

Football and Society in Brazil

Mauricio Murad

Executive Summary

In 1894, football arrived in Brazil or, more precisely, in São Paulo. And since it came to a country that, at the time, was still influenced by the colonial era and the culture of slavery, it became part of this culture, acquiring an elitist, racist, and exclusive character – no different from that of the country itself.

Even in today's Brazil there are manifestations of social exclusion, violence, and racism, in a country where more than 50 million people live below the poverty line, where the population does not really enjoy equal opportunities, and where there is hardly any chance of improvement in socio-economic conditions. Brazil was founded on the basis of several perverse factors, two of them being corruption and impunity, which are still characteristic of its reality.

The same holds true for football. Being elitist, racist, and exclusive was normal, and football became an integral part of life in the rich clubs of the country's big cities. However, Brazil's poor also enjoyed the new sport and thus, next to its elitist life in the clubs, it spontaneously became the medium by which the disadvantaged expressed their attitude towards life. Football conquered the street.

The history of Brazilian football is also a history of social struggle in the biggest South American country, so that it now carries a special sociological meaning. Football offers access to the fundamental dimensions of Brazil's social life. Here, football is more than just a game for the masses, it is a metaphor of social life par excellence. The early history of Brazilian football, with its tension between being a sport for the elites and fun for the masses, also marked the beginning of a popularisation process, in whose course football developed into the most powerful expression of the so-called popular culture of the country. This development may be divided into several stages: Between 1910 and 1920, football found a new home in Brazil, the sport entered the clubs in the twenties, and in the fifties, its popularisation and 'democratisation' was complete.

The country's poor classes gave football its 'Brazilian' character. What is expressed in football is a cultural identity inherited from the Indian and black population. In 1965, Anatol Rosenfeld, one of the fathers of Brazilian football sociology, stated that it is not important what a nation plays at, but how it plays. According to Rosenfeld, this is what the culture of a game is all about. Distinguished education theorists and teachers such as Mrs Montessori and Mr Bettelheim argued that children should have time to be children since this is their only and irretrievable opportunity to enjoy idleness and leisure, fun, games, and sport, thus developing creativity and sensitiveness through experience.

Football is the most popular sport in the world; billions of people – amateur and professional football players, fans, and innumerable employees in the field – devote themselves to football.

According to the experts, football is considered the most spontaneous, most unpredictable, most stable, easiest, cheapest, and most democratic sport of all. Mr Havelange, the honorary president of the FIFA, said that the global turnover in the football business amounts to 255 billion US dollars, while that of General Motors, the biggest industrial concern in the world, is no more than 170 billion.

However, football also is an amateur sport which, next to being ritualised by its masses of fans, has some educational content and social competence. Football with its characteristic violence and generosity, exclusiveness and egalitarianism is aesthetically presented by artists. Football not only reflects but also obscures reality. It may set either a good or a bad example.

Football is used for therapeutic purposes among needy children and adolescents who grow up in violent surroundings. Football as a sport enhances awareness and thus becomes a social factor; in social situations of deprivation and aggressiveness, it serves both as contrast and compensation. And indeed, football as a sport is capable of keeping social violence in check.

The UNO/UNESCO declared 2005 the International Year of Sport and Physical Education. In this context, it has been pointed out that a connection exists between improved physical and sports skills and the project of promotion, integration, re-education, and social peace. The 150 action programmes of 2005 included fielding a football team of young Israelis and Palestinians. This and the previous announcement of the 'European Year of Education through Sport 2004' by the EU Parliament may be applauded as the result of a long historical development. For many years now, the UNO and the FIFA have been jointly supporting tens of thousands of football sports centres purposing to bring people together and promote inter-cultural contacts.

In some way or other, Brazil has always found that football reflects its reality and its social condition. Football is like a book which tells about the positive as well as the negative features of Brazilian society. And yet – despite the country's huge problems, the Brazilians themselves are considered the best football players in the world. The Brazilians' musical, carnivalesque, and physical creativity and nature take shape within the 'four lines' of the game. However, features such as social violence, the authoritarianism of the rulers, and the country's misery also find their expression in Brazilian football.

Football is one of the country's big issues – at home, in bars, and at universities. It is part of Brazil's cultural identity; it is the synthesis of the life of its people. Looking at Brazilian football, you will discover the country and its roots, a kind of psychoanalysis of the life of the population.

Yet although football is strongly linked with the name of Brazil, it is an international event after all. It is the world championship itself that is the great spectacle which throws enthusiastic football fans from all over the world into a fever of expectation. And this is the reason why a life with football should lead us to a universal insight: The starting point of all human endeavour must be equality of opportunity, the end, however, is victory won through merit and skill.