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Legitimation Crisis: What We Learned from the U.S. College Football Playoff Controversy (2003-2014)

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Abstract

Jurgen Habermas in Legitimation Crisis (1975) argued that advanced capitalism comes with complex contradictions that are not easily solved. As global monopoly capital becomes the predominant economic arrangement, state intervention is needed to provide steering for the economy to deliver growth and stability. Politically, states must inspire confidence and mass loyalty to the system, the entire political system. Political participation is limited, as corporate interests truncate real democracy. When belief lags in existing institutions to provide a viable life in the system, a crisis of legitimation ensues as people begin to withdraw their support for the system, typically by the public's refusal to purchase goods or agreeably (peacefully) protest the status quo. As a direct threat to the economy, the refusal to buy products threatens to wreck the entire system centered on the economy.

Keywords: Legitimation Crisis, Capitalism, Corporate Interests, Football, Playoff

Jurgen Habermas in *Legitimation Crisis* (1975) argued that advanced capitalism comes with complex contradictions that are not easily solved. As global monopoly capital becomes the predominant economic arrangement, state intervention is needed to provide steering for the economy to deliver growth and stability. Politically, states must inspire confidence and mass loyalty to the system, the entire political system. Political participation is limited, as corporate interests truncate real democracy. When belief lags in existing institutions to provide a viable life in the system, a crisis of legitimation ensues as people begin to withdraw their support for the system, typically by the public's refusal to purchase goods or agreeably (peacefully) protest the status quo. As a direct threat to the economy, the refusal to buy products threatens to wreck the entire system centered on the economy.

Though not administered by a nation-state, American college football has acquired some state-like problems over time. The sport's economic impact extends well beyond game day receipts registered at the venue; thus, the postponement or cancelation of the sport for any reason (terrorism, natural disaster, COVID-19, or lack of participation by fans) has a ripple effect in the community. Football revenues typically cover funding deficits in other low-revenue-generating sports, such as track, swimming, and golf. The payments additionally support academic programs and contribute to various campus initiatives. From 2020-2021, the University of Florida football program returned up to $10.7 million to the university, while rival Florida State University contributed around $11.3 million to students. The games spur local small business growth as visitors buy goods and services (Guarine, 2020). Finally, bowl revenues shore up the budgets of participating teams and conference foes that share in the bowl dividend.

The coordinating body of the sport, the NCAA, is not a formal political institution. Still, it is a site of governance, holding real power over the outcomes of the sport. Fans retain some power as well. For example, though not officially subjects of the NCAA's authority, fans hold power to delegitimize and undermine the fiscal health of the sport by refusing to attend games or watch them on television or the device of their choice.

This paper presents the argument that U.S. college football endured a legitimation crisis during the years of the Bowl Championship Series, especially from 2003-2014. At the time, the BCS was a one-game playoff but not a multi-round tournament to decide the college football champion. The crisis was solved in 2014 with the College Football Playoff arrangement, in which a human committee selected four participating teams for a two-round tournament. A few lingering legitimacy issues remain under this new format, which continues to the present, but these issues do not threaten the viability of the playoff. The paper ends with suggestions on managing these residual issues to minimize their effects and warns of new crises now under development.

Background

Before the College Football Playoff in 2014, the NCAA Division I Football Bowl Subdivision (FBS) was the only NCAA-sponsored sport without an organized tournament to determine its champion. Since the 1970s, the NCAA's lower divisions (FCS, Division II, Division III[1]) have determined their national champions through single-elimination tournaments with fields as large as 32 teams. The postseason for the largest schools historically consisted of individual bowl games. The bowl games rewarded teams for their successful seasons and proved to be a financial advantage for participating teams. Television revenues soared along with viewer interest in the end-of-season matchups, as they coincided with fans' time off for the holiday season. National champions were determined by the outcome of several polls conducted after the bowl season. Despite this success, the bowl arrangement, by itself, ultimately did not satisfy the longings of fans who wanted to see the top-ranked team determined by a playoff, not by pollsters or computers.

