

# Has the nation hung up its soccer shoes?

In Brazil, football is something serious, seen by specialists as a paradigm of globalization

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It would seem that to watch all types of Parliamentary Investigation Committees on the television and to talk of the political crisis had turned into the Brazilian national sport. But the “mafia of the football whistle” showed that the country has still not hung up its soccer shoes: the discovery of corruption in the beloved sport managed to make the country leave aside the corrupt politicians to discuss a more serious question: soccer. “It’s perhaps the only item that arrived with the flow of

the Republican modernization, an authoritative modernization, the one that worked. Of everyone who became disenchanted with democracy and with the free market, with soccer the beloved bond was becoming more and more profound”, explains the anthropologist Roberto Da Matta. “This episode will make soccer come out even stronger, because, in this sport, the rules are clear and are far from the referees that manipulate them with limitations. It is the opposite of what is occurring in the political arena, where people make the rules and interpret them to their own pleasure”, he believes. Soccer shoes seem to be immortal.

Gradually soccer is becoming one of the Brazilian instruments of thinking and of, above all, classifying the world. The Brazilian nation is not just metaphorized in soccer, it has gone on to ‘exist’ as something concrete and palpable by way of the images constructed (starting) from this sport”, explains the anthropologist Igor Machado. “Soccer is a capital discourse about nationality. It is not simply another discourse about being Brazilian, but is fundamental for its constitution. There is no doubt that soccer is an alternative map, but it is a map as real as that of economic or political life, since it makes possible the nation’s sentiment. Besides, it makes possible an image of the nation almost in default of the economic conditions and the negative images of Brazil, an alternative world



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that presents itself as more just." Thus the "sea of mud" of the sport drowns the Brazilian more than that of politics. "But we can't forget that football is a caricature (in the sense that it brings in itself the essential traits) of Brazilian society. In the moments of glory or crisis, the history of the sport in the country had always been linked with socio-cultural, economic and political dynamics of the nation. Hence, tied up with such modernization", points out the economist from Unicamp, Marcelo Weishaupt Proni, author of *Metamorfose do futebol* [Metamorphosis of football].

**Marketing** - Fans are not usually led by reasoning and it is complex to remove from the Brazilian the eternal nostalgia for the "football art", corrupted by marketing and by modernism that attempt to transform, to the distaste of many, fans into consumers. "Throughout the century, the perceptions of 'backwardness' are recurrent as were the attempts to modernize Brazilian

society. The problem is that, in general, such modernism was latched onto in a partial manner. The roots remained, the archaic structure of power, superimposed by new clothing, a wrapping of modernism", observes Proni. "The evolution of our game went along in an analogous form with the modernization of the economic management of the sport advancing in front, out of step with the modernization of the political structure" To place soccer in step with the professionalization of the European clubs, various analysts have thought, would be the ideal way of liberating the sport from the relationship, at times spurious and always archaic, between it and the local or national governors. The state, in this ideal world, would only be watch over and impede abuses of power. However, this has not been verified, notes Proni. Alas, reiterating a model initiated back in the 1930s: "As soon as soccer became a popular phenomenon of the masses, there was no way to ignore the sport, and its influen-

ce as the state had done up until then", says Eliazar João da Silva, author of the doctorate thesis entitled, *"A seleção brasileira de futebol entre 1930 e 1958: o esporte como um dos símbolos de identidade nacional"* [The Brazilian national team from 1930 until 1958: the sport as one of the symbols of national identity], defended at Unesp.

On taking over the Presidency of the Republic in the 1930, President Vargas very smartly included in his National Reconstruction Program, of only 17 items, one exclusively about Brazilian soccer, regulating the profession of the soccer player. If it arrived in the country at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century elitist and justified by a Europeanized and eugenic discourse (the preparation of healthy youth) of warlike ends (healthy and ready for war), in a short time, because of its simplicity, it went on to make up part of the daily life of urban regions, especially with those that were poorer. "The verification that soccer had occupied the free time of various



social strata did not go unnoticed by the representatives of the New State. And the interpretation of football as a symbol of national identity was able to count upon the support of the press and intellectuals", says the researcher. Among them, Gilberto Freyre, who, giving background to his eulogy on the mixed character of the nation, said that "sport had a Brazilian soul, by way of the ideal meeting among Whites, Indians and Blacks, the basis of racial democracy as ideology".

