

GLOBAL LESSONS FROM THE BEAUTIFUL GAME

INTRODUCTION

In the book *Salsa, sabor y control, Sociología de la música tropical*, author Ángel Quintero Rivera (1998) presents the “contribution of the Caribbean to the happiness of the world” through its music. The same thing could be stated of South American football. Argentina, Brazil, and Uruguay embraced soccer⁴⁴ as part of the wave of globalization, port and rail construction, and immigration that swept the Southern Cone in the final decades of the nineteenth century. The creoles adapted and innovated the sport, with skilled passing and less dribbling, and by the 1920s Uruguay was the global power, subsequently joined by Argentina and Brazil as global leaders. These three countries have won 9 of 19 World Cups, 2 each by Argentina and Uruguay and 5 by Brazil.⁴⁵ To this stunning record we should add that Argentina and Brazil have also contested three World Cup finals: 12 of the 19 World Cup finals have featured one of these three South American countries. How is it that Uruguay, with a population of just over three million, was and is now again a global soccer power? What could larger countries with growing soccer fandom, such as the United States, India, or China, learn from South America?

44 While we prefer the word football to soccer, we use soccer in this chapter because of the quotations and language comparing football and soccer in the United States.

45 Uruguay was also Olympic champion on two occasions, 1924 and 1928, when the Olympics were regarded as the only world championship. In actuality, therefore, this tiny country, one-third the territorial size of Spain, with one-sixteenth the population of Spain, was the world champion on four occasions.

Indeed, what political lessons can we glean from Southern Cone soccer? There are few scholarly works that explore the sporting, political, and social lessons of this hegemonic sport, in part because social scientists traditionally have not systematically studied the phenomenon. Progressive intellectuals have largely decried the effect of soccer as the opiate of the masses and the principal source of alienation from politics and a distraction from the problems of corruption, inequality, poverty, and authoritarianism. For the rest of academia, soccer was a pastime, the domain of journalists and not serious academics. This dynamic is currently undergoing a radical change, as sociologists and political scientists are beginning to systematically examine the role of sport in general, and soccer in particular, in power dynamics, identity politics, civil society, corruption, organized violence, electoral politics, gender relations, and country branding.⁴⁶

This chapter examines two principal lessons from soccer in Latin America. The first is the limits of sport as the opiate of the masses. Since Roman times, critics have observed that political elites with large masses of poor and deprived citizens could ensure security and eliminate political violence and unrest through “bread and circuses.” One must merely keep the people fed and distracted by passionate entertainment in order to maintain privilege and power. In fact, 2013 was a watershed year in Argentina and Brazil for both the transparent attempts by political elites to use soccer as a distraction from political crises and the reaction from the population to these attempts.

The second lesson takes the example of Uruguay as the greatest per-capita soccer power in the history of the game, exploring precisely how the waves of Uruguayan soccer success occurred and providing a roadmap for other potential soccer powers to follow. Can Canada, China, India, Russia, or the United States, with a combined population of some three billion, learn enough from a country of some three million to someday challenge for a World Cup championship?

10.1. THE LIMITS OF CIRCUSES AND OPIATES

Journalists and academics have been charging politicians with using soccer as a political distraction for decades. Steve Bloomfield (2010) reveals the naked attempt by national rulers on the African continent to use the “beautiful game” for political ends. Franklin Foer (2004) vividly describes the use of soccer to boost ethno-nationalism and ethnic cleansing in Serbia. And in *Football and Fascism: The National Game under Mussolini*, Simon Martin (2004) argues persuasively that the Italian fascists used soccer stadia, Italy’s success in the 1934 and 1938 World Cups, and the love of the game by the masses to create Italian national identity, shape public opinion, and reinforce conformity. The military junta in Brazil meddled in the team’s composition to shape public opinion in 1970. Juan Domingo Perón was active in stadium construction and keeping the Argentines out of international competition in an effort to maintain his

⁴⁶ See, for example, several works by Pablo Alabarces (2003; 2008) in Argentina and Ronaldo Helal (1997) in Brazil.

own public support. Most famously, the Argentine military junta in 1978 held a World Cup championship during some of the most violent days of the Dirty War and orchestrated an Argentine victory in search of political support and legitimacy. When Argentina won what was their first World Cup in 1978, both torturers and those that they tortured (and would perhaps later disappear) put aside their violent differences and celebrated arm in arm.

