Why Sport?

A political economy perspective on sports[1]

Hardy Hanappi
VIPER – Vienna Institute for Political Economy Research
hanappi@gmail.com www.econ.tuwien.ac.at/hanappi/

One

The word 'sport' is an extremely superficial construct, it is not a useful concept to catch a deeper understanding of what is going on in the complicated mixture of emotions and social dynamics that its usage evokes. This vagueness is a main reason for its success as an ingredient of marketing strategies supporting economic and political agenda. To bring some light into this theoretical darkness, historians usually point at the role of sport activities in ancient Greece[2].

First, sports were closely related to *military education*. They taught self-discipline and trained bodily and mental strength needed to follow a strict rule system that was predefined by the rules of the game. Being able to master these virtues was a precondition for being a member of the hierarchically organized military body of a Greek city state.

Second, sports like the Olympic Games starting in 776 BC from the beginning were also addressing *different* communities of spectators, e.g. citizens from Athens, Sparta, etc. The Games thus always were ideological battlegrounds, substitutes for wars that channeled rivalries in what was considered to be 'fair'[3], to be a less damaging *competition*. The ideological impact was two-sided: On the side of the spectators the sports event served as an ideological glue, as a strong community feeling between them, which added social identity to each of them. A common identity, which they would not experience in all the other ordinary walks of life. On the side of the active athlete the role of representing a whole community emerged. The ideological impact of this role usually spurred his or her ambitions, provoked the feeling to be a hero. Almost as a consequence, the cult surrounding the winners of Olympic Games coincided with a religious festival. Drama and tragedy of winning and losing mirrored an actual combat between rivaling adversaries that did not have to take place. Its main social functions in the world of Ancient Greece survived in slightly modified forms till today.

But before jumping to Tokyo and Qatar in 2022, an additional element of some sports has to be mentioned, an element that emerged in some towns in England in the Middle Ages. When adversary teams of young players started to try to kick a ball through one of the two

[1] This text was originally produced in 2021 for a contribution to an exposition in modern architecture, the Biennale 2021 in Venice. The project leaders of this contribution called *Sport-Platform*, Christoph Lechner and Kevin Moore, needed a text that relates the concept 'sport' to the two major upcoming global sport events: the world-championship in soccer in Qatar and the Olympic Games in Tokyo. The content of the text did not necessarily reflect the positions of the project team. This revised version written in 2026 has been substantially revised and a new section four was added.

[2] See (Pritchard, 2009)

[3] It is interesting that athletes in Ancient Greece were allowed to cheat as long as it was not discovered. Fairness thus was not a moral concept, but was linked to the social practice of being able to display correct behavior – compare Diego Maradona's famous 'hand of God'.

opposing town gates the game of ***soccer*** emerged. And in this game a central new feature of the *different* players of the *same* team became apparent: Their ability to cooperate. The players surely were different, each had different strengths and weaknesses, but organizing their differences around a common goal, around kicking the ball through the goal of the 'enemy', was an art that surmounted the ability of each single athlete. If successful, the ideological impact of the art of cooperation on the side of the team itself is enormous - call it team consciousness. And this team spirit then – eventually - can be transferred to the fans, the fans of the team. In special moments and episodes, they can feel like the team itself – be it triumph, be it disaster. This was the mystery of the time when King Soccer ruled the world in the fifties and sixties. Cooperation creates identity and releases the emotional energy of large crowds of spectators in an imagined world of a rule-based game, which leaves the actual political economy of of ordinary life intact.

Two

In 2022 the global political economy certainly was in turmoil. After some consolidation of the health situation due to worldwide vaccination, numerous and varied economic collapse did lead to some restructuring of global value chains. Welfare depends on the cooperation of different parts of the world, which are specialized in their respective production field and natural resources. Welfare increasing cooperation implies trade, and trade hinges on transportation. But for transportation – be it ships, cars, trucks, trains, or airplanes – the major source of energy still is crude oil. The Middle East, e.g. *Qatar*, is one of the main producers of crude oil in the world. As such a node of the global production network the Middle East, of course, is also a place of permanent and fierce political intervention exerted by the major players in global political power.

