When Capital Masquerades as Football

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Football might be touted as the social unifier by the dominant powers, but in reality it is the site of the most violent social divisions and ensuing protest movements. To cede spaces of football to the forces of capital will be to let go of these very forces of struggle.

As we review the 2014 World Cup in Brazil, we ought to remember the massive protests against the human costs of staging the World Cup. Being a part of global capital, it produces inequality, and cultural homogenisation on a global scale. While its top end floats in money, the bottom end is characterised by low wages and poor working conditions. Capital masquerades as football when the underbelly is rendered invisible by the agents of capital, who seek to project the top end of the industry as its dominant face.

The Alliance with Capital

Football’s links with capital have developed hand in hand with the larger shifts in the global political economy. In the days of the welfare state and regulated domestic markets, there was a maximum wage ceiling of £20 in the first division of the English football league, which was the average wage for a British worker at that time. The ceiling remained in place till 1961, and was undone by the threat of a players’ strike. However, wage caps and widespread restrictions on the number of foreign players in European football leagues did not stop the growth of an international labour market with western Europe as its nerve centre. Football migration from Africa to western Europe began to increase (Alegi 2010: 78-104). Africa supplied the raw material; Europe manufactured the product and earned the profits. For instance, the Portuguese managed to recruit Eusebio from Mozambique, their colony, for the Portuguese national team. His performances for Portugal, and for the Portuguese club SL Benfica, were instrumental in earning global recognition for Portuguese football.

The 1960s witnessed the assertion of third world countries; in the United Nations as well as in the Federation Internationale de Football Association (FIFA), the governing body of world football. With their emergence as a voting bloc, Joao Havalange of Brazil launched a successful bid for the post of the FIFA President in 1974 with the express agenda of accommodating third world interests and taking the game to new frontiers. FIFA’s
expansion plans were tied to that of the global multinational corporations Coca Cola and Adidas right from the beginning. Havalange needed money to fulfill his election promises: an expanded World Cup to accommodate 24 teams instead of 16 (as was the case till 1970), and new tournaments like the FIFA Youth World Cup. Coca Cola and Adidas emerged as willing sponsors (Darby 2002). Football’s alliance with capital, mediated through television, was to blossom in the coming years. By the 1986 World Cup in Mexico, advertisement and television rights had replaced the returns from ticket sales as the mainstay of FIFA’s revenues (Homburg 2008: 33-69). The World Cup was soon taken to new locales to expand nascent markets – USA (1994), Japan and South Korea (2002) and presumably Qatar (2022) – and the revenues of FIFA as well as that of its sponsors steadily increased. For instance, FIFA ended the year 2002 with a revenue surplus of USD 131 million (115 CHF), while the 2010 World Cup in South Africa propelled FIFA to a revenue surplus of USD 202 million at the end of 2010 (FIFA Financial Reports 2002-2013).

In the early 90s, as an expansive market for football came within sight, the Union of European Football Associations (UEFA) and the richest European clubs like Real Madrid CF of Spain and AC Milan of Italy, began to work together to maximise their profits by restructuring the European Cup. Rebranded as the UEFA Champions League in 1992, with centralised distribution of broadcast revenues and larger share of the seats for the leading national leagues (England, Spain, Italy, Holland, France and Portugal), it enabled the leading clubs (all from the leading national leagues) to corner the maximum profits (Thompson et al 2003, Millward 2006: 199-216). This resulted in the monopoly of the big clubs over the production and distribution of “quality football”, showcased in the Champions League, as they were now financially powerful enough to pull the best playing and coaching talents from all over the world towards them. Consequently, unlike in the old European Cup, no club outside the leading leagues has won the competition or even provided a team in the semi-final on a regular basis.

