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Football isn't just about capitalism

Terry Eagleton is wrong to dismiss football as a capitalist plot. We love sport because, at its best, it rises to the level of art

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The USA's Tommie Smith and John Carlos at the 1968 Olympics. Photograph: AP

Terry Eagleton has been one of the great minds of the European left seemingly since Cromwell. But in his recent piece on *Comment is free*, [Football: A Dear Friend to Capitalism](#), his absence of understanding on the relationship between sport and modern society demands a response.

Eagleton writes: "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."

He continues, that "for the most part football these days is the opium of the people, not to speak of their crack cocaine". And finally he hammers home: "Nobody serious about political change can shirk the fact that the game has to be abolished."

This message is an old trope for the left and so musty that reading Eagleton's column seemed to kick up dust from my computer screen. Those of us who love sport must also be hoodwinked. We must be bamboozled. Are we just addicts permanently distracted from what "really matters" as we engage in a pastime with no redeeming value? This is elitist hogwash.

We don't love sport because we are like babies suckling at the teat of constant distraction. We love it because it's exciting, interesting and at its best, rises to the level of art. Maybe Lionel Messi or Mia Hamm are actually brilliant artists who capture people's best instincts because they are inspired. By rejecting football, Eagleton also rejects what is both human and remarkable in physical feats of competition. We can stand in awe of the pyramids while understanding the slave labour and misery that comprised its construction. We can stir our soul with gospel music even while we understand that its existence owes itself to pain as much as hope. Similarly, amid the politics and pain that engulf and sometimes threaten to smother professional sport, there is also an art that can take your breath away.

But like all art, sport at its essence – what attracts us to it in the first place – holds within it a view of human potential unshackled, of what we could all be in a society that didn't grind us into dust. Yes, far too many of us watch instead of play. But that's not the fault of sport. For our current society is but a fleeting epoch in history. But sports spans ages, and to reject it is to reject our very history as a species.

We now know that as soon as human beings could clothe and feed themselves, they played. Sports is as human an act as music, dance, or organising resistance. While sports may in a vacuum have no "significance", the passion we invest transforms it. Sport morphs into something well beyond escape or a vessel for backward ideas and becomes a meaningful part in the fabric of our lives. Just as sports such as football reflect our society, they also reflect struggle.

Therefore, when we think about the black freedom struggle, our mind's eye sees Jackie Robinson and Muhammad Ali. The story of the modern women's movement is incomplete without mention of Billie Jean King's defeat of the male chauvinist Bobby Riggs. It explains why the Algerian football team was motivated to outplay England after watching Pontecorvo's anti-imperialist classic, The Battle of Algiers. And, of course, one of the most stirring sights of our sport in the last century: Tommie Smith and John Carlos's black-gloved podium salute at the 1968 Olympics.

Sport is, at the end of the day, like a hammer. And you can use a hammer to bash someone over the head or you could use it to construct something beautiful. It's in the way that you use it. It can be brutal. It can be ugly. But it also has an unbelievable potential to bring us together, to provide health, fun, enjoyment, and of course pulse-racing excitement.

Eagleton, who has written extensively about Marx, would do well to remember his maxim: "Nothing human is alien to me." This latest polemic is more about Eagleton's alienation than our own.

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