



Sport Is the Opiate of the Masses:

Qatar, the World Cup, and the End of Football Activism

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Introduction

Sport is often lauded as a cure-all for society's problems. Speaking at the 2000 Laureus World Sports Awards, South African president Nelson Mandela declared that 'Sport has the power to change the world. It has the power to inspire. It has the power to Unite in a way that little else does. It speaks to youth in a language they understand. Sport can create hope where once there was only despair,' a quote regularly favoured by sports organisations when seeking increased funding and by various government ministers when justifying government spending on sports already rich in private resources. The author has even heard first hand a sports minister invoke this quote at the beginning of a short speech that ended with them proudly boasting of how they would like to compete against an opposition politician so that they could cause them serious physical harm! He left quickly afterwards in embarrassment.

The intention of this article is to highlight issues and topics in sport that Karl Marx may well have considered in his writings if he were alive or if sport had played the role in nineteenth-century society that it does today. It will focus on the upcoming Qatar World Cup and is intended to provide a snapshot of contemporary footballer activism and an assessment of the likelihood that footballers will utilise their *power to unite* and *change the world*.¹ The examples and predictions put forward in this article are intended to stimulate the reader's own predictions and are to serve as a snapshot for the purposes of further reflection and articles in the aftermath of the Qatar World Cup itself.

A brief overview of the development of sport, spectatorship, and football

¹ Without intention to cast aspersions on anyone noted or alluded to therein.

The word 'sport' is a derivative of the word 'disport' (to amuse or enjoy oneself through recreation or physical activity as a means of diversion from work or serious matters) and has its roots in the Latin term *des-porto* (to carry away). It is as old as humanity itself and is intrinsically bound up in its survival. With the necessity for early humans to keep warm, hunt, and defend themselves, their tribes, and later their countries from others and wild animals, the necessity for them to develop running, jumping, and swimming skills is inherent in their evolution.

Originally, sport developed as a form of religious worship, with participants engaging in sporting contests as a form of worship; improved harvests and fertility among cattle would be their reward.¹ Many of today's modern sports have their origins in ancient religious rites, with the most famous being the Olympic Games, which ancient Greeks dedicated to the Olympian gods in the eighth century BC.² The first recorded Olympics, in 776 BC, marked a decisive change in the world of sport, with people starting to gather to watch the contests and spectatorship, as well as participation, becoming a diversion from the drudgery of everyday life.

As crowds grew, arenas and stadia were built. To attract the best athletes and bigger crowds, prize money was offered. Gymnasiums, swimming pools, and health clubs were also soon invented. Other competitions followed, with the Pythian, Isthmian, and Nemean games in Greece, the Circus Maximus in Rome, and the Tailteann Games at Teltown, Co. Meath. The sports themselves also evolved from athletics, archery, and gymnastics into horse or chariot racing. In the twelfth century AD, horseback jousting was the greatest spectator sport of its age, with participants competing for profit in front of large, chanting audiences as part of national sides with team colours, big salaries, transfer fees, and celebrity.³

From the thirteenth century AD, many kicking ball games had become popular across the world. 'Mob' or 'Medieval' football was played across many towns and cities in England, although they lacked any rules, meaning that the use of hands and sticks was also allowed, and high levels of physical violence were not unusual or unexpected by the large crowds who followed games that lasted hours.⁴

The birth of modern football came in October 1863 at the Freemasons' Tavern in London, where a gathering of various representatives of football clubs adopted a motion

to form the Football Association and the rules of football, or soccer (an original slang term developed from the term *association*), were initially established. With proper organisation, few material resources required, and a workforce seeking *a means of diversion from work or serious matters*, the appeal and popularity of football grew quickly in Britain, especially in working-class industrial factories and areas. By the end of the nineteenth century, football was booming, with one million spectators per season. It grew so quickly that many grounds couldn't cope.⁵ As with other 'English games,' like rugby, hockey, and cricket, football followed its soldiers, teachers, and missionaries to British colonies, and it was soon adopted by the locals.⁶ In Ireland, it has long been viewed as the 'garrison game,' as its growth started in the towns where British garrisons were in place.