In the build-up to the 2010 World Cup in South Africa, Terry Eagleton (2010) voiced his complaint:

If every rightwing think-tank 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. . . . Football offers its followers beauty, drama, conflict, liturgy, carnival and the odd spot of tragedy. . . . 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?. . . . Football these days is the opium of the people, not to speak of their crack cocaine. (n.p.)

The global importance of the beautiful game and its importance for local and national identity make soccer more likely than any other sport to be an opiate. While some 160 million people watch the U.S. Super Bowl, some 800 million watch a regular-season game between Barcelona and Real Madrid, and some 32 billion cumulative viewers watched the 2008 World Cup in Germany.

If soccer were an opiate around the rest of the world, then it would be crack in the Southern Cone. Soccer is, for these countries, what Markovits and Rensmann (2010) refer to as the hegemonic sports culture that fills most of the sports space and is a subject of a large percentage of daily conversations. In Brazil—in addition to a 38-game national first division *Brasileirão* or national championship, the South American Cup, the Libertadores Cup all for club teams, and the international games for the multiple national teams—there are the state and regional championships. Brazilians are bombarded with more televised soccer games than any other people.⁴⁷ Brazil also boasts the most World Cup titles and is, by any measure, a soccer-crazy country.

No city, however, can compare to Buenos Aires for soccer passion. As documented by Gaffney (2009) the combination of neighborhood identity and politics produced a city with 69 professional soccer stadiums, more than any other city on the planet. In Argentina, first Diego Maradona and now Lionel Messi are referred to as lesser gods. Rabid fans of Maradona started the Maradona Church, with its own commandments,

47 In Brazil the weeknight soccer games are televised at 10 pm, so that Brazilians can watch the other opiate of the people, the television soap operas or *telenovelas*.



Figure 10.1: Diego Maradona at First National Team Game.

chants, and Christmas (Maradona's birthday of October 30, 1960). The church also uses the neo-tetragrammaton DIOS to refer to the soccer star, fusing the Spanish word for god (*dios*) with Maradona's kit number (10). The commandments include: 2) Love football over all things; 3) Defend the colors of Argentina; and 9) Let Diego be your second name and that of your children. And the "Our Diego" chant states,

Our Diego, who is on the pitches,
 Hallowed by thy left hand, bring us your magic. Make your goals
 remembered on earth as in heaven,
 Give us some magic every day, forgive the English, as we have forgiven the
 Neapolitan Mafia,
 Don't let yourself get caught offside and free us from Havelange and Pelé.⁴⁸

48 Maradona scored the "hand of God" goal against the English in the 1986 World Cup that was won by Argentina. Fans accuse the Neapolitan mafia of conspiring against Maradona. João de Havelange (b. 1916) was the Brazilian president of FIFA, and Pelé (b. 1940) is the long-time Maradona rival from Brazil.

These two cases, Argentina and Brazil, are what political scientist Harry Eckstein (1975) refers to as the “most likely cases” for exhibiting the power of bread and circuses through soccer. Consequently, if we can establish the limits of soccer as an opiate of the masses in these most likely cases, then the claims of the strong relationship are exaggerated and undermined.

The summer of 2013 provides unique test cases of the limits of sports as a distraction from politics in both Argentina and Brazil. The case of Argentina is framed by a decision by the Argentine state to nationalize the televising of the professional soccer leagues. Until 2009, Argentine First Division games were televised as cable or pay-per-view by a private company, *Torneos y Competencias* (TyC), a company controlled by enemies of the ruling Kirchner governments. In July 2009, the Argentine government of Cristina Kirchner voided the contract and decreed that all games would be shown live on free public television. Watching soccer, the government said, should not be an activity only for those who can pay; soccer is a human right in Argentina, and it should be accessible and free to every citizen. The new television program would be known as “Soccer for Everyone” (*Futbol para Todos*), and the First Division championship would now be known as the *Torneo Nestor Kirchner*, named for Cristina Kirchner’s late husband and former president of the republic. The televising of the second and third divisions of Argentine soccer has also been nationalized in the *Futbol para Todos* program. The games are shown sequentially from Friday to Monday, so that no two first-division games are shown at the same time. An Argentine has the right to watch every first division game for free!

