LeBron James Unshackled

15/07/2014



The public debate about the journey of Lebron James—a Black man and the greatest basketball player in the world today –is being discussed and debated by tens of millions of sports fans in the U.S. The passionate, hysterical, and truly fanatical debate analyzing his contractual decisions to leave the Cleveland Cavaliers to “take his talents to South Beach” to join the Miami heat and last week, at the expiration of that contract, in an earthshaking event in sports, to return to the hapless Cavs and by exercising his rights under “free agency” is filled with the ideology of white supremacy on which the U.S. was constructed as a white settler state. The first step is as a revolutionary organizer is to unravel and discredit the racist master narrative of U.S. capitalism. For Lebron James, one of the richest men in the world by still a Black man is being vilified for simply coming and going as he pleases in, as we used to say and should again—in WhiteRacistAmerika.

But it also is an exercise in contradictions—between the Black millionaires and the white billionaires, between the alliance of “owners” and too many Black professional athletes against and the masses, between the oppression and manipulation of the Black working class by a growing athlete/capitalists (as Michael Jordan, a recent billionaire who owns the Charlotte Hornets and Magic Johnson who owns everything in sight versus the deeply oppressed Black masses who are fighting for their lives. Trying to figure this out involves my own journey into the contradictions of my own consciousness as the system against which I have spent my entire life in revolutionary opposition works to “organize” me. As an avid “fan” (from the Latin fanatic) of the New York Knicks, whose hoop dream is that Phil Jackson, Derek Fisher, and Carmelo Anthony will work the Zenmaster’s triangle and bring a championship to New York where I was born, the class and race struggle of sports plays out inside my own head as well.

So, as 50 million people in the U.S. are debating Lebron’s moves and the mass media is making this comparable to Lincoln/Douglas, developing a correct line on the Lebron James question is critical to the development of a new left in the U.S. –give or take a little hyperbole.

The Back and Front Story—or as Chairman Mao taught us, “seek truth from facts.”

In the 2003 NBA draft, the Cleveland Cavaliers, winning the first pick in the NBA lottery, chose Lebron James, an 18 year old graduate of St. Vincent–St. Mary High School from nearby Akron, Ohio. Cleveland management and fans, after heralding his arrival, demanded that this amazing man-child lead the team to the Promised Land. Cleveland's management had years to build a fine team around Lebron but failed– drafting and trading for mediocrity after mediocrity while Lebron carried the franchise on his strong, young Black back. Finally, at the age of 23, he led his team of losers to the franchise's first NBA Finals appearance in 2007– losing to the San Antonio Spurs in a four game sweep. Throughout, he was criticized for "not being selfish enough" "passing too much" "afraid to take the last shot" – for no good deed goes un punished.

In 2010, after having spending 7 years in Cleveland, his second contract expired and he was free to sign with any team he wanted under NBA rules—becoming a "free agent." Sick of losing, he consciously planned (or conspired) with two other fine players–Dwayne Wade and Chris Bosh—to join the Miami Heat—hailed as one of the greatest "Big Threes of all time." Lebron was happy, actually ecstatic. He and ESPN (a billion dollar operation owned by Disney) organized a show in which he announced his decision to "take his talents to South Beach." In another media event, Lebron promised "not one" or "two" but six, seven championships in Miami's future.

The country went ballistic. Cleveland owner Dan Gilbert wrote a letter to the public calling Lebron a "traitor." Cleveland fans who had worshipped him burned his jerseys. Virtually sports "analyst" decried his arrogance and came very close to calling him an uppity Negro (as many in the streets did.)

The Big 3, which turned into the Big 1 and friends as Wade's great skills eroded, won 4 NBA East Coast championships and 2 NBA titles.

In 2014, in a truly shocking turn of events, Lebron James decided to leave the Miami Heat and return to Cleveland, where he plans to revive a moribund franchise by leading a group of lost, but talented players—as once again James, now at the age of 30, will be asked to bring a championship to a franchise that has never one won.

James beautifully crafted statement, that has turned the sports world on its head, reads in part.

"Before anyone ever cared where I would play basketball, I was a kid from Northeast Ohio. It's where I walked. It's where I ran. It's where I cried. It's where I bled. It holds a special place in my heart. People there have seen me grow up. I sometimes feel like I'm their son. Their passion can be overwhelming. But it drives me. I want to give them hope when I can. I want to inspire them when I can. My relationship with Northeast Ohio is bigger than basketball. I didn't realize that four years ago. I do now.