Pressure had been building for years for a playoff system that might replace or augment the existing system of bowl games.[2] The Bowl Coalition (1992-1994) and the Bowl Alliance (1995-1997) failed to produce a one-game playoff to determine a champion. The Rose Bowl proved to be a frustrating obstacle as it stubbornly insisted on continuing its long-term relationship with the Big Ten and the Pacific Ten Conferences. The Bowl Championship Series (BCS), started in 1998, provided a breakthrough and a temporary fix to the playoff dilemma. Before BCS, the Associated Press's number one and two teams met in bowl games only eight times in 56 seasons. After 1998, the top two teams, according to BCS metrics, played 12 years in a row. The *Associated Press* top teams played nine times (American Football Database [hereafter AFD], 2012).

The BCS was a selection system that created five bowl matchups involving ten of the top-ranked teams in the Football Bowl Subdivision, including an opportunity for the top two to compete in the BCS National Championship Game. Combining computer selection methods and polls, teams were ranked, and the field narrowed to the two teams to play in the Championship Game. The American Football Coaches Association was required by contract to vote for the winner of this game as the true BCS National Champion; conferences similarly were required to acknowledge the BCS National Championship game-winner as the true champion (AFD, 2012).

Television.

At the beginning of the BCS era, *ABC* held the rights to all four original BCS games, having previously held the Rose Bowl and Sugar Bowl contracts: and then picking up the Fiesta and Orange Bowls from another network. This arrangement continued until the bowl season ended in January 2006 (AFD, 2012). The next year, beginning with the 2006–07 season and lasting three seasons after that, any BCS game hosted by the Sugar, Orange or Fiesta Bowls aired on the *Fox Network*. The Rose Bowl was to be shown on ABC. Finally, *ESPN* agreed to air all BCS games, from 2010-11 through the conclusion of the January 2014 games (McCarthy, 2009).

Selection of Teams.

A set of rules determined who competed in BCS bowl games. Some received automatic bids depending on their BCS ranking and conference. The top two won spots in the BCS National Championship Game. A BCS conference champion (ACC, Big 12, Big East, Big Ten, Pac-12, and SEC) was guaranteed an automatic BCS bowl bid. Notre Dame, an independent, earned an automatic berth if it finished in the top eight (Mandel, 2010). The highest-ranked champion of a non-BCS conference received an automatic berth if: it was ranked in the top 12; or if ranked in the top 16 and higher than at least one BCS conference champion. All BCS conferences except the Big East had contracts for their champions to participate in specific BCS bowl games (AFD, 2012).

Rankings.

BCS rankings were determined by polls and computer-generated rankings. First, the initial BCS rankings from 1998-2003 combined several factors. The *A.P.* and *ESPN-USA Today* coaches' polls were averaged to arrive at a number which is the poll average. Next was the computer average: "(a)n average of the rankings of a team in three different computer polls were gathered (Jeff Sagarin/*USA Today*, Anderson-Hester/*Seattle Times*, and *New York Times*), with a 50% adjusted maximum deviation factor" (AFD, 2012).

The third factor was strength of schedule; this was the team's NCAA rank in the strength of schedule, divided by 25. Strength of schedule was calculated by the win/loss record of opponents (66.6%) and cumulative win/loss record of the team's opponents (33.3%). The team who played the most demanding schedule was given .04 points, the second toughest .08 points, and so on. Fourth, the margin of victory was a key component in the decision of the computer rankings to determine the BCS standings (AFD, 2012). Finally, losses: one point was added for every loss the team has suffered during the season. All games were counted, including pre-season Kickoff Classics and conference championship games (Fansonly, 1998).

[1] The FCS is the Football Championship Subdivision. Divisions II and III are smaller schools with fewer scholarship athletes.

[2] This section of the paper draws on the Fandom site, "Bowl Championship Series" in the American Football Database. See this site for the complete discussion: Bowl Championship Series | American Football Database | Fandom

The BCS found it desirable to tweak the rankings on several occasions. Before the 1999–2000 season, "five more computer rankings were added to the system: Richard Billingsley, Richard Dunkel, Kenneth Massey, Herman Matthews/*Scripps Howard*, and David Rothman. The lowest ranking was dropped, and the remainder averaged" (AFD, 2012).

