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futebol and myths of the brazilian way of life

ALEX BELLOS

Futebol: The Brazilian Way of Life

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With the exception of the classic texts by C.L.R. James and Ashis Nandy, both on cricket, sport has not captured the critical imagination of post-colonial theorists. While the rhetorical flourish and in-depth analysis of sports journalists have produced fascinating portraits of the motivational forces, rich sketches of the historical background, astute speculations on political linkages and even evocative ruminations on the mythic and moral dimensions of sport, these writings have barely entered the arena of 'cultural' debates. This omission is startling because not only is sport a huge player in global media industries and a significant sector in national economies, but it is also one of the most significant features of everyday life. Individual participation and team performances have become one of the most compelling ways for articulating personal and national identity. Events such as Cathy Freeman's run in the 400-metres final of the Sydney Olympics were more significant than individual success in the race. In Tim Lane's ecstatic words, 'Gold for Freeman. Australia the winner.' In what sense did Australia win gold in a race event? The social and symbolic significance of events such as this are still begging for critical attention.

Alex Bellos's *Futebol: The Brazilian Way of Life* explores possibly the richest example of how sport can serve as a metaphor to not only reflect social conditions but also influence the way a society dreams about itself. Soccer in Brazil and the Brazilian national soccer team have a unique and mesmerising history. The passion of the fans in local games and the success of the national team at the World Cup are

unparalleled. The legend of Pelé and the diaspora of thousands of other Brazilian stars also offer seemingly inexhaustible material for critique. No other country has elevated the game so much in pursuit of elegance and flair, and it is doubtful that even the Italians are as capable of sinking the game into such Machiavellian depths. Bellos shows us that Brazilians have improvised the game to such an extent that they have introduced variations ranging from autoball, where players drive cars and whack a giant ball, to footbull, where the bull becomes the ball and chases the players. They also invented the professional versions of button football, futsal (five-a-side indoor), society football (seven-a-side on exclusive playing fields), beach football, footvolley and ball-juggling competitions (in which Ronaldo's wife became known as the Keepie-Uppie Queen). In Brazilian slang there are no fewer than thirty-seven synonyms for the word 'ball'.

With considerable charm, sensitivity and cool irony, Bellos has reported on the rituals, charted the successes and portrayed the eccentric characters such as Garrincha, 'the angel with bent legs'. Armed with an enviable travel budget and the instant access that is afforded to the 'foreign press', Bellos provides a fascinating account of the history, topography and personalities of Brazilian soccer. However, his essayist approach is also complemented by an understated sociological and anthropological perspective. This book is not intended for an academic audience. There is no engagement with theoretical issues nor an attempt to offer an objective historical account. Rather, he aims to explore

the myth of soccer in Brazil and the myth of Brazilian soccer for the rest of the world.

In myths, facts do not always win the argument. Bellos is therefore at his best in capturing the memories and voices of fans. He realises that the game is not just about statistics on scoreboards, but more about the emotive drive within the sighs and screams of fans in the stands. After the game, these bodily gestures become stories, and the power of soccer lives on in the rumours that flow into and follow the endless debates on the quality of certain actions. For some fans, the discursive effects of sport are distilled in the pursuit of icons, the most precious icon being the shirts worn by the players. Bellos recounts a game of 'spot the club' with Fabio Menezes, a collector of over 420 shirts. 'Now this one', said Menezes, 'is *really* difficult—South Melbourne Hellas'. Menezes proudly recalled the shirt's exchange after a World Club competition in Rio, and Bellos, perhaps stunned that fetish value is extended to even an Australian soccer shirt, offers polite congratulations.

