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Football As A Commons

Yavor Tarinski

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Football has been turned from a commons shared by everybody who loves and practices it, to big business put in service of profit. In this article, Yavor Tarinski describes alternative practices in which the sport has been run by players and fans through direct democratic self-management.

In his book *Football in Sun and in Shadow*, Eduardo Galeano pointed at the commercialization of the world's most famous sport and its detachment from the grassroots. In it he says that "when the sport became an industry, the beauty that blossoms from the joy of play, got torn out by its very roots. Professional football condemns all that is useless and useless means not profitable."¹ Once again we saw this in the 2014 World Cup in Brazil where modern football appeared for what it really is: a mechanism serving the logic of constant capital accumulation, aggressive towards those at the bottom who cannot afford to participate in this celebration of modern consumerist culture. It has been turned into spectacle, one more commodity in the shelves of the global supermarket, in which we can participate only as passive consumers.

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¹ Eduardo Galeano (1997): *Football in Sun and in Shadow*, Verso Books, 2003. p.30

But in contrast with many leftist intellectuals, for whom “football castrates the masses and derails their revolutionary ardor”, for Galeano it was rooted deeply at the bottom of society with potential to sparkle human imagination, blunted nowadays by bureaucratic logic. In his own words “for many years football has been played in different styles, unique expressions of the personality of each people, and the preservation of that diversity seems to me more necessary today than ever before.”² Antonio Negri points at another capacity of the most popular game: “the great merit of football lies in its ability to make people talk amongst each other”, which in my opinion is quite necessary in a period where alienation is degrading the social fabric.

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In this line of thought football can be viewed as a commons, shared by everybody who loves and practices it, However, there is now a fierce attempt of privatization of the sport. Though millions of people all around the world share passion for football, they do not have any influence upon their favorite teams. Instead they are being placed in the hands of corrupted football associations

² Eduardo Galeano (1997): *Football in Sun and in Shadow*, Verso Books, 2003. p.2

³ Ibid., p. 208

and federations which prioritize the maximization of profits which constantly produces scandals on huge scale like the latest scandal around the FIFA's president Sepp Blatter.

But even 27 years before these words of Galeano, during the events of May '68 in Paris, one of the first stands against the trend of bureaucratization and privatization of football was taken. While millions of workers were on strike, students had occupied the universities, the president had fled the country and France seemed on the verge of revolution, a group of football players occupied the headquarters of the French Football Federation for six days⁴. In their communiqué they acknowledged that football had been snatched away from the players and the fans and put in service of profit. They demanded the immediate dismissal of the profiteers of football through a referendum of all 600,000 French footballers.

Later on, during the late 70's in the Brazilian football club Corinthians the players decided to take in their own hands the team they played in. Motivated by Socrates⁵, the famous captain of the team during that period, the players started discussing and voting with a simple show of hands on all matters which affected them, from simple things like what time they would eat lunch to challenging the dreaded *concentração*, a common practice in Brazil where players are practically locked up in a hotel for one or two days before a game. One of the most notable decisions they made was, in 1982, having "Vote on 15th" printed on the back of their shirts to motivate fans to vote in the first Brazilian multiparty elections since the 1964 military coup. The model of self-management they created was called Corinthians Democracy (Democracia Corinthiana)⁶. However in this experiment, though the players had a say in what affected them, the fans were not involved in the democratic processes.

⁴ libcom.org

⁵ libcom.org

⁶ en.wikipedia.org

One example in which the management of a football club was put in the hands of the fans was the case of Ebbsfleet United, participating in the English Conference South. On 13 November 2007, it was announced that the website MyFootballClub (MyFC)⁷ had entered a deal to take over the club. Approximately 27,000 MyFC members gathered the necessary £700,000 (£35 per member) for the deal. All of the members owned an equal share in the club but made no profit nor received a dividend. The members had a vote on transfers, player selection, budget, ticket prices and all major decisions. Because of the democratic nature of MyFC, it was announced that manager Liam Daish instead would become head coach. His backroom staff remained at the club. Under this type of direct-democratic management by the fans, during the season 2008 Ebbsfleet Utd. won both the FA Trophy, becoming the first team from Kent to win it, and the local Kent Senior Cup.

On April 23rd 2013, after a dramatic decline in membership (from 32000 in its peak to just 1000), MyFC members had voted in favor of selling their shares of Ebbsfleet Utd. This decline in interest can be attributed to many factors, like the constant skepticism expressed by club officials blaming the website even for “damaging the club”⁸ or that it became a economic burden for some of its members during period of global financial crisis, or perhaps the fact that the members of the MyFC viewed this just as a hobby and did not link their democratic endeavor to a wider project for direct democracy that covers all spheres of social life.

In all of these cases we can find imperfections: in the first one, even though the role of the players was being extended beyond the football field, politicized and loaded with democratic characteristics, the fans remained out of the democratic processes. In the latter we see the opposite. However, they offer us invaluable experiences and models, which if combined, could give us a potential

⁷ en.wikipedia.org

⁸ news.bbc.co.uk

base for the de-privatization of football and its commonization. In order for such a project to be long-lasting, it should be linked to a wider project for social democratization. As Cornelius Castoriadis says, direct democracy cannot exist only in one public sphere, as the inequalities in the rest of them, caused by their non-democratic character, sooner or later will effect the former one⁹.

Therefore, the turning of football into a common, managed directly by the players and the fans, is a feasible possibility and has already been attempted. In the words of Eduardo Galeano: football “is much more than a big business run by overlords from Switzerland. The most popular sport in the world wants to serve the people who embrace it”.

⁹ www.athene.antenna.nl