Over the past thirty years, the English Premier League has seen its revenue grow by 2400 percent to almost €5 billion, and it expects to see revenue exceed €6 billion this year. In 2020/21, total attendance at English Premier League games was fifteen million, and despite having no match-day revenue due to Covid-19, the European football market increased its revenue by 10 percent to €27.6 billion.⁷ FIFA (the International Association of Federation Football), the world's governing body for football, reported in 2021 that its revenue of \$766.5 million was a 187 percent increase from 2020⁸.

Marxism and sport

Writing in the nineteenth century, Marx gave little attention at all to sport. In Vol. 1, Chapter 27 of *Capital*, he highlights the role of deer forests in the Scottish Highlands, being a matter of sport for some and solely a source of profit for others. In Vol. 2, Chapter 20, he uses sport only as a metaphor to highlight the capitalist extraction of surplus value as 'indulging in the useless sport of advancing £100 in money and giving in exchange £80 in commodities, instead of advancing £80 in money and supplying in exchange for it £80 in commodities,'⁹ There is no doubt that this paucity reflects the role and status of sport at the time, before the rapid growth in the mass organisation of sport and latterly its mass commodification and commercialisation. However, had Marx been writing today, there is little doubt that the philosophy, politics, economics, and sociology of sport, and the 'people's game' of football, would receive much more attention.

Scholars and Marxist analysis to sport!

Executive Committee of the Workers Sport Alliance of America¹⁰

Sport does not exist in a vacuum

Perhaps the most profound and widely cited analogy used in deference to the role that sport plays in society today is the adaptation of Marx's renowned philosophical proclamation on religion,¹¹ the assertion that it is sport that is the *opiate of the masses*,¹² a temporary means used by the wealthy elite to mask class divisions and distract the disenfranchised working class from economic and social injustices and the damaging reality of the capitalist system by paradoxically uniting and dividing them into 'them and us.'¹³ Sport also serves as a more permanent means of pacifying the working class with 24/7 entertainment and producing ideological and nationalistic hegemony on a local, national, and global scale.

Qatar and World Cup 2022

On the 2nd of December, 2010, FIFA made the surprise announcement that the Persian Gulf state of Qatar would host the 2022 World Cup, a country then ranked outside the top one hundred (behind Malawi, Grenada, Togo, and Syria) and beaten by Irish League club side Linfield FC in July 2022. Costing \$220 billion to host, it will be the most expensive World Cup in history¹⁴ (second was Brazil in 2014 at \$15 billion)—more than all other world cups put together. In return, the local economy will be boosted by a mere \$20 billion, a relatively low return of 9.1 percent on any investment hardly seems logical!

The discovery of oil in the Qatari region in the 1940s provided the foundations for modern-day Qatar. Until then, its economy was largely based on fishing and pearl hunting. It has been ruled by the Al Thani Family since 1825, and gained independence from the UK in 1971. Over the course of the last twenty-five years it has become a significant player on the world stage, and in 2008 it launched the Qatar National Vision 2030 to ensure that 'Qatar becomes an advanced society capable of sustaining its development and providing a high standard of living for its people' through the four pillars of human, economic, social, and environmental development,¹⁵ a vision developed in response to Qatar's realisation that its long-term sustainability could be compromised by over-reliance on oil and gas and a need to develop its private sector, small businesses, and tourism.

Currently, its economic pillar is well supported. In 2021, while average global GDP was \$12.259 per capita,

Qatar's was \$61.276 per capita, or \$179.5 billion in total.¹⁶ In 2009, its total GDP was \$97.8 billion.¹⁷ As a result, the human pillar (prosperity) is also well supported. Per inhabitant, they have the fourth-greatest purchasing power in the world. However, this financial success has come at a severe cost, with their social (realising a *just and caring society*) and environmental (*harmonious protection*) pillars needing some considerable attention.