Lost Art, Unfulfilled Dreams

The concentration of wealth in a few European clubs of Spain, England and Italy has drawn the best playing and coaching talents from all parts of the world towards them. Consequently, these clubs have a monopoly over the production and distribution of “quality” football. This has had a detrimental effect on other football cultures, reconfiguring them as the periphery of global football. Whatever the circumstances of initiation in different parts of the world, football has historically allowed different styles – art forms, indeed – to grow and prosper. The styles often shared a deep organic link with the societies that produced them. For example, the compulsion of barefoot football in Africa (no money to buy boots!) inspired a specific style of capturing the ball without colliding with the opponent (Alegi 2010: 68). Capital has weakened that organic link and integrated them into new “global” networks – with western Europe as the centre. Football styles have consequently been homogenised. Brazil provides an obvious example.
With players migrating to European clubs in their early twenties, the trickster-like, artistic, flowing football of Brazil has been all but relegated to the past (Brazilian Sensation 2013). The world saw such football from Brazil for the last time in the 1982 World Cup while they won their last two World Cups (1994 and 2002) by beating teams on brilliant moments, like any other good team, rather than on the flow of the game. Who knows which football (read art) tradition in which unknown community is dying a silent death in some other corner of the world as the European powerhouses are busy homogenising the game?

The defenders of the present global football order proudly claim that the migration to European clubs have led to the equalisation in the performances of the national teams, as players from traditionally weaker football traditions have learnt the art from the traditionally powerful cultures while playing for their clubs. This hardly holds true for Latin American players; vibrant football cultures in their countries have historically enabled them to beat European teams with ease. Asian and African teams have flattered to deceive. Talented players migrating to European clubs often end up playing for their adopted countries, while the prominence of Europe leads to overdependence on European managers constraining the growth of indigenous coaching talents and playing styles. African and Asian dreams of equality have remained unfulfilled.

**Insecurity, Exploitation, Alienation**

Of course the commercialisation of football has enabled upward economic mobility for many African players. Yet that does not tell the whole story about the third world experience of globalisation of football. While the top end of the industry provides gigantic salaries and “star” social status to the players, the bottom rungs are characterised by blatant exploitation. It was estimated that in 2010 around 20,000 young west African players were stranded throughout Europe – trafficked there by predatory agents who had promised them contracts with big European teams and then abandoned them (Van Zeller 2010). In 2013, a young Nigerian footballer, Adegbola Ayomide Idowu, suffered the same fate supposedly en-route to the relatively poor football league of India, the I-League, and remained stranded in New Delhi for months. Stories such as these emerge regularly from different parts of the world (Bhattacharya 2013).

The “kafala system” prevalent in Qatar and Saudi Arabia provides another example of such exploitation. Under the system, employers can easily detain their employees by denying them exit permits. Recruitment agencies often dupe migrant workers, including footballers, who are then trapped for years. Throughout 2012 and ‘13, Zahir Belounis, a French footballer, remained stranded at Doha in Qatar as his club Al-Jaish had refused to grant him an exit permit over a pay dispute. No one is bothered about what happens to the less talented or less fortunate practitioners of the beautiful game. While the football discourse is dominated by the top end that produce “quality” football, evils prevalent at the bottom end
remain the great unspoken of global football.

Exploitation, though less blatant, is prevalent in the top rungs too. Players and managers are often victims of the authoritarian behavior of those who run the club. However the stakes aren’t too high in the top tier as the victims are always “good enough” to be absorbed somewhere else in the industry. The League Managers’ Associations in England, for example, limit themselves to expressing “disappointment” about the way managers are removed from their jobs. Despite widespread discussions about unfair treatment of managers and players in the football clubs, the industry today remains largely immune to radical activism through the players unions or otherwise.