The Peter Wolfe and Wes Colley/*Atlanta Journal-Constitution* computer rankings were used starting in 2001 in place of the *NYT* and Dunkel rankings. "The change was made because the BCS wanted computer rankings that did not depend heavily on the margin of victory. The highest and lowest rankings were discarded, and the remainder averaged" (AFD, 2012). Also in 2001, a quality win component was added. If a team beat a team that was in the top 15 in the BCS standings, a range of 1.5 to .1 points was subtracted from their total. If you beat the #1 ranked team, that caused subtraction of 1.5 points, "beating the #2 team resulted in a deduction of 1.4 points, and so on. Beating the #15 ranked team would have resulted in a deduction of .1 points" (AFD, 2012).

The BCS continued to purge ranking systems which included margin of victory. The Matthews and David Rothman ratings were removed before the 2002 season. "Sagarin provided a BCS-specific formula that did not include margin of victory, and the *New York Times* index returned in a form without margin of victory considerations. In addition, a new computer ranking, the Wesley Colley Matrix, was added. The lowest ranking was dropped and the remaining six averaged. Also in 2002, the quality win component was modified such that the deduction for beating the #1 team in the BCS would be 1.0, declining by 0.1 increments until beating the 10th ranked team" resulted in a 0.1 deduction (AFD, 2012).

Criticism

A major controversy evolved after LSU played Oklahoma in the 2003 BCS National Championship Game. LSU won the game, but voters in the *A.P.* and Coaches polls named the University of Southern California as the top ranked team at the end of the year, defying the autonomy of the BCS to determine a champion. Thus, there was a split championship which BCS was designed to avoid. USC's low computer rankings left the school out of the title game. Southern Cal fans and some in the media argued that human polls ought to be given more weight, which led to a rewriting of the BCS ranking formula with a new algorithm. The *A.P.* poll was taken out of the equation, and the *Harris Interactive Poll*, the Coaches Poll, and the computer average all underwent adjustments to give more weight to the human voters. The three components were added together and averaged for a team's ranking in the BCS standings. The team with the highest average ranked first in the BCS standings (AFD, 2012).

In April 2009, Bowl Championship Series commissioners met for its annual spring meetings in Pasadena, California in conjunction with the Rose Bowl's staging the 2010 BCS title game. According to the agenda, concerns were being raised about the fairness of the BCS. The Mountain West Conference presented a proposal that would establish an eight-team playoff that provided better access to the four BCS bowl games for the five conferences without automatic bids. The proposal also included a motion to change the automatic qualifier criteria to reflect inter-conference performance better. The BCS rejected the proposal, citing a lack of support among the member conferences (AFD, 2012).

The fairness issue took on greater import when several undefeated teams finished seasons without an opportunity to play in the national championship game. Tulane, Marshall, and Utah were shut out of the playoff following undefeated seasons in the late 1990s and early 2000s. In the six seasons of FBS football from 2006 to 2012 there were more undefeated non-BCS champions than undefeated BCS champions. Undefeated seasons by Boise State in 2009 and Texas Christian in 2010 appeared worthy of a championship game or playoff invite. Yet, no mid major or team from any conference outside of the six aligned conferences had ever played in the BCS Championship Game as of 2012 as pressure for a playoff increased. Mid-major teams had a 4-1 record as of 2012 against teams from the six automatic-qualifying conferences in the BCS Bowl games they have been allowed to play in (AFD, 2012). These observations suggested to many that the BCS perpetuated inequality in U.S. college football and unfairly determined access to playoff spots.

Ultimately, it was a highly decentralized grassroots movement of average fans that tilted public opinion toward a true playoff system to replace the BCS. A diverse collectivity of malcontented fans displayed a range of involvement with college football, including nerds who memorized statistics of their favorite teams/conferences (and developed their own playoff scenarios); fans who attended games; weekend warriors (the T.V. watching crowd); and casual fans who followed the sport in January only.

Opposition to BCS appeared to cross over ethnic and gender lines. People from all walks of life participated in the lively debate, from the elitist patrons of upscale coffee houses in Seattle to the regulars at the most run-down beer joints in the Florida Everglades. What BCS was to be replaced with, exactly, no one knew for sure, and that was part of the debate at the grassroots level. As of 2008, the controversy had no immediate end in sight, and virtually no one could foresee that the solution would be six years away.

