

World Football in the Twenty-First Century: A Manifesto

The ideas in this presentation are drawn from a forthcoming book length project that uses the theory of Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek to imagine what football should be for in the 21st century. Today, I will focus on international football (particularly FIFA) and advance a ten point plan that is grounded in a deep analysis of the appeal and the antagonisms of the game itself, that is practically and almost immediately implementable, politically and economically feasible, and fit for the purpose of managing what the sport is and will be, rather than what it was once imagined to be.

Before I get to the manifesto itself—and because I lack the time to carefully develop each of these ideas as fully as I should—I will outline some preliminary Žižekian assumptions that inform this analysis. To the broad conference question of whether or not reform or revolution is required, my answer is that only a combination of both can lead to the creation of an organization that is up to the task of governing football, but that genuinely revolutionary reforms are required. Žižek is singularly well suited to help us in this regard. My broader project is to transpose his critical ideas about the world/ capitalism in general into the realm of football/ capitalism specifically. From this analytical perspective, the following must be true of any attempts to fix FIFA:

- a. “It’s the economy, stupid.” Most importantly, football’s problems are symptomatic of its increasingly complex relationship to modern capital, and must be treated as such. Moreover, they are *inevitable* consequences of this relationship, rather than evidence of an avoidable systemic breakdown.
- b. Solutions must be found beyond the football/capitalist *denkverbot*, Žižek’s term for a ‘prohibition against thinking’ beyond certain widely agreed to, and fundamentally conservative, premises which necessarily mirror those that exist in the world at large. In this case, solutions which focus on ‘corruption’ scandals, personnel changes, and minor governance reforms to FIFA’s operations are the most widely discussed remedies *precisely* because they will ensure that nothing actually changes, that the matrix of power remains as it is.
- c. Football administration must be reimagined as something that is not just a business: FIFA is in fact responsible for managing a globally shared resource, a

resource that exists not on the field of play, but in the relationship between this field and its legions of fans, who are the real source of its incredible appeal and value.

- d. The challenge of football administration, then, is at bottom a challenge of the commons, and Žižek believes that capitalist systems are fundamentally ill equipped to address major problems of the commons in the 21st century.
- e. Football's embrace of capital has had and continues to have consequences: capitalism has victims, particularly those ("the part with no part") who are excluded from, but necessary to, its operation. If football wishes to continue to tarry with capital, it needs to do so on behalf of those who suffer from it, and not profit at their expense. It needs to make central to its reason for being those who are currently most marginalized by its way of doing business.
- f. The ideology of football governance (it's "unknown knowns") needs transforming: it needs to be *for* something else. FIFA can and must be made to stand for that which is attractive about the beautiful game, not symbolic of the worst features of its current excesses as a business.

So, how can these theoretical claims help world football out of its current deadlock? In the months following the latest and most spectacular FIFA crisis, the world's media has been awash in critical commentary spiraling around one fundamental question: what is to be done? There is near consensus on the basic notion that sweeping changes to world football governance are urgently required, but little agreement on what precisely to do. Reform? Revolution? FIFA? A new governing body entirely? To date, none of the proposed remedies has acquired significant uptake on the part of those who care about the game of football. Out of these debates, we have heard lots of criticisms of FIFA and many proposals about improving its governance and enhancing its transparency, but nothing that will actually transform that organization for good. This is often an issue for activists: consider, for example, how little changed in the banking system following the 2008 financial crisis, when things had become so bad that any sweeping proposal would have been seriously considered had they been available.

The problem (or one of them)—in both the world of football and the world at large—is that for Žižek one of the unique features of modern capital and its symptomatic systems after the so-

called ‘end of history’ is that they are so deeply entrenched that alternatives seem beyond comprehension. As he has observed “it is now easier to imagine the destruction of the earth and everything in it than it is to imagine significant changes to our economic system.”

However, the dismal depths to which elite football has been dragged of late have made even the most radical, exciting, egalitarian possibilities widely imaginable, in some ways perhaps even inevitable. Žižek says that “[i]n football we win if we obey the rules. In politics we win if we have the audacity to change the rules.” These, then, are my proposals for the new rules of FIFA, —or of whichever body replaces it—and they will change it for good. Some are familiar, others entirely new. I will speak first to those reforms which will be required to reign in FIFA’s perfectly natural leanings toward various sorts of corruption (dependence and otherwise), clientelism, and the perpetuation of a self-serving old-boys club. While I go on to propose some more revolutionary, fundamental transformations of FIFA that are also required for these reforms to be meaningful, these are nonetheless important policies that need to be implemented.

1. Term limits of four years for *every* elected position within FIFA *as well as* for each of its national associations.
 - FIFA is currently largely like any other kind of business in that it is run by career executives: it isn’t one, and it’s inappropriate that it should be populated as though it were.
 - Note: a reasonable counterargument to this point and to several others below is that FIFA lacks the authority to mandate its members to do this, which is strictly speaking correct. Critically, however, it is also true that national associations almost exclusively derive their power and wealth from their affiliation with FIFA. If national associations want to participate in FIFA tournaments, and if they want to have a say in how that organization is run, then they must and will comply¹.