The nationalization of soccer has been highly controversial. Opponents argue that taxpayers are underwriting not only popular entertainment and undermining market forces, but also providing a space for government propaganda. Nearly all of the advertisement in “Soccer for Everyone” is from and for the government. Supporters claim that the private broadcasters were abusing the soccer teams and the population with high prices to viewers and low payments to the league, that all citizens have the right to see soccer, and that the subsidy of the government is less than US\$1 per viewer, who are largely working class, while the taxpayers subsidize the elitist Colón opera house in Buenos Aires with more than US\$200 per spectator, who are largely elites.

The objective of the Kirchner government to use soccer as the opiate of the masses was never fully transparent until June 2013, when the government attempted to directly use soccer to undermine criticism of the government. Why did that happen and who won?

In April 2012, celebrated journalist Jorge Lanata started a satirical yellow-journalism weekly television show named “Journalism for Everyone,” a clear play on words against “Soccer for Everyone.” Week after week, the popular and talented Lanata would combine satire, stand-up comedy, and scandal-probing investigative journalism in an attempt to undermine the Kirchner presidency and expose corruption and misdeeds by Cristina Kirchner, the late Nestor Kirchner, and anyone associated with the government. Lanata’s show is a mixture of similar shows in the U.S. hosted by Stephen Colbert and Glenn Beck. “Journalism for Everyone” became more and more popular with each new scandal, and the charges, often with limited evidence beyond the testimony of a single guest or two, would be supported with carefully timed reports

in the major newspapers (*Clarín* and *La Nación*) that are unflinchingly critical of the government. The scandals included that the Kirchners had a huge vault of money hidden under one of their houses, that the vice-president was corrupt, and that governors associated with the Kirchners are feudal lords that abuse their own citizens.

By the southern hemisphere's autumn of 2013, the Kirchner government had reached its limit with the program and options were discussed to reduce the popularity, ratings, and influence of Lanata. Soccer was selected as the tool to reduce Lanata's viewers. There are plenty of popular soccer teams in Argentina, but the two largest teams with the biggest national fan bases are Boca Juniors and River Plate. Consequently, these two teams pull the highest ratings on "Soccer for Everyone." These two teams were integral to the government's plan.

The Argentine government informed the Argentine Football Association that it was to schedule the prime game for May 26, 2013 (Boca Juniors vs. Newells Old Boys) to begin at 7:30 pm, precisely the starting time for Lanata's "Journalism for Everyone." A new competition, much greater and more interesting than a mere soccer game, was now on. Who would win between Cristina Kirchner and Lanata? How could Lanata compete with the biggest soccer club in Argentina, the legendary Boca Juniors? Could soccer be the opiate to distract the population from Lanata's effective and entertaining yellow journalism?

This became a major question in café conversations and in the press in the days leading up to the Sunday-evening showdown. Lanata, ever a brilliant showman, executed a perfect game plan. The stage for his show was decked out as a soccer pitch, the announcers were the former soccer announcers for TyC, and Lanata and his crew all dressed as soccer players. And what was the final score of this showdown? All of Argentina was waiting for ratings to be released on Monday, May 27. The final score in the ratings war was "Journalism for Everyone" 24.7 vs. "Soccer for Everyone" 17. But Cristina Kirchner is a fighter and does not easily throw in the towel, so she tried again the following week by scheduling River Plate vs. Argentinos Juniors opposite Lanata. Lanata won again, 21 to 18.5.

The Kirchner government continues to use "Soccer for Everyone" to maximize government support. In September 2013, a long-awaited first part of a long interview with Cristina Kirchner was broadcast on public television, with a ratings share of a mere 1.9. The government changed the soccer schedule for the following Sunday and scheduled the second part of the Cristina interview in between the Boca Juniors and the River Plate games, which improved the ratings but also increased the critiques. This case in Argentina demonstrates the continuing attempts and limitations of politicians harnessing soccer as an opiate of the masses. While Argentines are passionate and crazy for soccer, they are also sophisticated political thinkers and do not like being manipulated with the beautiful game.

The limitations of soccer as a distraction were also tested in Brazil in 2013. Brazil is hosting the greatest and most popular sporting event on the planet—the World Cup—in 12 cities in June and July 2014. Brazil previously hosted the World Cup in 1950, losing a final in front of 200,000 fans at the Maracanã stadium. While the country has won a record five World Cups, that defeat is still a burden to carry. As a test-run of a World Cup, a smaller but important competition known as the Confederations Cup

is held the year before in the host country. Eight national teams representing the different federations from around the world compete for the title and test the stadiums, infrastructure, and organization. Brazil has never won a Confederations Cup, and everyone knew that this would be a major event, held from June 15 to June 30, 2013.