If I had to do it all over again, I'd obviously do things differently, but I'd still have left. Miami, for me, has been almost like college for other kids. These past four years helped raise me into who I am. I became a better player and a better man. I learned from a franchise that had been where I wanted to go. I will always think of Miami as my second home. Without the experiences I had there, I wouldn't be able to do what I'm doing today.

"I always believed that I'd return to Cleveland and finish my career there. I just didn't know when. After the season, free agency wasn't even a thought. But I have two boys and my wife, Savannah, is pregnant with a girl. I started thinking about what it would be like to raise my family in my hometown. I looked at other teams, but I wasn't going to leave Miami for anywhere except Cleveland. The more time passed, the more it felt right. This is what makes me happy.

To make the move I needed the support of my wife and my mom, who can be very tough. The letter from Dan Gilbert, the booing of the Cleveland fans, the jerseys being burned — seeing all that was hard for them. My emotions were more mixed. It was easy to say, "OK, I don't want to deal with these people ever again." But then you think about the other side. What if I were a kid who looked up to an athlete, and that athlete made me want to do better in my own life, and then he left? How would I react? I've met with Dan, face-to-face, man-to-man. We've talked it out. Everybody makes mistakes. I've made mistakes as well. Who am I to hold a grudge?

I want kids in Northeast Ohio, like the hundreds of Akron third-graders I sponsor through my foundation, to realize that there's no better place to grow up. Maybe some of them will come home after college and start a family or open a business. That would make me smile. Our community, which has struggled so much, needs all the talent it can get.

In Northeast Ohio, nothing is given. Everything is earned. You work for what you have.

I'm ready to accept the challenge. I'm coming home."

Within the crazy, distorted world of professional sports, this was pretty beautiful and moving stuff. A high school graduate used by the system for their profit, explains that his four years in Miami "has been almost like college for other kids" is vulnerable and insightful. The voice of a grown man explaining his own Odyssey—great prose, great authenticity—and of course the powerful complex narrative that couldn't help bring a tear to the eye and a sense of great respect.

Who could find fault with this? No one in Cleveland–where Dan Gilbert is trying to burn any copies of his "Lebron as traitor" letter and hysterical fans are trying to find the ashes of the Lebron jerseys they burned to rewrite their own history and atone for their sins.

But outside of Cleveland, the shit is getting crazy.

According to virtually every clichéd sports writer—Lebron is the "prodigal son" returning home—and by this, they mean it as a complement—the runaway slave returning to the plantation, apologizing to his master, and begging for forgiveness.

According to this new New Testament story a man had two sons—one who was loyal and one who left, the "prodigal son" who was ungrateful, foolishly independent, and who, after losing his money and his soul, returns home to throw himself on the mercy of his father. 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' But the father said to his servants, 'Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. 23 Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let's have a feast and celebrate. 24 For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.'

"Dead and lost" and these are from his defenders.

But ESPN sports commentator Ric Bucher, who gives superficial a bad name, upped the ante—debating Lebron's choices as "Lebron–prodigal son or traitor."

As if it couldn't get worse, Kareem Abdul Jabbar, one of the greatest basketball players of all time, who in 1975, forced the owner of the Milwaukee to trade him to Los Angeles, postures in Time magazine as an angry god decrying Lebron's life as a modern day Soddom and Gomorrah. He describes Lebron's triumphant return to Cleveland as one of "the straying husband who abandoned his longtime partner to chase a younger, hotter, firmer slice having second thoughts. Having realized he traded a deep love for a sweaty romp, he's coming home with a bouquet of roses in one hand and a diamond bracelet in the other, begging forgiveness for his foolish mistake of lustful youth."

Jesus Christ, in every sense of the name, now Lebron is given 3 historical interpretations—"traitor" "prodigal son" or "straying, lustful, unfaithful husband and abandoner" all terrible caricatures of Black men in our society.

Let me offer a fourth interpretation—the right of a Black man to come and go as he pleases.

