

Football: a dear friend to capitalism

The World Cup is another setback to any radical change. The opium of the people is now football



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If the Cameron government is bad news for those seeking radical change, the World Cup is even worse. It reminds us of what is still likely to hold back such change long after the coalition is dead. If every rightwing thinktank came up with a scheme to distract the populace from political injustice and compensate them for lives of hard labour, the solution in each case would be the same: football. No finer way of resolving the problems of capitalism has been dreamed up, bar socialism. And in the tussle between them, football is several light years ahead.

Modern societies deny men and women the experience of solidarity, which football provides to the point of collective delirium. Most car mechanics and shop assistants feel shut out by high culture; but once a week they bear witness to displays of sublime artistry by men for whom the word genius is sometimes no mere hype. Like a jazz band or drama company, football blends dazzling individual talent with selfless teamwork, thus solving a problem over which sociologists have long agonised. Co-operation and competition are cunningly balanced. Blind loyalty and internecine rivalry gratify some of our most powerful evolutionary instincts.

The game also mixes glamour with ordinariness in subtle proportion: players are hero-worshipped, but one reason you revere them is because they are alter egos, who could easily be you. Only God combines intimacy and otherness like this, and he has long been overtaken in the celebrity stakes by that other indivisible One, José Mourinho.

In a social order denuded of ceremony and symbolism, football steps in to enrich the aesthetic lives of people for whom Rimbaud is a cinematic strongman. The sport is a matter of spectacle but, unlike trooping the colour, one that also invites the intense participation of its onlookers. Men and women whose jobs make no intellectual demands can display astonishing erudition when recalling the game's history or dissecting individual skills. Learned disputes worthy of the ancient Greek forum fill the stands and pubs. Like Bertolt Brecht's theatre, the game turns ordinary people into experts.

This vivid sense of tradition contrasts with the historical amnesia of postmodern culture, for which everything that happened up to 10 minutes ago is to be junked as antique. There is even a judicious spot of gender-bending, as players combine the power of a wrestler with the grace of a ballet dancer. Football offers its followers beauty, drama, conflict, liturgy, carnival and the odd spot of tragedy, not to mention a chance to

travel to Africa and back while permanently legless. Like some austere religious faith, the game determines what you wear, whom you associate with, what anthems you sing and what shrine of transcendent truth you worship at. Along with television, it is the supreme solution to that age-old dilemma of our political masters: what should we do with them when they're not working?

Over the centuries, popular carnival throughout Europe, while providing the common people with a safety valve for subversive feelings – defiling religious images and mocking their lords and masters – could be a genuinely anarchic affair, a foretaste of a classless society.

With football, by contrast, there can be outbreaks of angry populism, as supporters revolt against the corporate fat cats who muscle in on their clubs; but for the most part football these days is the opium of the people, not to speak of their crack cocaine. Its icon is the impeccably Tory, slavishly conformist Beckham. The Reds are no longer the Bolsheviks. Nobody serious about political change can shirk the fact that the game has to be abolished. And any political outfit that tried it on would have about as much chance of power as the chief executive of BP has in taking over from Oprah Winfrey.

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