The 2021–22 Amnesty International report on the state of human rights in Qatar¹⁸ highlights continuing human rights abuses against migrant workers, women, the LGBTI community, and ongoing curtailments of the freedom of expression and assembly. Over 90 percent of Qatar's three million inhabitants are migrant workers, and despite claims of reforms by the government, they continue to face indefensible working conditions and systemic abuse.

Migrant workers are prohibited from joining or forming a trade union and are often subject to wage theft by their employers. Over thirty thousand additional labourers from Bangladesh, India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Nepal, and the Philippines have been employed to build the eight stadiums that will host the World Cup. There are reports that between two and seven thousand migrant workers have died in Qatar since 2010, with heart attacks and heat stroke prevalent in the high temperatures, and there has been little in the way of reparations for their families. Many also report that six-day weeks and thirteen-hour days are the norm in return for wages of \$1.50 per hour and squalid living conditions.

Qatari women face discrimination in both law and practice. They continue to be tied to a male guardian whose permission is required for key life decisions (e.g. to get married or go to university). Women also forgo guardianship of their children if they get divorced. The forty-five-member Consultative Assembly legislature has no women.

Homosexuality is illegal in Qatar, and it is among the most dangerous places in the world for LGBTI travellers. Homosexual males can face up to seven years in prison for having sex, and gay Muslims can face the death penalty.¹⁹ While gay fans are officially being told they are welcome in Qatar for the 2022 World Cup, they are also being told not to demonstrate with rainbow flags and to use common sense for their own protection. A potential paradox waits for the LGBTI community in a country with low crime rates and where violence is rare. With public displays of affection frowned upon, goal-scoring

players are well advised to show restraint—especially in the ninety-fifth minute of a game! Qatar's ongoing abuse of human rights is at great odds with FIFA's human rights position, which states that it 'embraces its responsibility to respect human rights across its operations and relationships.'²⁰

Despite its relatively small size and great vulnerability to rising sea levels, Qatar has been criticised for being too slow to alleviate the effects of climate change. It is the largest supplier of liquified natural gas (LNG) and the biggest per capita polluter in the world. In 2020, it had emissions of almost 107 million tonnes of carbon dioxide (CO₂) from fossil fuels and industry.

Despite its misleading claim that it is helping tackle climate change as gas produces less CO₂ than fossil fuels, it has criticised promises for net-zero carbon emissions by 2050 and has been reticent to look beyond a 25 percent reduction in greenhouse gas emissions by 2030, a position that is also odds with both FIFA's own promise of a 50 percent reduction in carbon emissions by 2030 and carbon neutrality by 2040,²¹ as well as with the UN Sports for Climate Change Framework, which calls for action on climate footprints and transformative climate action.²² Given how many contradictions exist between Qatar and the various articles, statutes, and policy documents of FIFA, it is a curiosity how and why Qatar was even awarded World Cup 2022.

Sportswashing, bribery, and the Qatar World Cup 2022

Sportswashing is a political tool that is used by corrupt, tyrannical, or repressive states and countries to airbrush the stains of human rights abuse from their tainted reputation and public image. It involves the cynical use of sport to divert attention away from their violations by creating positive images or highlights to pretend that all is okay. Its use can be traced back decades across a range of sports and sporting events. These include, for example, the 1936 Olympic Games in Nazi Germany; the 2008 Olympics in Beijing; the Grand Prix of Russia, Azerbaijan, and Qatar in Formula One racing; the 1976 'Rumble in the Jungle' boxing match between Ali and Foreman in Zaire; and the 1978 World Cup in Argentina. More recent examples are seen in Saudi Arabia's purchase of Newcastle United FC in England and their financing of the LIV Golf tour using the Public Investment Fund, the sovereign wealth fund of the country. Qatar's hosting of World Cup 2022 has obviously been subject to many

claims of sportswashing, which although highly unethical, is not illegal.