Fan sentiment began to appear in surveys starting around the mid-2000s. For example, a Quinnipiac University survey found that 63% of individuals interested in college football preferred a playoff system to the BCS. Only 26% favored keeping the BCS as is. In other polls, margins favoring a playoff were similarly large;

according to the *Gallup Poll*, 65 percent of U.S. college football fans wanted a playoff and so did 79 percent of *ESPN*'s SportsNation (*Salt Lake City Tribune*, 2009; *Gallup*, 2005; *ESPN*, 2007; see also *Associated Press*, 2009b).

Movers and shakers in multiple professions lent weight to the push for a playoff (*CNN*, 2009; Kapadia, 2004; Bluestein, 2009; *Grand Rapids Press*, 2008; Lemke, 2008). As a candidate and later as president, the support of Barack Obama proved to be a huge lever advancing the cause of a playoff. Obama was vocal in his opposition to the BCS (Thamel, 2008; Gregorian, 2008; *NPR*, 2008). In interviews with Chris Berman and Steve Kroft, he stated that he disliked using computer rankings to determine bowl games, and he supported having a college football playoff for the top eight teams (Pucin, 2008; Makowsky, 2008). Longtime college football announcer Brent Musburger also voiced his support for a playoff in an interview with the *Chicago Sun-Times*. "My dream scenario … would be to take eight conference champions, and only conference champions, and play the quarterfinals of a tournament on campuses in mid-December. The four losers would remain bowl eligible. The four winners would advance to semifinals on New Year's Day with exclusive T.V. windows. Then … one week later, there would be the national championship game" (O'Donnell, 2010). Musburger's peers joined him in a call for action. A steady stream of sportswriters and football analysts argued convincingly that a playoff system should replace the BCS (for a sampling, see Carlin and Stern, 1999; Logan, 2007; Nixon, 2009; *USA Today Magazine*, 2009; Annis and Wu, 2006; Hayes, 2007, 2008; Mandel, 2007; Thamel, 2008, 2010; Martzke, 2003; Looney, 1998; Dunavent, 2003; Wieberg, 2001, 2004, 2009; Rhoden, 2008; Kindred, 1997; *USA Today*, 2004a, 2004b; Rock, 1999; Lemke, 2006; Wetzel, 2007; Barnes, 2005; Chusid, 2010; Souhan, 2008; *Augusta Chronicle*, 2008, 2010; *States News Service*, 2009; Frommer, 2009; Carr, 2009; *U.S. News*, 2009; Bolstad, 2009; Brown, 2007; *Chattanooga Times Free Press*, 2006; Pearson, 2005; Campbell, 2007; Gilmore, 2000; Scanlon, 2003; Miller, 2009; Tudor, 2005; Bohls, 2008; Barfknecht, 2007; Sanders, 2006). Meanwhile, in Washington, D.C., various organizations were spending hundreds of thousands of dollars to lobby the federal government in opposition to a college football playoff system (Levinthal, 2009). Opposition to BCS ramped up when a political action committee called Playoff PAC was formed to oppose BCS and threatened to sue the IRS over the tax-exempt status of several BCS bowls (Winslow, 2010; Caron, 2010).

Antitrust Lawsuits

Members of Congress, indignant over the inequities of BCS, held Congressional hearings to berate the bowl system and to explore potential playoff schemes (U.S. House, 2005; U.S. Senate, 2004). Antitrust attorneys wanted a playoff, fearing that the BCS violated federal antitrust laws (U.S. Senate, 1997; U.S. Senate, 2004, 2010; U.S. House, 2004; Hanna and Bruno, 2010). In 2008, a lawsuit was threatened due to the exclusion of teams from the non-automatic qualifying conferences in the BCS system (Associated Press, 2009). Following Utah's win over Alabama in the 2009 Sugar Bowl, Utah Attorney General Mark Shurtleff announced an inquiry into whether the BCS system violated federal antitrust laws (Associated Press, 2009; Russo, 2009). In 2009, Utah senator Orrin Hatch announced that he was exploring the possibility of a lawsuit against the BCS as an anticompetitive trust under the Sherman Antitrust Act. In November 2009 Representative Joe Barton (R-TX) announced antitrust hearings on the BCS, again based on the Sherman Antitrust Act and its provisions outlawing noncompetitive trusts (*Fort Worth Star-Telegram*, 2009).