In a less visible way Taiwan and Japan, e.g. *Tokyo*, also play the role of neuralgic points of global politics. With the rise of China as the main challenger of US hegemony, compare (Hanappi, 2025), president Biden continued the strategic line of argument of his predecessors to consider Japan as an outpost of the 'free world' guarding the US-dominated pacific basin. While it will be very difficult to contain the rising economic power of China – not the least because Western corporations participate heavily in China's state capitalism – it seems easier to build up an ideological barrier in Japan's population. The plan to host the Olympic Games in 2020 in Tokyo was an opportunity to successfully outperform the Olympic Games in Beijing in 2022. Then the Olympic Games returned from Asia to Europe: France (2024) and Italy (2026).

As these considerations show, *mega-events in sports have never lost their political dimension* – just remember the Olympic Games Adolf Hitler has brought to Berlin in 1936[4]. Anyone denying this fact and claiming that there has to be a clear cut between sport and politics is simply ignoring what takes place ever since sport events were institutionalized. Ignorance leads to blindness, only a conscious evaluation of the political situation can develop a sound point of view. In the case of *Qatar*, a spotlight on this political dimension must take into consideration Qatar's role in the Middle East.

[4] Though the official website of the Olympic Games claims that *Hitler failed* with his attempt to show that the Aryan race will win all competitions, it is also true that *Hitler succeeded* in showing to the world that Germany was a normal country that could host Olympic Games.

When in 1961 OPEC, the Organization of Oil Exporting Countries, was founded Qatar was one of the thirteen founding members[5]. The goal of OPEC in 1981 and 1983 - the years of the famous 'oil price shock - was to use its cartel power to receive a larger part of petroleum product revenues by a sharp increase in crude oil prices. In colonial times US oil companies paid only approximately 1.6 $ for a barrel crude oil. In 1980 this price did rice to something like 3 $, and in 1983 to around 10 $. The strategy worked because the oligopoly of the petroleum industry in the West (the 'seven sisters') participated in the price hike. Nevertheless, the shift in global revenues from OECD to OPEC countries looked like a shift from rich OECD countries to poor OPEC countries. What was less visible for the common man in the streets was that some OPEC countries in the Middle East were still feudal regimes; it was just the ruling feudal class, which now had become enormously rich. And for feudal classes politics till today mainly is family business. Part of the story why Qatar applied for the Olympic Games can be understood with a look at the inner structure of the ruling family of Qatar's ruling class. Another part can be understood by a look at the rivalry between the feudal class in Qatar and the rulers in the big player in the Middle East, i.e. Saudi Arabia. Since 1972 the USA had an official agreement with the ruling leaders in Saudi Arabia: We provide weapons to help you maintain feudalism, you provide oil for our car industry. In Spring 2011, when the 'Arab Spring' of Arab counties' youth lead to a shake-up of the feudal regimes of the region, Saudi Arabian rulers went through a traumatic period. Since Saudi Arabia was one of the three strongholds of the superpower USA in the Middle East – Israel and Turkey being the other two – the US had a strong interest to consolidate the situation[6]. Later Saudi Arabia supported building political bridges between Saudi Arabia and Israel. In the aftermath of the 'Arab Spring' the Muslim Brotherhood had won increasing influence in the region, e.g. with president Mohamed Morsi in Egypt[7]. But in the end, the strongest player in Egypt till today is the military and its current leader Abdel Fattah Saeed Hussein Khalil el-Sisi. Turkey's president Recep Erdogan developed the idea of a secularized Islam dominating the Eastern Mediterranean – of course, under his leadership. In this new political atmosphere after 2011 Qatar also started to signal a slight tendency towards secularization, e.g. its media channel Al Jazeera supported several more progressive movements of the 'Arab Spring' and even after the take-over of Al Jazeera by a member of the royal family of Qatar in September 2011 it still was an example of a somewhat more independent news in the Arab world. In 2017 Qatar's channel Al Jazeera was banned by its neighbouring Arab states, Erdogan as rival of the Arab League and promoter of a secularized Islam protested[8]. For Qatar, still following a somewhat more secularized policy, an invasion by the big Arab brother Saudi Arabia had always a latent danger. Thus the decision to have the World Championship in 2022 in Qatar looked like an attempt to consolidate this slightly more secularized, 'Western', variant of a feudal Islam government.

