The Last World Cup?: Slavoj Žižek and the (Im)Possibility of Democratic Reform of FIFA.

It is my hope today to make a case for using the theories of Slovenian Marxist philosopher Slavoj Žižek to assess the need for reform of FIFA, an organization whose reputation is (rightly) at an unprecedented low. I will use the controversial decision to award the 2018 and 2022 World Cup finals to Russia and Qatar respectively as being emblematic of the myriad problems that beset world football governance today. This widely criticized moment inaugurated a period of intense public criticism and marks a turning point of historical significance for FIFA. Coming in the wake of the contested awarding of these tournaments in late 2010, I contend that Brazil 2014 will be the last World Cup of the sort with which we have become familiar—a tournament that is indicative of FIFA’s apparent willingness to subordinate all other considerations (the lives of workers, the social impact on the citizens of host nations, the quality of football that is played, etc) to the economic bottom line. The nearly two million protestors at the Confederations Cup this summer have made choosing another type of tournament—one which is not a mechanism for privatizing profit and socializing debt— and another type of FIFA almost inevitable. As Eduardo Galeano recently argued, “Brazilians, who are the most soccer-mad of all, have decided not to allow their sport to be used anymore as an excuse for humiliating the many and enriching the few.” Next summer, during the finals proper, we can expect much more of the same—wave after wave of protests that dramatize people’s outrage with what the beautiful game has been made into on its biggest stage of all. How might Žižek help us theorize these troubles? While he writes about almost everything but football, his models of cultural critique can be easily translated from the world in general to the world of football, since both spheres share similar and related problems.

It is first worth noting (somewhat depressingly) that nothing about the 2018/2022 World Cup hosting process was substantively atypical, nor was the decision itself particularly illegitimate—it was, in fact, business as usual in the context of FIFA’s perverse *modus operandi*. However, because so many people felt that the decisions that were arrived at appear egregious—so clearly motivated by considerations other than footballing ones, so directly contradictory to FIFA’s mission statements—that we need to think about this organization and this process in a new way. The institutional commitment to commercialism and spectacle at any cost initiated during the Havelange era and accelerated under Blatter’s tenure appeared to reach its apogee at this
moment, particularly with the Qatar decision. An organization that selects a host nation approximately the same size as Aarhus and with fewer citizens, which has no notable footballing tradition, no evidence of a lively footballing culture, which is indeed climatologically incompatible with either playing or watching football, and whose only real claim to international fame is the oil wealth buried beneath its surface can hardly seriously claim to be “For the Game” or “For the World.” Russia, too, seems to many a dubious choice, and for many of the same reasons—its geographical incompatibility with the tournament, its devastating and worsening social inequalities, its abysmal human rights record, its negligent public interest in domestic football and, last but definitely not least, the massive (and massively concentrated) profits derived from its oil and natural gas deposits. Russia and Qatar also shared the dubious distinction of being the two most operationally risky nations by FIFA’s own bid evaluation group.

How to account for the strangeness of this moment, which seemed at once to stun the sporting world and yet was precisely what one might expect given the players involved? Žižek’s particular conception of ideology is useful here. Žižek has risen to prominence as the leading exponent of the ‘good old fashioned half-forgotten art of the critique of ideology.’ One of his favourite ways of defining this idea is to build upon an example provided by the ‘great American philosopher’ Donald Rumsfeld in 2002. While attempting to suggest Saddam Hussein’s possession of unimaginably terrifying weapons of mass destruction, Rumsfeld advanced an infamous theory of knowledge:

[Citing Rumsfeld] ‘There are known knowns. There are things that we know that we know. There are known unknowns. That is to say, there are things that we know we don’t know. But there are also unknown unknowns. There are things we don’t know we don’t know.’ [Žižek continues] What he forgot to add was the crucial fourth term: the ‘unknown knowns,’ the things we don’t know that we know….the main dangers lie in the ‘unknown knowns’—disavowed beliefs, suppositions and obscene practices we pretend not to know about, even though they form the background of our public values.

Ideology, for Žižek, is these ‘unknown knowns’ which constitute the parameters of our thinking in socially useful ways and limit our comprehension of cultural phenomena. The critical question, then, for Žižek is: what do we not know that we know about football?
Certainly, today almost everyone (and certainly everyone in this room) is aware that all is not well in the (footballing) world—the secret is out! The majority of the mainstream media today assume the existence of a cynical viewer who believes the elite game is being made worse by money in various ways. How can football abide such critique and still flourish? Another Žižekian notion is useful here: the idea of the *denkverbot*, or ‘prohibition against thinking’ beyond certain ideologically determined boundaries. Žižek argues that, unlike other systems of rule which limit free speech to contain dissent, our contemporary social order is unusually predicated on a healthy degree of public critique, which paradoxically sustains the system rather than undermining it: “In short, it means: say and write whatever you like – on condition that you do not actually question or disturb the prevailing political consensus. Everything is allowed, solicited even, as a critical topic…The problem is that all this occurs against a background of a fundamental Denkverbot: a prohibition on thinking…[in ways that might lead to] engaging in political projects which aim seriously to challenge the existing order.”

