



Opinion

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The Football World Cup is not About Nations Competing but About People Getting Together

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I saw Poland's dramatic loss, 1-2 with Senegal, together with two Polish friends just before going out to have a glass of wine on the Rhine's wonderful bank in Mainz. But unsurprisingly, even without a TV in site, I could not escape the World Cup. From time to time, two men dressed in Russian t-shirts jumped from the ship docked nearby, crazily shouting and screaming. At one point, their shouts were cheerfully returned by another two men, in Polish t-shirts, that just happened to pass by. I soon learned that Russia was leading 3-0 against Egypt (and would end up winning 3-1), in a game that pundits predicted much closer.

The next day I woke up to read a high-spirited email from a friend in Birmingham who detailed the World Cup games from the previous day and how the teams we randomly chose to support performed against each other. Later in the airport I was following Portugal's difficult game against Morocco while reading an interview with this German sport philosopher (!) who explained how the fascination with football comes from the paradox that humans compete against each other while totally restraining their most well-exercised and physical ability, handling.

World Cup is simply in the air. Everyone jumps, talks, screams in a special way these days. I definitely feel I cannot escape it. So, I won't even try.

The brief flashbacks from my stay in Mainz reveal I believe why the World Cup is special. Obviously, it is an exceptional event in many ways. It engages so many emotions and passions, people are exuberant, more than for the Olympics for example, whole cities, public squares and pubs become one in support of a team. But there is something more to it, that ever since I began study the nature and development of nationalism, never ceased to amaze me. The football World Cup has inherently the beautiful paradox that countries are competing against countries in fiercely disputed games but fans from all over the world actually come together, united in shared passions and emotions. From the eventful street of Moscow or Sankt Petersburg to the quiet and uneventful streets of

Mainz, Germany, one can see fans of different nationalities having a bear and a chat together and rarely an argument. Spanish and Portuguese, or Russian and Germans, are laughing and joking, playfully teasing each other. They interact in a way they never would if the World Cup did not give them the opportunity.

In fact, there are generally not many opportunities for people of different languages and cultures to interact with each other. The rise of national ideologies brought different ways of conceiving the past, present and future for different nations. Nation-states preached and fostered dialogue within one's own borders but not with other cultures and ethnic groups. Multilingualism was discouraged, international languages as well, shared histories, traditions and characteristics of different 'nations' were obliterated.

One side effect of the rise of the nations has been the emergence of international sports competitions. If at the Ancient Greek Olympics athletes competed for their own personal glory and secondly to that of their local communities, more than two thousand years later, at the first modern Olympic Games of 1896, athletes were already just representatives and subsumed to a concept far bigger than themselves, 'the nation'.

But in spite of the direct connection with nationalism, sports competitions between countries do not reflect the ideology of nationalism. They do not divide but bring people together. Almost by magic, while nations are competing in football games, nationals are bounded not only with their own kin but with other nationals, by shared passions, shared types of emotions, and a plethora of other, more prosaic things, such as a pint, a bet and a table in a pub. Football, as the global sport par excellence, has the wonderful capacity to nurture connections, to make people share their feelings and their passions. This could be a first step to more deep and durable connections.

I cannot wait to go out again this afternoon. Maybe I will have the chance to exchange a few words with a Senegalese, Polish,

Tunisian, Costa Rican, Nigerian, Korean, Panamanian, etc., etc. It is the football World Cup and I plan to indulge in it.

Conflict of Interest

No conflict of interest.

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