If the Games themselves can contribute to further democratization in Qatar always had to be questioned. The class structure in Qatar follows its economic structure, it is all built around crude oil exports. Like in other Arab states in the region most work is done by a cheap foreign workforce[9] that lacks social security. Protests concerning missing Human Rights' standards in Qatar, e.g. by some participating soccer teams, were justified. And it cannot be

[5] Qatar left OPEC in 2019.

[6] See (Hanappi, 2014).

[7] See (Hanappi, 2016) for a detailed study of the Arab Spring.

[8] In Libya Turkey later provided military support for one side of the civil war, while Egypt supported the opposite side.

[9] Even in Europe's *migration year* 2015 the work migration from Asia to Saudi Arabia was larger than the total migration to Europe.

expected that this situation will change as a consequence of the championship taking place.

The situation in Tokyo is completely different. Militarily Japan is the closest ally of US dominated NATO. It is firmly under the umbrella of the USA, which in 2019 spent 9,4 % of its GDP as military expenditure (China: 5,4 %, Japan 2,5 %). Economically its role as the second largest economy in the world in the late 60-ties has been lost, but despite of its enormous budget deficit – the highest deficit to GDP ratio in the world (2019: 238 %, 2020: 266 %) - it can be considered as economically fairly stable, though Trump's recent trade war will lead to a severe domestic shake-up. The reason certainly is its high technological standard and a rigid social structure. At the time, the decision to choose Tokyo had been an apparent win-win situation: For large Japanese corporations it was an extraordinary opportunity to show their technological excellence and for the organizers of the Olympic Games it was a safe location – financial worries never had troubled Japan's government.

The difference of the current domestic background in political economy between Qatar and Japan could hardly be greater.

Three

What concerned those who were against the World Championship in Qatar most, was the lack of Human Rights standards in this country. After the decision for Qatar already had been taken demonstrations in this direction evidently could only be considered as additional expressions of discontent, meant to urge Qatar's policy makers to improve the situation. As such these demonstrations were important. Nevertheless, they did not provoke any improvements in Qatar's social policy. A feudal regime always remains a strictly hierarchical command system with no place for any democratic feedback.

Iconic sport events are large scale symbolic interactions. On the one hand, they can be *used by a regime* to show its competence in organizing such a complicated performance. This can be successful, e.g. Beijing 2008, but it can also be politically dangerous, e.g. Berlin 1936. On the other hand, such events are also an *ideological tool* to frame ***the attitude of a worldwide audience***. It is this latter function that finally needs some closer attention.

After the two World Wars of the last century the sinister influence of overshooting nationalism had become more visible to large parts of the population, even if many people in the victorious countries maintained a fair share of national proudness. At the same time the rise of poorer social strata to a so-called 'middle-class' that entered the possibilities of higher mass consumption and a somewhat better education gave room to an extended ***search for social identity***. Local environments with their local soccer clubs offered one such framework. In a small country like Austria a government that tried to reconstruct Austrian identity after 1945, the national sport of skiing was the logical offer for national identity: If the world champion in a ski race was an Austrian, this should make all Austrians feel Austrian, the government proclaimed. For sports like soccer, sports with a *strong cooperative element*, the lonely hero of a ski race received an *additional property*: he or she had to be a team player. In the 50-ties and 60-ties Gerhard Hanappi, my father, was such an exceptional team playing hero in Austria. He indeed served as a role model to show that a recovery from a destroyed country to a prospering new state is possible. More than that: Coming from a poor worker's family he

showed that by being an exceptional soccer player he could finance his university studies and become an architect. This real life narrative of the possibility to ascend in status, to overcome class barriers, produced a wide ranging field for finding social identity, produced hope. At the height of his career as soccer player he played as a member of the world team, a selection of the eleven best players in the world, and in his career as architect he designed his own stadium for his club SK Rapid Wien, the famous Hanappi Stadium (compare (Lechner et al., 2019)). In 2016 SK Rapid relocated to a new stadium financed by Allianz (a large international insurance company) and the city of Vienna. The times and the ideological needs of large political players had changed.