**Football Politics**

While selectively utilising the political possibilities that football embodies by virtue of its universal appeal, the agents of global capital set limits to politics in and around the game whenever their football empire faces a threat. Over the last ten years the FIFA and the regional football associations have promoted the use of football for "social development". For example, in 2007, FIFA and the football governing bodies of North/Central and Latin America signed a Memorandum of Understanding with the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) to jointly invest in projects for “the development of life skills among youth, violence prevention and the improvement of education and employment opportunities.” Such efforts, though valuable in themselves, do help to draw attention away from the culpability of FIFA and the big clubs for unjust labour practices that often create the exact problems that the football powers hope to partially solve through football. While FIFA and the International Labour Organization (ILO) have vowed to waive a “red card to child labor”, Nike and Adidas, widely known to indulge in such practices continue to sponsor the industry with ILO monitoring systems playing a questionable role in combating exploitative labor practices in sweatshops (Ross 2004: 88-89). Manchester United FC has violated its original customer charter, which explicitly opposes child labor and other illegal labour practices, to continue its association with Nike, Adidas and their likes (Ross 2004: 92-98). What about the “social development” of the young people who such practices victimise?

Brazil 2014 has exposed the hypocrisy more clearly than ever. We’ve been told that football must be played even when it stands in the way of wider efforts for “social development”. When the protestors in Brazil argued that the World Cup was taking away the money required for improving health and education facilities, the FIFA President asked them not to use football to voice their protests. Football politics played by the protestors had crossed the limit earmarked by the football powers; hence the outright criminalisation and the desperation to render them invisible.

While the power brokers promote football as an agent of hope, peace and unification, it remains the site where social divisions are manifested in the most violent fashion. The
solution is simple: eliminate the “lower class” fans likely to foment trouble. The “clean up”
act merely shifts the tensions out of the high profile stadia, not out of football, so that
“quality football” in pristine settings can be beamed worldwide. For instance, the iconic
Maracana stadium of Rio de Janerio reconstructed for the World Cup (in line with FIFA
directives) has removed the “geral” — the cheap standing area occupied by Rio’s most
ardent football fans (Birkbeck et al 2014). Far from the glare of the World Cup, fan violence
continues unchecked (Novoa 2013, Wells 2014).

**Oppositional Practices**

Away from the manicured world of mainstream football, there have been scattered efforts to
constitute alternative football cultures in the recent past. Republican Internationale FC,
based at Leeds in England, calls itself a “socialist football team” and uses only fair trade
sports goods, including footballs, whenever possible. In 2005, they vowed never to buy from
corporate giants like Nestle, McDonald’s, Nike, or Coca Cola. In 1998, the club participated
in an Alternative World Cup that featured ideologically like-minded teams from across
Europe, including Germany, Belgium, Poland, Lithuania and Britain (Kuhn 2011: 203-210).
Initiatives like this call for support and imaginative replications.

In 1984, when Brazil was ruled by a military dictator, Sport Club Corinthians Paulista of Sao
Paolo witnessed a movement for democracy – both within and outside the game. Some if its
members initiated the Corinthians Democracy to undo the authoritarian structures within
the club: the democratic practice of employing polls to decide everything concerning the
group. Corinthians won the state championship in 1982 with “Democracia” printed on their
shirts and before the 1983 state championship final the whole team paraded around the
pitch with a banner that stated: winning or losing, but always with democracy. The
movement, calling for democracy both in the football world and in wider society, became a
part of the struggle to end dictatorial rule in Brazil. Socrates, one of its leaders, became an
icon of democracy (Knijnik 2014: 635-654).

To cede the space of football to the forces of capital is to let go of an arena of struggle that
has a global resonance today. Inspired by Brazil 2014, organisations the world over,
including some in India, have taken up the dark side of football as the subject of political
action. In India, for example, a left-wing students’ organisation called the Peoples’
Democratic Students’ Front (PDSF) organised a demonstration of solidarity with the Brazil
protests at the College Square in Kolkata on 16 June 2014. Not that they hate football, but
they don’t see it separate from life. After all, as Socrates, the leader of Brazil and
Corinthians once said, “My political victories are more important than my victories as a
professional player. A match finishes in 90 minutes, but life goes on.” (Meenaghan 2014)

**References**


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