

Some thoughts on the France 98 World Cup

Robert Stevens
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The World Cup, which concluded on July 12, hosted the largest number of football teams ever assembled. Altogether 32 sides from every corner of the globe participated in *France 98*. An estimated 80 percent of the world's population watched the competition, with the games being seen by a cumulative television audience of 37 billion people. The World Cup final held on July 12 attracted the largest TV audience in history.

A number of striking paradoxes are presented in reviewing the event. Perhaps the most glaring is the number of 'foreign' players which can now be seen in most of the major club sides all over the world. Today it is not possible for any club to survive at the highest level without calling on the ability of such international footballers. Yet every four years these same players are marshalled into national teams in order to do battle to 'prove' the superiority of one country's football over another.

The tournament, presented as a competition for a prestigious trophy, is also an arena in which major transnational corporations launch their own struggle for world supremacy.

Internationally, the sportswear industry is worth some £30 billion. Commenting on the importance of the World Cup to their marketing strategy, Adidas spokesman Peter Csanadi said, 'The World Cup is not a destination for us, it is a milestone. When the circus leaves town we are going to stay.'

France 98 had 12 official sponsors who spent an estimated £257 million for the privilege of being associated with the event. The sportswear manufacturer Nike declined to be an official sponsor and instead sponsored the national teams of Italy, Holland, Nigeria, and South Korea. Nike's main rival, Adidas, sponsored Germany, France, Spain, Argentina and Romania.

The most controversial of these deals was Nike's \$400 million contract with the Brazilian team, the most lucrative sports sponsorship ever. It gives Nike unprecedented authority over Brazilian football. The deal requires Brazil to play five matches a year for Nike, with the company promoting and owning the TV rights to the games. It has been alleged that a player was chosen for Brazil's World Cup

squad simply because he had just negotiated a Nike contract.

The violence at *France 98*

The organisers of *France 98* claimed that football had shed its 'hooligan' image. However the tournament was marred by pitched battles between rival supporters, as well as with the police. Though the violence involved a minority of supporters, many more were swept along by the nationalist fervour.

The behaviour of English hooligans dominated the early tournament, until June 21 when more than 1,000 German supporters, hundreds of them members of fascist organisations, fought with police in the town of Lens before and during the Germany/Yugoslavia game. One gang beat a gendarme with iron bars and left him dying in pool of blood.

The violent scenes of this World Cup are not new. Just two years ago the European championship soccer tournament held in England saw an unprecedented display of xenophobia in the British tabloid press. Opponents of the England team were insulted in war-like language. The German team bore the brunt of this abuse, with the game between England and Germany being played in an atmosphere of constant references to the Second World War and Germany's defeat: 'Achtung Surrender!' and 'Let's Blitz the Fritz' being just two examples. The tournament saw numerous outbreaks of fighting by England supporters. At *France 98* the game between England and Argentina was similarly presented by sections of the press as a rerun of the Falklands/Malvinas war.

Nationalism as the cornerstone of modern sport

With the election of the Labour government last year, the term 'Cool Britannia' was coined to describe the creation of a new national cultural renaissance that supposedly stripped nationalism and patriotism of its imperialist trappings. The Blair government and the media, who took up this nonsense, reacted with horror to the violence of the England supporters. They claim that it is not possible to fathom the cause of such behaviour.

In the face of this hand wringing it was left to an arch-right-wing former Tory government minister, Alan Clark, to state the obvious. In belligerent tones he praised the 'martial spirit' of those involved in fighting 'foreign riot police' and other supporters. He defended his statements by explaining that violence was 'endemic' in games such as soccer, and that 'football matches are now the modern equivalents of the medieval tournaments.'

Clark sees the violence as something virtuous, which is to be celebrated and encouraged. However, in his description of modern sport's function as a bastion of national rivalry, he is essentially correct. This is not a new phenomenon but is bound up with the development of competitive sport in the era of the creation of the modern nation states in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

The English writer George Orwell made astute and timely comments on the origins and nature of modern sport in his essay, 'The Sporting Spirit', written in December 1945.

Orwell's essay was penned on the occasion of a tour of Britain by Dynamo Moscow, a Russian football team, following the Second World War. The tour was marred by mutual hostility between the teams involved, and the games were generally violent affairs. The writer sought to explain how it was that sport is the arena for such animosity, even among teams from two countries who had been allies in the war.

'Nearly all sports practised nowadays are competitive. You play to win, and the game has little meaning unless you do your utmost to win. On the village green, where you pick up sides and no feeling of local patriotism is involved, it is possible to play simply for the fun and exercise: but as soon as the question of prestige arises, as soon as you feel that you and some larger unit will be disgraced if you lose, the most savage combative instincts are aroused.... At the international level sport is simply mimic warfare. But the significant thing is not the behaviour of the players but the attitude of the spectators: and behind the spectators, of the nations who work themselves into furies over these absurd contests, and seriously believe--at any rate for short periods--that running, jumping and kicking a ball are tests of national virtue.

'Serious sport has nothing to do with fair play. It is bound up with hatred, jealousy, boastfulness, disregard of all rules and sadistic pleasure in witnessing violence; in other words war minus shooting.

'Instead of blah-blahing about the clean, healthy rivalry of the football field and the great part played by the Olympic Games in bringing the nations together, it is more useful to inquire how and why this modern cult of sport arose. Most of the games we now play are of ancient origins but sport does not seem to have been taken very seriously between

Roman times and the 19th century ... there cannot be much doubt that the whole thing is bound up with the rise of nationalism--that is the lunatic modern habit of identifying oneself with large power units and seeing everything in terms of competitive prestige' (*Collected Essays, journalism and letters of George Orwell*, volume 4, 1945-1950, Penguin Publishers, pp. 62-3).

The Federation of International Football Associations (FIFA), football's governing body, devised the World Cup ostensibly to bring nations together through an international soccer tournament. Calling for the competition to be established, FIFA President Jules Rimet said in 1926 that, 'Soccer could reinforce the ideals of a permanent and real peace.' The inaugural World Cup was held in 1930.

While these sentiments were most likely genuine, the very concept of organised sporting competitions between nations mitigates against such unity. These tournaments could not be, and are not, separate from the society in which they arise. One of the most infamous sporting events of the twentieth century was the 1936 Olympic games held in Berlin, Germany under the auspices of Hitler's Nazi regime. Those games were overtly political and used to promote and encourage nationalism and xenophobia.

Today there are definite historical parallels to the 1930s. A number of the games at *France 98*, such as the USA/Iran fixture and England/Argentina, were deliberately built up as political events. Similarly, the intervention of fascist gangs into the World Cup is symptomatic of the resurgence of extreme nationalism in a whole series of countries.



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