According to AFD (2012), Senator Hatch received a letter in January 2010 from the Justice Department concerning the possibility of a legal review of the BCS. The Obama administration believed that the lack of a playoff raised important questions affecting millions of citizens. The Department of Justice said it would explore options to establish a college football playoff, including "(a) an antitrust lawsuit against the BCS, (b) legal action under Federal Trade Commission consumer protection laws, (c) encouragement of the NCAA to take control of the college football postseason, (d) the establishment of an agency to review the costs and benefits of adopting a playoff system, and (e) continued legislation in favor of a playoff system."

In April 2011, Utah's Attorney General announced he would file an antitrust lawsuit against the BCS for "serious antitrust violations that are harming taxpayer-funded institutions to the tune of hundreds of millions of dollars" (AFD, 2012). Earlier, 21 high profile economists and antitrust experts lent their support to an investigation into the BCS' anticompetitive practices (Murphy, 2011).

Bowl Revenue: An Obstacle to Change

In purely political terms, such overwhelming support from so many societal institutions would be a precursor to solving a social problem or winning an election. A referendum placed on state ballots for voter approval, if supported by the same overwhelming margin that support for a playoff suggested, would likely pass in a landslide given the broad, general support for this issue. Stated another way, if the playoff system would have been subject to a referendum in the individual states, it likely would have passed in a landslide everywhere. Similarly, a political candidate with playoff-type support, in any jurisdiction, would also win convincingly. Sociologists know that many pro-active, change seeking social movements are effective in forcing reasonable accommodation from the power structures that they oppose (Smelser, 1963; Melucci, 1989; Smith, Chatfield and Pagnucco, 1998; Walter, 2001;

Tilly, 2004; Marx and McAdam, 1994; Buechler, 2000; McAdam, 1982; McAdam, McCarthy and Zald, 1988; Snow, Rochford, Worden and Benford, 1986; Taylor, 1989). In the social movement favoring a playoff system, there was hardly any progress for many years despite broad grassroots support leveraged by some of the most powerful players in Washington, D.C. Why was this the case? Why was there no playoff system for the more prominent schools until 2014, despite the growing clamor in favor of it? Certain institutional arrangements prevented changes to the BCS – but which ones?

The bowl system had proven to be a system too big and lucrative to fail. Bowl revenue, some of it shared among conferences whose teams participated, grew significantly over time. Table 1 presents data from the two years in the transition from the BCS to the College Football Playoff. The amount of money distributed to conferences, already a substantial sum during the BCS years, increased by 94 percent in just one year. The bowl system had survived and was doing better financially. The three-game, four-team playoff was integrated into the bowl system as the College Football Playoff. Admittedly, there was some grousing about the quality of the early bowl games ("baby bowls"), which did little to inspire fans, and there was talk once again about too many bowl games. The six-win limit was eventually waved for some of the games, as some bowls were having trouble finding eligible team candidates. During the COVID-19 crisis, the win requirement was abandoned altogether. Despite these problems, the bowl system remained essentially intact, not much different from its structure under BCS. Viewership remained strong, and advertisers paid big money to secure ads during the bowl games.

Distribution	2013-2014 (BCS)	2014-2015 (CFP)	% Increase
Mountain West	$3,591,309	$23,465,188	553%
Mid-American	$2,394,206	$14,088,886	488%
Conference USA	$2,992,757	$16,339,754	446%
U.S. Naval Academy	$100,000	$307,544	208%
U.S. Military Academy	$100,000	$307,544	208%
Brigham Young	$100,000	$307,544	208%
Sun Belt	$4,189,860	$11,963,453	186%
Pac-12	$27,897,751	$69,328,611	149%
Southeastern	$34,197,751	$65,598,710	92%
Big 12	$34,197,751	$64,700,801	89%
Big 10	$34,197,751	$63,978,927	87%
ACC	$34,197,751	$58,280,649	70%
Southern	$250,000	$250,000	0%
Ohio Valley	$250,000	$250,000	0%
SWAC	$250,000	$250,000	0%
Southland	$250,000	$250,000	0%
Big South	$250,000	$250,000	0%
Missouri Valley	$250,000	$250,000	0%
Notre Dame	$2,319,639	$2,321,258	0%
Big Sky	$250,000	$250,000	0%
Atlantic 10	$250,000	$250,000	0%
Mid-Eastern	$250,000	$250,000	0%
Big East/Am. Athletic	$27,897,751	$15,214,320	-45%
New Mexico St.	$100,000	N/A	N/A
Idaho	$100,000	N/A	N/A
Total Distribution to Conferences	**$210,824,276**	**$408,433,189**	**94%**