Knowing that Brazilians would be focused on the Confederations Cup, government officials delayed the implementation of two unpopular policy issues until mid-June: increases in public transportation fares and a constitutional amendment known as the PEC 37. How successful was this plan of using soccer as a distraction? We explore this question below.

One of the major challenges for Brazilians is transportation. Subways are expensive and insufficient, public buses are crowded and expensive, and all surface transportation, including the huge numbers of first cars owned by the burgeoning middle class, often spends more time in traffic jams than moving. Several local governments announced bus and subway fare increases for early 2013. The national government of Dilma Rousseff, already facing criticism for the rising cost of living in Brazil, pressured those governments to delay fare increases until mid-June, during the Confederations Cup.

A second polemical issue that was also delayed until the Confederations Cup was the voting on the PEC 37. The PEC 37 is a constitutional amendment that would take away the Brazilian Public Ministry's authority to investigate corruption and other crimes committed by public officials, including elected officials. The Public Ministry is often referred to as the fourth branch of Brazilian government; it comprises independent public prosecutors who work at both the federal and state levels to investigate wrongdoing. The Public Ministry has brought charges against numerous officials, most notably the participants in the *Mensalão*⁴⁹ vote-buying scandal in 2005 that eventually led to convictions in 2012. The PEC 37 would not only eliminate the role of the Public Ministry in ongoing and future investigations of corruption, but would also provide impunity to those previously charged and convicted due to Public Ministry actions. The amendment would make corruption, already widespread in Brazil, that much easier and increase impunity by absolving the guilty from the *Mensalão*. It sailed through the committee process and was scheduled for what looked like a pro forma vote in the Congress in mid-June 2013.

Against this backdrop of the fare increases in transportation across Brazil, the impending vote of the PEC 37, and the glorious play of the title-winning Brazilian team in the Confederations Cup, the most unexpected thing happened. Brazilians initiated mass protests with millions of participants that exploded across the country. Ironically, the Confederations Cup, the upcoming World Cup, and the construction of the new soccer stadiums not only did not act as an opiate of the masses, but instead were kindling and gasoline for the political protests. The World Cup and the stadiums are examples of cost overruns, corruption, and diverting resources from transportation and health to unnecessary games and overpriced stadiums that would either end up as white elephants

49 *Mensalão*, or “big monthly,” was a scandal in which the Lula government paid national legislators large monthly payments to vote with the government.



Figure 10.2: Protestor in São Paulo, June 7, 2013.

Credit: Maria Objetiva. Licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-Share alike license (CC-BY-SA).

or privatized after being paid for by the taxpayer. Indeed, the stadiums are truly scandalous. For example, the World Cup stadium in Cuiabá will seat 43,000 when the average attendance for a soccer game in that city is 200. The Mané Garrincha stadium in Brasília was originally expected to cost US\$330 million but ended up costing US\$750 million. The stadium seats 70,000, while local professional soccer crowds average 1000. There is also a stadium in Manaus, a city that does not have high-level professional soccer. These excesses and abuses to the taxpayer go on and on and are documented by many, including Gaffney at “Hunting White Elephants” (Gaffney 2014).

Protestors booed the president of FIFA and the president of the country at the opening Confederations Cup game. Brazilians attempted to delay the playing of the games by blocking access to the stadiums. In direct protest of the PEC 37, protesters attempted to seize the national legislative palace in Brasília. Large-scale protests

continued from mid-June throughout the rest of the year. These protests had immediate effects in Brazil. Brazilians rarely protest in large numbers; in fact, the last such event was in 1989. Government officials, business leaders, international soccer officials at the World Cup, and those for the Olympics—Rio de Janeiro hosts the Olympics in 2016 and part of the 2013 protests were against the Olympic Games expenditures—are worried that the brand of these mega-events in particular, and Brazil more generally, will be extensively tarnished.

The two actions that were delayed until the expected Confederations Cup distraction were suddenly and unexpectedly impossible to pass. The Brazilian Congress, expected to rubber-stamp the PEC 37 before the protests, voted 430 against and only 9 for. Transportation fare increases were rolled back throughout the country. It is too soon to know the long-term transformations that will result from the mass protest movement. We can, however, conclude that the opiate effect of soccer was not obtained, and in fact the attempt of the government to use soccer as a distraction turned out to backfire and inflame the protest movement.

END OF EXCERPT