Bellos's account of the historical development of Brazilian soccer focuses on the vexed democratisation of race relations. According to socio-economic indicators Brazil is located fourth among the world's most polarised societies. The gap between rich and poor is staggering. While the *favelas* (slums) in Rio are cheek by jowl with some of the most opulent suburbs, the myth of fluidity among the races is paradoxically upheld not only as a source for potential transformation but also as the explanation for the nation's unique identity. Bellos informs us that the invention of the dribble by

black and mulatto players was a way of self-protection against whites. Guile was used where force would have been punished disproportionately. Excessive individualism reigned when team discipline could not be relied upon. Drawing on the work of Gilberto Freyre, the brilliant Brazilian sociologist whose work in mulatto cultural identity transformed the debates on nationhood, Bellos reports on the complex ways that soccer has served as a launching pad for the poor and as metaphor for the value of mixed-race practices. However, the myth is replayed in profound ambivalence. No story in Brazil is told as mournfully and compulsively as the tragic loss to Uruguay in the 1950 World Cup. The Brazilians, confident of their ultimate victory, built the Maracanã Stadium. This stadium also served as an awesome expression of Brazilian modernism. In front of 200,000 fans Gigghia weaved past the Brazilian defence and shot the winning goal. The newly built shrine to soccer became a tomb. A wave of heart attacks spread across the city as the drums, whistles and trumpets went silent. The mulatto curse that Freyre had tried to argue away came back to bite in the form of the 'stray dog complex'. (55) Brazilians felt condemned by their racial mixture. They had inherited the colonial mythology that mixture led not only to cultural dilution and moral depravity but also to biological sterility. Freyre had successfully argued against these theories and promoted a view that mixture would lead to a higher synthesis of European culture, African strength and native American beauty. This new myth was never fully internalised in

the national psyche, and with every failure the spectre of an impotent and homeless animal came back to haunt them.

To deal with this loss Brazilians fell back on the spike of abjection. Such a calamity could not be overcome by merely blaming the referee, the coach, the rain or even the players; the downfall was deeper because it exposed the supposed lack of moral fibre in the national identity. In this space logic has no ultimate weight, and the cut was made even deeper when Gigghia attempted to absolve the goalie of responsibility by pointing out he was not at fault for guarding the left post: 'He did the logical thing. I did the illogical ... and I had a little luck. In football you need luck and you need to go after luck.' (74-5)

The interpretation of the game is thus embedded within a rich discourse of spiritualism and fatalism. We are informed of goalies' persisting dread. According to one popular saying: 'For he is such a miserable wretch that even the grass does not grow where he stands on the pitch.' It is no surprise that goalies are regarded as the most religious players, routinely crossing themselves before penalty kicks. They know that if they succeed it is only because of a miracle and when they fail they will need all the support they can get.

Bellos captures such details with great sympathy and warmth. What is lacking is a broader frame for explaining the significance of such stories. The details from everyday life are fascinating but their relationship to a larger context is never examined with any rigour. Bellos notes the circular flows between syncretic forms of

faith and the eccentricities of football figures. He stresses the active engagement of fans in creating a carnival-like spectacle rather than seeing them as passive spectators (which effectively blurs the distinction between sporting performance and the fans' participation). However, there is little critical attention paid to the way national and cultural myths are mobilised in what is now known as the 'world game'. This is particularly evident in the rather glaring failure to reflect on the role of sport not just in the global media but as an agent of globalisation. Bellos gives an interesting account of the early role of radio and the press in creating specific forms of attachment, and even in whipping the fans into frenzy, but he avoids any discussion of the role of soccer on television and the Internet. His story stays within the discourse that linked sport to national and regional forms of identity. Yet today the key sponsor of the Brazilian soccer team is Nike. The imagined communities of fans have been deterritorialised and clubs aim to capture the attention of fans all over the world. Manchester United, indeed, has more registered fans in China than it does in England and all the major clubs now earn more from selling shirts than they do from ticket sales. Everyone knows that these shirts are the cheapest marketing strategies, but why do people get up in the middle of the night, put them on and watch a game on satellite television playing live on the other side of the world? While the strength of Bellos's book lies in his ability to convey the passions that have lifted Brazilian football to such heights, the fact that his narrative stays within

a national discourse risks losing sight of the new globalising forces and slipping into a cosy nostalgia for an imagined time when sporting teams could represent the dreams of a nation.

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