From slavery to Jim Crow and the Black codes to the present mass incarceration of Black and Latino people, what Michele Alexander has called "the New Jim Crow" the role of white society is to restrain, constrain, punish, and mutilate the Black body and soul—to make every day life unbearable and to support super-exploitation through Klan and police terror—what we in the civil rights movement called "blue by day and white by night." In particular, the system has always made clear that Black folks do not have the right to come and go as they please—they are subjected to an occupying army of police, as Latino immigrants are hunted down by ICE. The system constructs a series of legal constraints in which, especially Black youth who they fear as potential rebels and revolutionaries, are arrested for "loitering" "truancy" "disrespecting an officer" "jaywalking" that make it illegal for Black folks to do, say, walk, ride, or be anything and anywhere the white man prohibits.

While Lebron James is a powerful, wealthy man, far more powerful and successful than his critics, the struggle against the ideology of white supremacy, even as it impacts the most privileged of Black people is a critical part of the larger strategy of Black liberation and international revolutionary thought and action. This pivotal struggle of the wealthy Black athlete against white corporate racism has been elaborated by William C. Rhoden in Forty Million

Dollar Slaves: The Rise, Fall, and Redemption of the Black Athlete and by Brad Snyder in A Well-Paid Slave: Curt Flood's Fight for Free Agency in Professional Sports. So, within the confines of the system in which we live, Go Lebron Go! Go wherever the hell you want.

But that's not where the story ends. For the struggle to defend Lebron James' democratic rights is part of a far larger narrative of the struggle of all Black people, and especially the Black working class, for self-determination, national liberation in the larger multi-racial, multi-national battle against capitalism itself. And in this arena the next struggle will be to challenge the tragic alliance of too many Black athletes with white corporate capitalism and their abandonment, exploitation, and even tacit support of the suppression of the very people, their own people, who idolize them. The struggle against false idols is the next front in this war.

Let's return to Cleveland. The Cleveland Cavaliers are not a "team" (the deceptive imagery of inclusion is so brilliant—when sports fans refer to their teams as "we" — the "we" that Malcolm lampooned in Message to the Grassroots. The specific form this takes is that wealthy individuals "buy" a team and the "owners" — the people who own the means of production–in this case Black athletes. The white, racist, "owner" who called Lebron a traitor and with whom Lebron has now reconciled is Dan Gilbert. His prominent role in U.S. capitalism reads like a case study of interlocking directorates. According to our friends at Wikipedia

Gilbert is the chairman and founder of Rock Ventures and Quicken Loans Inc., the majority owner of the National Basketball Association's Cleveland Cavaliers, the American Hockey League's Lake Erie Monsters, the Arena Football League's Cleveland Gladiators and the NBA Development League's Canton Charge. He is also the operator of the Quicken Loans Arena in Cleveland, Ohio and chairman of Rock Gaming, which opened its first Horseshoe Casino in downtown Cleveland in May 2012. In November 2009, Gilbert and a group of partners successfully backed a state-wide referendum to bring casino gaming to Ohio's four largest cities. Through a joint venture with Caesars Entertainment Corporation, the groups operate urban-based casinos in both Cleveland and Cincinnati. The first of the casinos, Horseshoe Cleveland, opened in May 2012.[3] In 2013, Rock Ventures, the umbrella entity for Gilbert's investments and real estate holdings, announced it had formed Athens Acquisition LLC, an affiliate of Rock Gaming, and acquired the majority interest in Greektown Superholdings Inc., owner of the Greektown Casino-Hotel located in downtown Detroit.

The political economy and massive super-profits of professional sports is a story in itself—all part of what we at the Strategy Center call the "privatizing, polluting, and policing" strategy of capitalist urban development.

While Gilbert has tried to distance himself from the slightly more predatory Wells Fargo, Countrywide, Bank of America, J.P. Morgan Chase, and Citibank, some of his employees respectfully beg to differ. In a suit filed in Detroit, they "accuse the company of using high-pressure salesmanship to target elderly and vulnerable homeowners, as well as misleading borrowers about their loans, and falsifying property appraisals and other information to push through bad deals….
 Another group of ex-employees have gone to federal court to accuse Quicken of abusing workers and customers alike. In court papers, former salespeople claim Quicken executives managed by bullying and intimidation, pressuring them to falsify borrowers' incomes on loan applications and to push overpriced deals on desperate or unwary homeowners.

Will Lebron expose the toxic concoction of capitalism and white supremacy that continues to hold Black communities in bondage while the day that Lebron left Miami to sign with Cleveland for $42 million over 2 years, the value of Dan Gilbert's investment increased from $500 million to $1 billion literally overnight! Will Lebron explain the false promises of his capitalist development in which he will function as a developer like Magic Johnson in which the main "jobs" that will be created will be the restaurants, clubs, Rock and Roll Hall of Fame and the millionaire athlete/culture/entertainment/music/land grab/gentrification complex?