What, then, is the denkverbot as regards the problem of FIFA, and what are the acceptable limits of reformist thinking? Primarily, it seems to me that we place too great a hope on the possibility of democratic reform, both in terms of changes to personnel or to structural governance problems. While changes in these areas are a good thing, and will make things better in some ways, for Žižek the problem is at bottom an economic one—we ought to stop characterizing what is fundamentally a problem of economics as primarily one of governance, since doing so leads us first to consider democratic solutions rather than economic ones. The problems at FIFA and the current issues with World Cup planning are principally economic in character—the organization has chosen to conform itself to the demands of global capitalism, to model itself on a transnational corporation, and is behaving accordingly. No institution that defines itself in this way could do significantly otherwise, regardless its democratic structure or internal politics.

Indeed, counter-intuitively, many of the problems besetting FIFA today might actually be understood as democratic in origin. Blatter’s much criticized tenure (as well as that of his predecessor) has been facilitated by his manipulation of the organization’s well-intended democratic mechanisms. He exerts control over the organization by virtue of his electoral mastery of its primary decision making body, EXCO. He has been successful in multiple election
bids due to his shrewd manipulation of FIFA’s one country-one vote policy, which while theoretically admirable is practically disastrous. Even the controversial Qatar and Russia decisions were arguably triumphs of democratic decision making rather than subversions of it—they were chosen in a free election and have been defended (as was South Africa) precisely as reflecting a righteous desire that all member states and confederations should be equally able to host the finals, not just traditional European footballing superpowers.

The fundamental ideological problem, then, for Žižek, is not one of a paucity of democracy but rather of an excess of capitalism, which has wound itself deep into the DNA of elite football in general and FIFA in particular. Nearly all of the problems besetting FIFA at the moment are expressions of the fact that they seem motivated primarily by profit, and are really only problems if you do not accept the premise that this is what FIFA is really for. This helps explain the bemusement of so many at the news of the 2018/2022 allocations and it helps explain the spontaneous social movement against the tournament in Brazil last summer. For decades, FIFA has elected to run world football like a business. The only thing that has really changed is the extent to which this is the case. Despite its unconvincing claims to be “For the Game. For the World,” if the answer to the existential question “what is football for” is in actuality nothing more than “for profit,” then problems such as those we are experiencing today are inevitable regardless of who is in charge or what governance structure is adopted.

A focus on politics over economics is apparent in most proposed reforms of FIFA—many of which present themselves as sweeping yet remain within this ideological framework. Despite a wealth of critique of the corrosive effects of capital on football, there still remains the underlying assumption that we can alter football’s governance structure and insodoing have our cake and eat it too—we can retain all of the spectacular things we like about the game today while doing away with its capitalist excesses. Žižek’s concern would be that only those solutions which would change things by not really changing them are considered, rejecting at the outset solutions which lie outside the sphere of capitalist ideology. For Žižek, put simply, all proposals to rid football (or our culture) of the negative effects of capital from entirely within the capitalist horizon are ultimately doomed to fail.

A utopian faith in capitalism’s ability to correct itself or be reined in democratically is everywhere apparent in critical football ideology, and certainly in the range of solutions which
bear serious discussion. For Žižek, this focus is diversionary, and he would have us remember that if we are interested in changing these worlds in the long term and for the better, then we must focus on the financial system itself rather than those who may exploit it. For Žižek, capitalism will always concentrate resources unfairly, will always arrange power unequally: far from being a flaw of the system which can be corrected with better governance or different leadership, the desire to move more and more money through the game is the very engine of capital itself, its driving mechanism, which will always find ways to override any attempts to contain it. He reminds us of Bertolt Brecht’s injunction to ‘change the system, not individuals,’ but the system that needs changing in football is primarily economic rather than political. Žižek counsels: ‘In football we win if we obey the rules. In politics we win if we have the audacity to change the rules.’ This means rethinking what elite football might look like if it were governed by non-capitalist principles and for non-capitalist ends, which is to say, imagining what football might be for if it was not for money.