The pioneer World Cup of 1930 showed to the Brazilian government the potential of the sport as a form of stimulating the desired sentiment of national and racial unity. Football had to be "at the service of the fatherland" and the victories on the field were symbols of success of the President Vargas regime. "The organization of the World Cup in 1950 increased this sentiment even further, because the success of Brazil could add propaganda to a country supposedly entrepreneurial", says Eliazar. What did not function during that World Cup went well in 1958, with the victory of the national team over Sweden, which "symbolized the idea that the Brazilian population had been prepared for the challenges of post war competitiveness". From the president Juscelino Kubitschek administration to the military regimes, all sold the idea of the "country of soccer", to the point that the sport would be erroneously placed under suspicion as a form of alienation, of regime control over the people. "Football joined, by chance, the national state and the people in its popular universe, its superstitions and creative force. To this end, it was a popular movement that gave to the people and to Brazil a feeling of power, of conviction in national possibilities, because, as a sport, it permitted associating bourgeois elements such as the market, the local set aside for its realization, the control of time, the use of uniforms, but, above all, the submission to universal rules, to the ethics of accepting a defeat as something normal, not as humiliation, and the victory as a passing glory and not everlasting", explains Da Matta.

If one day the sport created a nation, today it is seen as herald, a paradigm of globalization. "Football is a key to interpreting the spirit of the world. Football had already begun the circulation of the work force from one country to another, had already turned local tournaments hybrids and had contaminated the supporting crowds. In Europe, the major national teams are hybrids. This proves that football has anticipated reality.



The players move with freedom and arrived in all the valleys before economic globalization", analyzes Antonio Negri, author of *Empire*. "In this perspective, the World Cup is a singular anachronism. Nations no longer exist when the social and economic relations develop themselves on a universal scale, where the identities dissipate themselves. The

World Cup presents itself like a fiction of permanence of nations and our national pride is artificially revived. Sport anticipated globalization in an extraordinary manner."

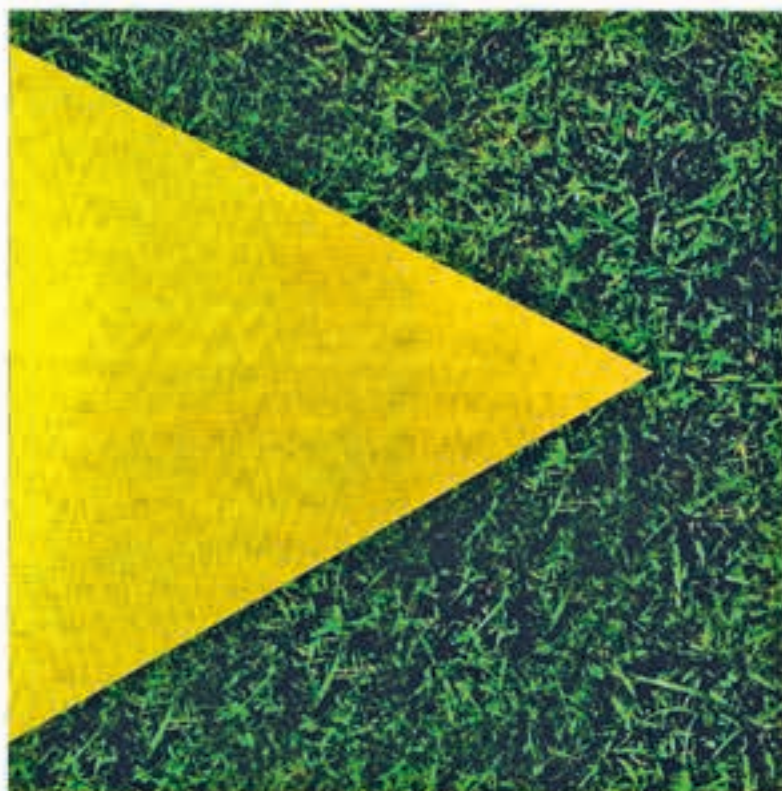
This game is definitely global: around 250 million people are directly linked to it and a further 1.4 billion have some type of interest in the sport. The World Cup finals attract audiences of 3 billion spectators. "Nothing is more global than soccer. But, in many forms, it reveals more (on) the limits of globalization than (of) its possibilities", states Franklin Foer, author of the recently launched *How football explains the world: an unlikely theory of globalization*. Brazil, indeed, is an exemplary case of the thesis of the Englishman: "Anachronous corruption rejects the supposed liberalization that would arrive with a global world and places Thomas Friedman upon his head". Thus, in spite of the world circulation of our soccer players and of the attempts to transform clubs into multinational conglomerates, soccer is a bone in the idea of unlimited power of the new world order.