Exceptional sport heroes play an eminent role for the attitudes of large amounts of people. As my father - politically belonging to social democracy - showed the possibilities of upward mobility to Austrians, Jesse Owens had shown to the world in Berlin in 1936 that a black man is the fastest runner in the world, not an Aryan competitor[10]. Other exceptional sportsmen - the Brazilian soccer player Pelé, the Marathon winners from Kenia - showed that each continent has its own outstanding talents. In that sense the Olympic Games as well as the World Championship in soccer are events that unite the human species. Competition between teams and single athletes are of secondary importance, they are the entertainment add-on for spectators. The overall message of sports thus turns out to be 'mastered combination of diversity wins', not 'the best individual wins'.

Team sports are thus particularly attractive because they create an artificial 'inside' based on diversity and simultaneously a similarly artificial 'outside', the opposing team and its fans. The mystery of constructing social identity is to overcome diversity, to organise it, in the face of another team which is confronting this goal. The game itself has to take place in the context of a strict rule system that defines what is allowed and what is forbidden. This is true for the active sports teams as well as for the fan clubs. No single hero can ever produce this mystery. And while today a self-proclaimed marketing genius might amplify the fame of individuals like Lionel Messi, it still is the match of 22 players during which he shows his art.

Four

During the seven years that passed since the first version of this text was written, a rather substantial earth quake in the world of soccer has occurred, which has to be addressed as step four. It concerns the fact that soccer nowadays is one of the largest businesses, an economic machinery, which attracts enormous amounts of money as well as whole states and their leaders, while being still an incredibly strong link between big capital and high-powered local emotions of individuals on the ground – worldwide.

The changes in the world of soccer did not emerge in the game itself, its rules and the ways it is played by and large have remained the same. The impetus came from outside, from the dynamics of the global political economy and its unbelievable tendency to concentration and centralization of capital. Today, practically all dominant firms listed in the Dow Jones industrial Index are US firms. The capitalist commodification has taken over all areas of human activity and even the interpretations of individuals' brains mostly follow the capitalist algorithm: 'In what should I invest to profit most?'. Since consumers in the world of soccer are an anonymous mass, the marketing of a soccer business – and every larger club nowadays is a capitalist firm - has first to identify the product it wants to sell. There are four main candidates for the role of a product: The match, the prominent player, the soccer club, or a pure symbol combining elements of the former three. For the oligopoly of large soccer

clubs these possible product types play different roles.

When marketing specialists take over, they typically go for catchy symbolism, which sticks in the memories of simple-minded people that are continuously distracted by their busy – though routinely boring – life. The best type of product to attract their attention is the '***soccer star***', a human individual like them – but equipped with an outstanding god-like talent. To see this star lets some of this exceptionalism trickle down to the spectator. Players like Cristiano Ronaldo or Lionel Messi became typical icons, but also more local mini-stars can often be sold at astonishing prices.

The single ***match***, seen as a product to be sold, in general has lost importance. To pay for being a spectator for ninety minutes was split in two possible options: Being in the stadium, or being in front of a screen (either in a pub or at home). Financially – for the consumers as well as for the soccer business - the latter had won over the former. There are desperate attempts to make matches a more attractive product again by clumping them together in the form of tournaments – but even that has proven to be of limited success. One could try to enrich the attractiveness of a tournament by masking it as a war-simulation between national teams – but this trick carries the danger of tumultuous clashes between nationalist fan-mobs.

