

# Football Belongs to the People, Not Plutocrats

By [Ian Buruma](#)

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Who would have thought it?

There they were, Brazilians, protesting outside football stadiums against their country hosting the World Cup in 2014 — and this even as their national team was thrashing Spain in the final of the Confederations Cup. It was as if Catholics were to protest outside the Vatican against picking a new Pope.

What cuisine is to the French, football is to Brazilians: a matter of the highest national pride. Regardless of their economic, racial or political differences, all Brazilians are uplifted by having the best team in the world, winning the World Cup many times and inventing and reinventing "the beautiful game." Staging the next World Cup in Brazil, as well as the Olympic Games in 2016, even though the football tournament alone will cost up to \$13 billion, seems a logical move.

Rio de Janeiro is where football belongs.

So what possessed the 19-year-old Brazilian male who told reporters: "We don't need the World Cup. We need education, better health services and a more humane police." Many people feel the same way. Have millions of Brazilians suddenly lost their passion for the game?

If so, it is not the game itself that they have forsaken, but rather the kind of game that football has become: a billion-dollar business, a prestige object for louche plutocrats and an extravagant showpiece for corrupt governments and international sporting organizations.

Football was once a popular sport, rooted in local communities. Local working-class boys played for local clubs that inspired fierce loyalty among fans. Football chauvinism always contained an edge of violence, for it often included an ethnic, religious or class component:

- protestants versus Catholics in Scotland;
- "jewish" clubs in Amsterdam, Berlin, London and Budapest taunted by fans who opposed the "Yids";
- posh clubs like Galatasaray in Istanbul and resolutely proletarian sides, such as West Ham in London;
- clubs that took pride in a strong regional identity, such as Barcelona; and
- clubs that were close to the centers of power, such as Real Madrid.

Some clubs were financed by industrial corporations to promote loyalty among their workers. For example, Philips sponsored the Dutch club PSV Eindhoven, while Fiat played the same role for Italy's Juventus. But regardless of the sponsorship or the location, fans felt close to most of the clubs, as well as to their national teams. They were part of people's "identity."

This is still true to some extent, but something crucial has changed. Football, like other types of commerce, has gone global. Thanks to new ownership rules, cable television, product endorsements and other business-related factors, there are probably more supporters of Manchester United in China than there are in Britain itself, let alone in the city of Manchester. Football teams are now like multinational franchises, with coaches and players from all over the world.

But this alone does not account for the kind of alienation from the game expressed by the Brazilian protesters. The worldwide reach of football was preceded by that of the Olympic Games, and it is here where we should turn to understand the corruption of globalized sports.

Unlike football, the Olympics were always closely associated with elites: amateur athletes recruited from universities, and so on. The father of the modern Olympic Games, Baron de Coubertin, was a French aristocrat who promoted sports to reinvigorate the men of France after their defeat in the Franco-Prussian War of 1871. His aim for the Olympic Games was to embody a noble ideal of world peace and brotherhood through athletic competition.

How easily this ideal could be corrupted by distinctly ungentlemanly politics was already clear in 1936, when Coubertin's doddering speech about peace and fair play was played over the loudspeakers of the Olympic Stadium in Berlin, while Hitler and his henchmen raised their

arms to salute the Nazi flag.

But even without noisome politics, the sheer amount of money required to stage the Olympic Games — the building contracts for stadiums, transport infrastructure and hotels, together with all the other commercial razzmatazz — was bound to produce a culture of bribery and kickbacks. (The cost of the 2014 Winter Olympics in Sochi is expected to exceed a record \$50 billion, roughly 25 times more than the previous Winter Games in Vancouver.) An international elite of Olympic officials arose, living in a self-contained bubble of wealth and privilege.

I once had occasion to watch these men as they trooped in and out of first-class hotels in an Asian capital, sleek figures in gold-buttoned blazers. It was striking to see how often the most prosperous-looking representatives came from the world's poorest countries.

Football is now like the Olympics or Formula 1 racing, except that even more money is involved. Football clubs have become the status symbols of newly rich tycoons from Russia or the Middle East. Meanwhile, international competitions, especially the World Cup, have become occasions to bolster the prestige, and sometimes even the legitimacy, of national governments. Such events reinforce the tendency of modern political regimes, dictatorships as well as democracies, to measure themselves in monumental building projects — giant new stadiums, gargantuan shopping malls or huge conference halls — which are sometimes needed, but often are not.

As a result, developers, architects, politicians, tycoons and international sporting officials are now in charge of the beautiful game. This adds to their power, wealth and prestige. But once they have staged their spectacles, at vast expense to the host country, they move on. This is especially galling in countries where much of the population is poor and deprived of decent schools or proper medical services.

Millions of Brazilians have made clear where their priorities lie. They haven't fallen out of love with football. On the contrary, by protesting against the grotesque manipulation of the modern game, they are trying to take it back.

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