Table 1. Conference Bowl Payouts in Transition from BCS to CFP*

***Source: Business of College Sport (2021)**

The BCS was criticized for creating a two-tiered system of college football in which the Automatic-Qualifying (A.Q.) conferences held advantages over the rest of the FBS schools by creating a "have not" class of non-automatic-qualifying conferences and schools. According to Table 1, the transition to CFP did little to change this basic stratification system. The A.Q. schools (later called Power 5) near the middle of the table stand out because they earned $27-34 million in distributions under BCS and distributions mostly over 60,000 in CFP, which is substantially more than the distributions from other conferences.

BCS allowed the A.Q. conference schools to rationalize and plan their operations over a longer term, including the option of diverting a portion of their earnings into reserves which could be tapped later. For example, Louisiana State University, two-time winners of the BCS Championship and a 2011 finalist, looked forward to a rebuilding year in the fall of 2011. Despite this, they knew that a season of six or seven wins lands the team in the Peach Bowl or similarly minor bowl but still one that pays decent revenues to the school and to the Southeastern

Conference of which LSU is a part. Eight or nine wins puts the Bayou Tigers in contention for a higher payout; playing in one of the BCS bowls. Ten or eleven wins puts them in the running for the ultimate prize, the BCS national championship game with an exceptionally large payout. While budgeting for athletics in 2011 or in any given year, aiming for the middle on this income-generating continuum of wins was a reasonable plan, an achievable goal given the school's resources and level of success on the field. Enabling such planning and making it all possible was the Bowl Championship Alliance, which aligned designated conferences with specific bowls. For LSU to forsake this warm, cozy, predictable bowl arrangement that allows for long term planning and rationalization of their income stream for the chaos of a playoff system is not a valid option from the perspective of school administrators. Potentially, LSU could get upset in the first round of the playoffs, thereby having its profit stream rudely and unexpectedly interrupted.

Habermas was uniquely situated to analyze such prickly problems with American life. Having closely observed the country's political economy in the early 1970s, he found it to be capitalism of an advanced type. It was strongly resistant to socialistic alternatives. It was clear to him that there would be no socialist revolution in America, the police forces having successfully beaten down the radical groups of the 1960s. But flaws in this advanced system of capitalism would still manifest themselves. The contradictions within the system were such that periodic crises may develop, with the potential at least for some of the crises to become semi-permanent. His analysis helped resolve the anomaly of a world's superpower struggling despite its largesse and superior resources. How could one of the strongest nations in the world be racked by problems that appeared at times to be intractable or unsolvable?

In America Habermas saw an advanced capitalism which he called organized, or state regulated capitalism. It was characterized by economic concentration along with state intervention in the market when functional gaps develop between goods, capital, and labor. The market is steered, not by Adams Smith's benevolent hand, but by the unbridled pursuit of profit (see Polanyi, 1957). Four crises, he believed, were certain to develop. First, there is an economic crisis resulting from the falling rate of profit that triggers all the other crises. Accumulation of capital leads to a situation where more capital is chasing labor, elevating wages, and suppressing profit margins. The capitalist response to the crisis – pumping more money into technological and time saving gadgets – requires expenditures that further depress the rate of profit. Second, there is a rationality crisis as administrative agencies are unable to defuse the economic crisis. Third, there is a legitimation crisis. Here, the state is unable to arouse the mass loyalty needed to support the capitalistic system. Finally, there is a motivational crisis, where loyalty to the system erodes to the point where constituents begin to opt out of it; this is a phase in which citizens lose interest in participating. This is a critically dangerous crisis for the economy as it would mean that consumers quit consuming products, with catastrophic results (Robbins, 2005). Habermas believed that capitalism, like an athlete that is dinged up but still playing, would limp along through these various crises but would rarely reach 100 percent of capacity.