What is illegal, though, is corruption and bribery. In 2011, former FIFA vice president Jack Warner alleged that Qatar had bought the World Cup, and in various reports, the *Times* newspaper has made claims that Qatar sabotaged rival bids for the World Cup with a ‘black ops’ campaign of dirty tricks and secret \$880 million payments to FIFA. Qatar has always denied wrongdoing, and a 2014 Sepp Blatter–run FIFA investigation cleared Qatar of any wrongdoing, a view not shared by the United States Department of Justice, which in October 2021 said that representatives working for Qatar had bribed FIFA officials to secure the World Cup and charged several people with crimes that included wire fraud and money laundering.²³

Sport, football, and political Activism

Despite the pronouncements and various policies of FIFA, it was never likely to reverse its decision to award the World Cup to Qatar. Similarly, with much of Europe reliant on Qatari LNG gas and 34 percent of Qatar’s foreign direct investments being in Europe alongside over \$400 billion in investments across forty countries around the world (with the UK alone benefiting from investments worth over £35 billion²⁴), it was unlikely that any other nation would be willing to raise any substantial objection beyond rhetoric as useful as FIFA’s policies! However, this reticence has not always been so prevalent, though it has increased significantly since sport became the mass-market commodity and commercial success that it is today.

Despite the cries of sporting purists that sport and politics do not and should not mix, it has long been apparent that they inextricably do, and that sports people should be political too.²⁵ As well as sportswashing, nation states also use sport to enhance their prestige and standing with rival countries by peaceful means, or as George Orwell put: sport is ‘war minus the shooting.’ This was best exemplified during the Cold War era, when 67 out of 147 countries, led by the US and their objections to the invasion of Afghanistan by the Soviet Union, boycotted the Moscow Olympics of 1980. In response the Soviet Union and its allies subsequently boycotted the Los Angeles Olympics of 1984. In another example, the International Olympic Committee excluded South Africa from competing at their games from 1964 due to the crimes against humanity perpetrated as part of apartheid,

but they were happy to allow the Beijing Olympics of 2008. South Africa also faced bans from a wide range of sporting bodies, including rugby, athletics, golf, football, and cricket associations, though their cricketers themselves did sometimes compete: between 1982 and 1990, several lucrative ‘rebel’ tours of South Africa by cricketers from England, Australia, Sri Lanka, and the West Indies took place against the wishes of International Cricket.

However, as the political activism of nation states and sports organisations has subsided, the same cannot be said of sports people themselves—rebel cricketers aside. There is a long history of political activism by sports people around the world, who have used their platform to elevate and advance political and social causes for a global audience. 1960s America saw Muhammad Ali refuse to enlist in the Vietnam War and the 1968 Black Power Salute of Tommie Smith and John Carlos in protest at the treatment of Black Americans and other minorities in the US. In the 1970s tennis player Billie Jean King was an active campaigner for gender equality, while Martina Navratilova was an advocate for gay rights in the 1980s. In the early 1990s, five-time NBA champion and twelve-time All Star ‘Magic’ Johnson became a campaigner for safe sex and education around HIV and AIDS after bravely announcing that he had tested positive for HIV contracted through heterosexual activities. More recently, in 2016 Colin Kaepernick ‘took a knee’ during the US national anthem to protest police violence against minorities and elevate the Black Lives Matter movement to a wider audience, inspiring many others to do the same, including Megan Rapinoe, of the US national soccer team, who also advocates for LGBTI rights, gender discrimination, and equal pay rights for female footballers. Most recently, Manchester United’s Marcus Rashford successfully campaigned for a change in government policy during the Covid-19 pandemic that saw 1.3 million school children receive free school meals during the school holidays, and he continues to fight against child poverty.