"In cases like Brazil, corruption in football doesn't remain in defiance of globalization, but because of it. I believe the critics and the defenders of this order overestimate the force of destruc-

tion of local cultures by the internationalized market", notes Foer. Since 1992, with the partnership between the Italian company Parmalat and the football club Palmeiras, there have been various attempts at an approximation between international capital and local football, seen as highly potential by many transnational conglomerates: Hicks, Muse, Tate & Furst, have all thrown millions of US dollars into Brazilian teams. "Less than three years after they had arrived triumphantly in Brazil, the foreign investors left broke. The problem was that this modernization movement had to deal with archaic structures, the football bureaucrats, and this mixture between capital and corruption just doesn't work", the Englishman believes. The economist Luiz Gonzaga Belluzzo, a fan of the sport and the person who suggested the partnership between Parmalat and Palmeiras, disagrees. "We have the notion that the investors have knowledge of the market better than the common man, but they don't. They place bets that could win out, such as was the case of Hicks with Corinthians and with Cruzeiro", he says. "In football, they made projections that were almost carbon copies of businesses in Europe and the USA. Our people don't have this acquisition power and our capitalism is very poor."

**"Glocalization"** - "One has to take into account that globalization is a relative phenomenon and that part of it's an element that I call 'glocalization', or that's to say, the power of assimilation of universalism proposed by the new order to the particular situation of each country", ponders the sociologist Richard Giulianotti, author of *Sociologia do futebol* [The sociology of football]. "Soccer has been experimenting the transnational circulation of work, information and capital that knock out cultural particularities. There is, for example, more and more less tactical and esthetical differences between the manner of play of different nations, although various countries fight to provide relativity to this phenomenon by way of very successful competitions." Anyhow, for Giulianotti, the local roots of the sport cool down the impetus of negation of the particular by way of globalization. "In this mixture of the universalization of the par-





ticular and the particularization of the universal, soccer gives valuable lessons about how to better understand the new world order and to avoid errors." For him, there is the danger of being repeated, on an economic scale, what one can see on the playing fields: poor countries becoming the storehouses of athletes for the teams of rich countries, without any return.

"It is believable that we perceive our subordinate position in this globalized world, and football, as an economic fact, well portrays this grouping and our position as exporters of soccer stars. But this is also a simplistic vision", criticizes the anthropologist Luiz Henrique Toledo. "What I perceive is an expansion of our soccer, and not a repression. The players are there, but they apply dynamics to a symbolic economy here, adding value to our identity. Indeed, the recent increase in exporting of star players coincides with the position of Brazil in the last few World Cups, three ti-

mes finalist and victorious in two of them." But does this not interfere in the well-built national identity by way of soccer? "Identity isn't built on its own, estranged from the world, but in confrontation with this world. We will only know how to complain and to perceive our footballistic identity whenever we make a contrast with other styles and experiences", analyzes Toledo, for whom Brazil only started to win in sport when it straightened out its sporting relations with other cultures and printed an identifying mark or a cultural idiosyncrasy into the game, which is, he remembers, subject and open to changes.

**Rationales** - "One has to recognize that the loss of players to rich teams has a negative impact on local football, since without idols no event of the masses can be sustained. But, on the other hand, the players are better prepared for the World Cups, since playing abroad they obey a rational calendar. It has

been observed that in 1970, long before globalization, the Brazilian team was the one best prepared for the World Cup. They trained and how. It is as if speaking of work and effort were to undermine talent, as if science were stained by art. We have a mania of inventing heroes who are born ready", observes the sociologist Ronaldo Helal, from Uerj. The economist Branko Milanovic, from the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, a colleague of Dani Rodrik's, agrees. "The example of soccer illustrates well the type of globalization that we desire: let's go ahead with the mobility of the work force, let's increase the general output by way of an interaction among people, to make use of the sharing of talent, but without ensuring that the gains are divided also with those that don't have sufficient economic power." In the end, what is the worth of having the country wearing football soccer if they have holes and are covered in mud? •