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