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The Right to Celebrate

Claudio Tamburrini

Stockholm Bioethics Centre, Stockholm University



Claudio Tamburrini will go to Germany for this year's Football World Cup. So will hundreds of thousands of other football fans, so what? To fully grasp the significance of finding Dr. Tamburrini at a football stadium in Germany, cheering for the Argentinian side, one must consider his background; a professional footballer and leftwing activist, Tamburrini was summarily imprisoned in 1978 by the rightwing dictatorship and subjected to cruel torture. He managed to escape after four months, and three months before the 1978 World Cup started in Argentina, and cheered with the rest of the nation – Left and Right – as Argentina worked its way through the tournament, eventually to win the final. Sport nationalism is the subject for Claudio Tamburrini's column.

On March 24th 1978, during the preparations for the football World Cup in Argentina, I escaped from a concentration camp outside Buenos Aires where a group of the Air Force had kept me captive for exactly 120 days^[1]. That destiny I shared with thousands of Argentinians who were illegally detained and tortured. Many of them were killed by their captors. Almost 3 months later, I dared to leave my hideout for the first time after my escape and joined the cheering crowds celebrating the Argentinian team's victory over Peru by 6-0, which put Argentina in the final against Holland. Did I do the right thing? Was it right to support "our" (even the military's!) team, as I and thousands of football supporters did?

The standard Leftist answer to that question is no. Particularly intellectuals have always expressed the opinion that the crowd's celebrations of sporting events or festivities (such as the Carnival in Brazil) are instances of political "false consciousness". Instead of dealing with their problems, the masses turn to diversion and amusement, thereby perpetuating the political domination of the ruling classes. Sport nationalism, in other words, is opium for the masses.

I am not so sure about that answer. Not only because it deprives the poor and disadvantaged of the right to cheer; it also sets up a political agenda for them in a paternalistic manner. Who are the intellectuals to judge how the poor and disadvantaged should behave politically? Besides, might it not be the case that participating in the celebrations will instead strengthen people and make them fight even harder against injustices? Actually, there are no well-established facts of the matter regarding the supposed paralysing effect of celebrations in a situation of political crisis or social and

economic misery.

But, it could be argued, the Argentinian case was special. The eyes of the whole world were directed towards that tournament. Further, the Argentinian regime was particularly cruel and oppressive. A general boycott to the World Cup might have accelerated the military's fall (as the defeat at the Malvinas/Falkland's war some years later did), thereby saving hundreds, perhaps even thousands of lives. A similar criticism was directed to the coach of the Argentinian team César Menotti, a man with publicly expressed Leftist sympathies who nonetheless accepted being used by the huge propaganda apparatus of the military dictatorship by coaching the national team. And it can hardly be denied that, at that moment, the regime clearly understood that, during the months to come, Argentinian football would literally become a battle field in which the international reputation of the military rule was at stake.

At the time of my abduction, I played football professionally in Almagro, a modest second division club which, after year 2000, managed to make a couple of less successful incursions in the first Argentinian league. The immediate reaction of my club's officials was to give me "free transfer": I no longer was considered to be part of the club. During my captivity, an official propaganda campaign was launched by the military regime under the slogan "Argentiniens are humane and right" ("Los argentinos somos derechos y humanos"), in an attempt to discredit the international action orchestrated by human rights organizations all over the world, facing the imminent World Cup. A famous sport journalist, together with the right-wing mass media, headed the official campaign and took advantage of every occasion to spread that slogan, particularly during the transmissions of the matches of the Argentinian league. In view of such a situation, many people have argued since, the only decent thing to do was to abstain from the show.

Maybe there is a grain of truth in that criticism. After all, sport nationalism is a dubious phenomenon. The following example will suffice to illustrate this. During my captivity, some of us were taken to the kitchen by the guards to look a F1-race in Brazil on TV. When the Argentinian racer Carlos Reuteman won the race, we all – the guards and the prisoners – embraced each other, shouting "Argentina, Argentina!" in unison.

However, reality is much too complicated to be explained by standard political formulas. Perhaps the question is not so much "to participate" as opposed to "not participate", but rather what one does to alleviate the situation of those suffering of injustices, whatever course of action finally selects.

A couple of years after the national team's victory over Holland in the final, Menotti became the first football celebrity to sign, together with other renowned persons, a paid-for announcement in a major Argentinian newspaper demanding to right to know what happened to the thousands of people abducted by the regime. On the way to the final, Argentinians gradually felt a newly born courage and regained control over the streets of the country, as they hadn't been able to do since the military coup in 1976. That night, celebrating with all the football fans on the streets, I revived the feeling I had at the moment of my escape, that the regime was far from being unassailable, and that I could leave my hideout, go abroad and announce what I had witnessed to the international community. How many lives were saved when the masses were back on the streets again? Or by a newspaper announcement with the name of Menotti, perhaps the most famous football coach at that moment? Even we, the prisoners cheering for Reuteman with the guards, managed to gather all the intelligence information on how the concentration camp was run, and used it to plan our escape.

The examples above suggest that even the most suspect forms of sport nationalism might have positive effects for the political development of a nation. In the Argentinian case, perhaps those effects might have been attained more quickly by a general international boycott. But was that indeed a realistic alternative?

In a few weeks, the Football World Cup gets started in Germany. Football fans from all over the world are looking forward to that event with the kind of passion only football – the greatest mass cultural manifestation of the modern era – can originate. But, again, the question could be asked whether it's really appropriate to celebrate. After all, the world has not become a better place since the 1978 Cup. The detention practices to which I was subjected in my youth are now being overtly applied on a world-wide basis, and some of the most powerful nations of the world see themselves justified in launching wars and invading other countries, claiming preventive aims.

A couple of months before the World Cup, my former club Almagro organized a match in memory of the victims of the military rule. The event was covered by the media, including the ones who, almost thirty years ago, promoted the "humane and right"-campaign. Do you want to know what I did? I took part in it. And soon I'll be going to Germany? to cheer for my team. It is not wrong to participate, provided we give the football party a positive, democratic content. Perhaps the world's latest political events will be reflected during the tournament?

Sport is a powerful political weapon. We should never surrender it into enemy hands.

[1] Dr. Tamburrini's experiences as a prisoner of the Argentinian military regime are narrated in his book *Pase Libre – La fuga de la Mansión Seré* (Free transfer: The escape from Mansión Seré). The book has recently been filmed and the movie opens during the first half of 2006.

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