Though couched within institutions that are nominally non-profit, college football is clearly a capitalistic enterprise and open to the kind of analysis that Habermas performed on the American economy. For the larger state schools especially, football is situated within structures of state budgets and tax revenues, the latter being either strong or weak in any given year. Thus, collegiate football is subject to the structural constraints of any public business venture or any state institution, which made the BCS predicament more cumbersome. Even though a team may be successful, incoming tax revenues to fund the school's general fund may be weak if the home state's general economy is weak. Budget cuts may loom even in states that house the most successful or winning football schools. This makes the large revenues from the BCS even more appealing, and the purported savior of many programs. And a Habermasian perspective basically fits the landscape being surveyed. College football tried to defuse the crisis initially by investing in pollsters and data analysts who made changes to the BCS system for rating teams during the period 1999-2004. This did not help the situation and did serve to depress the amount of revenue schools could receive in BCS payouts. The NCAA as an organization appeared unable to defuse the crisis by itself. It did not subject the bowls or the bowl system to federal regulation (which was one of many options open to solve the crisis). And college football was in the throes of a "legitimation crisis" in which it could not arouse mass loyalty because it could not reconcile or fulfill multiple tasks that required concurrent fulfillment. For example, it could not simultaneously create a playoff system, eliminate some minor bowls to save money, and fend off federal antitrust suits to save the BCS (because these goals are contradictory). Importantly, college football was unable to solve its economic problems in a manner consistent with long-held American ideas about democracy and equality – how everyone is supposed to play a game fairly on a level field. The BCS school administrators greatly admired the status quo, dragging their feet concerning possible changes to the system. They stalled until 2014 when new TV contracts would be negotiated, and there was room for a fresh start. Too strong to fail yet too weak to be all it can be, college football limped forward, trying to weather the legitimacy crises to prosper greatly in better times. College football administrators held their breath, hoping that fans would not abandon the sport in droves. Viewership and game attendance held steady, averting catastrophe.

Habermas' perspective is unique because it answered the question of why a playoff system remained an elusive goal for so long by drawing on critical sociological theory, which made sense of the chaos (see also Jhally,

1984; Roesnner, 2007). Other books dealt with the history of the BCS without answering this question (Watterson, 2000; Boyles and Guido, 2007; Dunnavant, 2004; DeVries, 2007; Lawhorne, 2009). For example, *Death to the BCS* by Wetzel, Peter and Passan (2010), was a strong statement of why the BCS needed to be replaced. However, the book was written by award-winning sportswriters, and it did not explain why the College Football Playoff was delayed to the greatest extent possible.

Resolution

As Habermas likely would have predicted, college football did not succumb to its multiple crises; it weathered them. The CFP began in January 2014 with a four-team tournament. As of 2021, the format has held. However, there are still some legitimacy concerns which do not rise to the level of a crisis.

With a four-team tournament, the teams not selected that were rated 5th or 6th usually complained about the selection process, though it is now in the hands of a human committee and not computers. Additionally, critics questioned if the last team in (the #4 seed) was truly a legitimate contender. The usual solution to this problem is bracket-creep, where the number of teams selected is gradually expanded over time. In 2021 there were discussions about increasing the number of teams in the CFP from 4 to 12. In this format, no team would be excluded for not being in one of the larger conferences, which would strike at the root of the fairness concerns - that all teams have access to the playoffs. Bracket creep typically leads to more bracket creep, especially if the last teams into the tournament do well. The FCS (formerly Division I-AA) bracket is now 24 teams, and while there are arguably fewer legitimacy concerns with this large a bracket, it does not eliminate all controversies. Teams may still complain of being treated unfairly (i.e., not being selected), even with this expanded format. When one of the last four teams in unexpectedly does well in the tournament, this success too can lead to calls for bracket expansion.

Suppose America continues to function as a neo-liberal advanced capitalist society – a likely scenario. If that is the case, college football will continue to function as a microcosm of American business trying to navigate the system and all its contradictions. If Habermas' perspective is correct, we could confidently predict that the conditions for more crises to evolve in college football will be present, regardless of the exact postseason tournament format chosen. It is possible that a legitimacy concern that emerged in 2021 may someday rise to the level of a crisis. The U.S. Supreme Court on June 21 ruled that college athletes should have the privilege of being paid for their services above the usual room, board, and academic scholarship. If the BCS controversy serves as a lesson, the NCAA will drag its feet on paying the players more than what they now receive for as long as it can (e.g., by a direct stipend arrangement). Habermas would predict that the crisis will not be fatal, but there will be consequences. College football will limp on until the problem is solved.

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