Rashford was rightly praised and recognised with awards for his brilliant work. However, the active sports person making a political stand is not always so well recognised or rewarded. Kaepernick’s actions are widely thought to have cost him his career, and Tommie Smith was banned by the International Olympic Committee and faced financial hardship and death threats. Closer to home, footballer James McClean has suffered supporter insults,

sectarian abuse, and death threats since refusing to wear the remembrance-day poppy on his shirt in protest against the actions of the British Army in Derry during the Troubles and particularly on Bloody Sunday, when fourteen innocent people were murdered without justice for their families. The power of sports people today was perhaps best seen when Cristiano Ronaldo removed bottles of Coca-Cola during a press conference at the 2021 European Championships: the coverage went viral and the value of Coca-Cola dropped by \$4 billion. While probably an act of impulse and non-political, it nonetheless shows what could be done if footballers decided to use their activism at times of maximum exposure.

Conclusion—Will Qatar be the end of footballer activism?

At the time of writing, there are forty days until the 2022 World Cup kicks off in Qatar, and the world of football activism has been relatively muted. There have been fan banner protests calling to 'Boycott Qatar 2022' in France, Denmark, and Germany. Watford also cancelled a pre-season friendly with Qatar after fan group objections. However, various media outlets are reporting that there is now a shortage of accommodation for the 1.5 million fans expected to attend. Several French cities have stated that they will not organise fan zones, but the mayor of Paris claims it is not a boycott of the event or the Qatari regime. Hummel, sponsors of the Danish team, have also unveiled a kit designed as a protest of Qatar's record on human rights. While these are all commendable, they carry relatively little exposure in the media beyond localised and time-limited coverage.

There is no doubt that footballer activism has a massive role to play in realising social change, and it will continue. Many footballers quietly campaign against racism and Islamophobia, and for refugee rights, improved education, and many other social issues. However, will any of them be brave enough to use the global stage of a world cup, one already under scrutiny, to elevate their cause to a level perhaps never seen before?

Perhaps the problem in Qatar is what to stand against! Homophobia, climate change, or human rights? Perhaps in the age of multi-million-pound transfers, wages, and endorsements, players are reluctant to jeopardise their financial security. As with philanthropy, perhaps activism exists only to launder the reputations of the footballing rich. Or perhaps the simple act of wearing a pair of

rainbow laces and the reaction of the hosts will be revolutionary enough.

With the eyes of the world on Qatar from November 20th to December 18th, it is the best opportunity there has ever been to test the theory of American journalist and one-time member of the Socialist Party USA Heywood Brown that 'sport does not build character it reveals it.'

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² Ghazi Bin Muhammed (1998), *The Sacred Origin of Sports & Culture*, Fons Vitae, Louisville, KY, USA.

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⁶ Brasch, R. (1986).

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⁸ <https://digitalhub.fifa.com/m/7b8f2f002eb69403/original/FIFA-Annual-Report-21.pdf>

⁹ https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1885-c2/ch20_04.htm

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¹⁰ <https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/parties/cpusa/1924/nomonth/0000-wsaa-sportorgs.pdf>

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¹⁵ <https://www.gco.gov.qa/en/about-qatar/national-vision2030/>

¹⁶ <https://www.worlddata.info/asia/qatar/economy.php>

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¹⁸ <https://www.amnesty.org/en/location/middle-east-and-north-africa/qatar/report-qatar/>

¹⁹ <https://www.pinknews.co.uk/2019/09/27/qatar-world-cup-2022-fifa-anti-gay-sex-homosexuality/>

²⁰ <https://www.fifa.com/social-impact/human-rights>

²¹ <https://www.fifa.com/social-impact/sustainability/news/fifa-climate-strategy-builds-on-long-standing-commitment-to-sustainability>

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²³ <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/06/sports/soccer/qatar-and-russia-bribery-world-cup-fifa.html>

²⁴ <https://politicstoday.org/qatar-Ing-real-estate-foreign-direct-investments-expand-globally/>

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