Of course not, but that is the job of a social movement that is not strong enough organizationally or ideologically, operating under increasing police surveillance and suppression—but can grow with high visibility struggles against the many examples of capitalist excess, decadence, and mass suffering. to mount a concerted challenge—but that is the direction many organizers and organizations in low-income Black and Latino communities.

At a time when grassroots organizing in ghettos and barrios on campuses and factories were allied with an international movement from Vietnam and Cuba, Muhammad Ali, Tommie Smith, John Carlos, and other athletes took enormous risks to challenge not just racism but the more fundamental tenets of racist capitalism? Most people today, younger people who cannot yet imagine a real revolution but long for one, and people who lived through that

period but suffer from amnesia about their own finest hours, cannot fathom the heroic actions of Black athletes at Historically Black Colleges and Universities who were part of the larger world of CORE, SNCC, the Nation of Islam, the Black Panther Party.

Muhammad refused to serve in the U.S. army—and some remember he was stripped of his crown as the heavyweight champion of the world. But few know or remember that Ali was convicted of resisting the draft and sentenced to five years in prison, was stripped of his world heavyweight “crown” and as he appealed his case, went on a speaking tour of colleges and Black communities to deliver brilliant evolved oratory against the racist, imperialist genocidal war in Vietnam. And if his case had not been overturned on appeal, Ali would have spent five years in prison.

In my lifetime, we saw the brilliant imagery of U.S. sprinters Tommie Smith and John Carlos, raising their clenched fists with a black glove on the winners stand in the Mexico City Olympics.

But who can begin to understand that in order for this tactic to work they first had to win gold and bronze medals as two of the greatest athletes in the world, and then, in Mexico city where Mexican students had been murdered, they risked their amateur and professional careers in front of 100,000 people in the amphitheater and millions of people all over the world. They were part of a much larger narrative—in a period of world-wide and Third World revolution.

Today, my organization is working on the buses of Los Angeles fighting transit racism and organizing among 500,000 Black and Latino bus riders. We are organizing in the high schools of Los Angeles against the School to Prison Pipeline and the Mass Incarceration of Black and Latino youth. The main enemy is the system, the main organized force is the capitalists and the capitalist state, and many bus riders and students in motion understand that. But as they struggle the class contradictions in the Black community are growing sharper—as very few professionals or upper income people side with the urban poor and worse, are a significant part of the “privatizing, policing, polluting” class that runs Los Angeles and U.S. cities. Our Fight for the Soul of the Cities is challenging this worldview—fighting for the social welfare state not the police state, the environmental justice state not the warfare state.

In Los Angeles, we were outraged at Donald Sterling’s racist diatribe against Magic Johnson. And let’s be clear, it was Lebron James leadership among Black and white NBA players who convinced NBA Commissioner Adam Silver that if he did not get rid of Sterling there would be a boycott of NBA players that would bring the league to a halt.

And it was Lebron James, Duane Wade, and the entire Miami Heat team that posed defiantly in hoodies in solidarity with Trayvon Martin. So, there is hope. Imagine in the future when a militant minority of fans at NBA games go on the floor to challenge the League to end stop and frisk, risking arrest, and who explain that handing our basketballs and Adidas and Nike running shoes is no answer to structural racism and poverty. They call on the players to support an occupation of city hall demanding a program of jobs or income now, or put their bodies in front of corporate development projects and ask the athletes to oppose government subsidies of corporate built sports arenas—or call for the end of U.S. Drone attacks and the closing down of U.S. military bases. Dr. Harry Edwards is decrying the growing class antagonisms in the Black community and a new generation of Black and Latino youth, still fighting “the white power structure” will be also be demanding of Black athletes, which side are you on? And while it is hard to imagine who will be the Muhammad Alis, or for that matter the Fannie Lou Hamers of our time, just a few high profile college or professional athletes joining the movement can bring the debate into the system’s ideological fortress of professional sports. Once that break begins the Black athletes, whose own struggle against racism has been strongly supported by the masses, will be forced and in some times propelled into reciprocal action. It’s hard to imagine, but believe me, so has every revolutionary upsurge before it happened.