The third possibility, namely to market the ***soccer club product***, produces even more severe contradictions. At first sight a spectator sees a club simply as the group of players of the team. The necessary organization behind the team, everything that gets the team on the field, makes them playing well, remains in the dark. And for the average spectator the background activities of the club never come to light. This is why a 'symbolic' human person, presumably responsible for team performance, is constructed: the ***head coach***. Marketing aiming at the product 'club' therefore extends its reach by marketing the head coach. But alas, there are always less really victorious clubs than loosing clubs and head coaches of professional clubs nowadays on the average are fired *yearly* by their clubs. This makes it impossible to include a certain head coach in the symbolism of a unique club for a period of many years. A similar contradiction builds up with the ***professional players***, with aspiring soccer stars. They also change their club rather often, following the money and the length of the contract they are offered. They cannot be identified with a certain club any more, they are changing their colors too often. So the marketing specialists using the product 'club' more and more are forced to use the *fourth possibility*: sell the pure symbol, the name of the club, its emblem. Soccer stars and famous head coaches maintain their own marketing experts.

For the frustrated old-style spectators, who are still interested in the quality of their team as the experience it watching a match, the situation has dramatically changed. Really good matches are mostly played if some of the handful of globally superior teams encounter each other. This pleasure can almost exclusively experienced in front of a TV screen. To be in a stadium watching and supporting one's own team is a completely different experience full of positive enthusiasm and deep despair. Both types of fascination usually have a foundation in the past of the spectators, when they themselves were playing, either soccer or any other team sport. Despite the contradictions brought about by capitalist commodification, team sport still provides its deep-lying message: Bringing a diverse selection of human individuals under the common effort to achieve a goal can be a most blissful feeling for each of them. This primacy of the group - of the team over the players - is what old-style spectators want to see. A further typical desire of old-style spectators is to see a victory of the team that was

expected to be weaker – not only if this is their own team, but also if they first are neutral with respect to the two teams. To support the team that everybody expects to lose reflects a hope linked to the average spectators own position in life: Let the surprise happen that the team of underdogs suddenly is victorious, wins over those who routinely are the winners.

Team sports are to a large extend mirroring the social dynamics in everyday political economics - though mostly this connection is not directly realized by players and spectators. The world of team sports always has a strong link to politics, it is a political world. Not only because success of a national team, or hosting an international competition is often used for propaganda of politicians, but also more indirectly because it frames the attitudes and mindsets of players and spectators. And the way it interferes in these indirect ways shows the difference between team sports and single individual sports particularly well: If an athlete can run exceptionally fast or can jump exceptionally high, then this is the result of inborn talent plus a successful training with – and against – the own body. What is learned by the athlete (and in further by the spectator) is that consequent training can pay off. This message is far less complicated and important than the messages provided by team sports. Of course, competitive behavior is grafted on individual athlete sports parallel and independently of their sport activity – and this could also be taken as a lesson for social behavior. But in this case it is only an overly simple, though surely very capitalism-conform, advice.

Sports are omnipresent in the history of our species. They have always been mirrors of the societies in which they emerged. The more sophisticated these societies became, the more telling their mirror images and the rules of the games played became. This leads back to the title of this text.

Why sports?

One answer: *They are not serious*. They simulate interaction, simulate fights, without hurting the adversaries – too much. As a consequence, they leave room for risky experiments, for trying out dangerous thoughts. Spectators know that and as fans become part of these experiments. They come along with glory and desperation – in a game-like environment[11].

Second answer: *They are serious*. Sports change our internal model building process. For the involved individual this is evident: discipline and fantasy are mixed up, in team sports self-confidence and trust in other team members have to be permanently consolidated. This produces a special mind-set. For those actively watching sports, being sports enthusiasts, their thoughts, sometimes their whole life, is embedded in a passionate adherence to this simulated world of games. Their role models, their emotional attitudes and prejudices are framed – for the better or the worse. It all depends on the circumstances.

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[10] In a similar vein Cassius Clay became a symbol for the fight against racism, just like the winning athletes Tommie Smith and John Carlos showing the black panther fist at the Olympic Games in 1968.

[11] Team sport is *fun*. To play is an activity that provides fun on an almost inexplicably deep level, compare Huizinga's classic book 'Homo Ludens' (Huizinga, 2016(1930)). On a simpler level even an isolated athlete plays with his or her body.

This ambivalence of sports makes them life-like. They are a necessary ingredient of our ability to play, to simulate, to anticipate what *might* happen. Life itself is a kind of sport.

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