2. An immediate move toward not just greater but *absolute* transparency of both governance and accounting decisions for the entirety of FIFA, as well as for each of its associations.

¹ It is less clear whether or not the six confederations could be similarly pressured to comply, but all of the recommendations I make here pertaining to FIFA and the national associations would be similarly transformative of these organizations, as they are beset by comparable problems.

- Each body will receive a template of accounting/ reporting regulations to comply with each year which will be independently monitored.
 - This will include a mandated percentage of spending in certain areas as a condition of FIFA's continued distribution of funds.
 - None of these entities are for profit businesses *per se* and it is inappropriate for them to be run as such: rather, they are managers of a shared global resource and act on behalf of its stakeholders (fans, players, etc.). Their accounting and governance practices should be visible to the stakeholders they represent.
3. The encouragement of broader and more participatory involvement in football governance by its stakeholders and communities of interests at every level of the game.
- All elected positions within FIFA and its associations must be open elections in which any interested member of the footballing community can vote electronically. The technology is already available for this kind of direct democracy: it is logistically simple, affordable, and secure.
 - As a lifelong player and supporter of the game, I should be allowed as much of a say as anyone else in determining who will make decisions about the management of the shared resource I love in their role as head of the Canadian Soccer Association, CONCACAF, and FIFA. And I should be provided with all of the information required to make these decision as informed as possible: this means access to financial reports, voting records, and so forth.
4. This will entail an abolition of the recently implemented barriers which restrict who can apply for top FIFA governance positions. So long as they receive the approval of an independent ethics committee and are the candidate for the job who receives the greatest level of support from those they will represent, then they are the woman or man for the job. Again, this must apply not just to FIFA but also to all its associations.
5. FIFA has made much of its 'apolitical' status: this has always been nonsense, as it is not, nor can there be, such a beast as an apolitical organization with the size and scope of those which govern football. It needs to stop pretending otherwise, and proceed as an

organization that has social, political and economic principles, as all organizations do. It would do well to show leadership in this regard.

- One of these commitments, for instance (and there are many more²), ought to be a feminist one. The world's women—the fastest growth area of the game on and off the field, and the demographic that has the most potential to more fully contribute its talents to world football—must be better represented both in greater numbers and in positions of greater influence within football governance.
 - An initial move in this direction might begin with policy requiring that no organization have a male President for three consecutive terms, which would ensure both an uptake in the number of female candidates holding positions of power, as well as increasing the impulse to give interested female candidates the opportunity to develop the skills needed to hold higher office.
 - Gender equity must be also be made a criteria of the funding that FIFA redistributes. Countries like Saudi Arabia, for instance, that actively prohibit the involvement of girls and women in football, should have their funding cut to reflect this.
6. A massive reduction in the obscene remuneration and benefits currently enjoyed by football executives to eliminate the grotesque inequities between the game's administrators and its real world fans. The days of first class air travel, on call limousines, 7 star hotels, bountiful free tickets for games, lavish gifts and per diems needs to end and end immediately.
- None of these things are befitting an organization whose core responsibility is to act as stewards of something commonly owned. Remuneration should be in line with those of other public sector managers in the same country.

² For instance, by demonstrating leadership in the fight against catastrophic climate change which will in the long term ultimately make playing football (as well as most other things) impossible in the way it is currently done. Despite issuing numerous platitudes about sustainability, in practice FIFA (along with other mega-event organizers like the IOC) has become and more and more closely aligned with petrostates (Qatar, Russia, Brazil, Canada) and partnerships with energy giants like Gazprom, such that its tournament have increasingly become greenwashing tools bought and paid for by petrodollars.

7. A strict policy of zero tolerance for ethics breaches, and an end to the practice of providing only lifetime bans to those found robbing the spoils of the game. These punishments ought to be supplemented with football organizations pressuring law enforcement agencies to rigorously pursue legal actions against those enriching themselves and their friends through their theft of a common resource, as well as by the robust legal pursuit of stolen wealth.

8. The implementation of moves to bring an end to the discordant demographic homogeneity and accordingly narrow focus of those charged with managing football³. FIFA and company do not just preside over the elite men's game, but also the women's game, the development of the game for youth and for the differently abled, for amateur players, players unions, supporters groups, and so forth. Advocates for these groups must play a much more central role in all football governance.
 - This must be reflected not only in the makeup of FIFA's new power structure, but also more fully in how it redistributes our wealth. The associations and federations must be given guidelines about the appropriate allocations that must be made with their FIFA income to ensure that this diversity is represented.

9. A removal of FIFA's ability to select World Cup hosts, which is emblematic of most of their problems. Instead, the finals should rotate through each continent (in the way they once did) but hosting rights will be given to the nation from the next host continent in succession whose team does the best at the preceding World Cup. (For instance, if Asia is hosting the 2026 tournament, then the Asian team that does the best in the 2022 tournament hosts.)
 - The only caveat is that in order to be eligible to exercise the opportunity to host, nations must meet certain easily devised benchmarks regarding human rights records, press freedoms, environmental records, levels of income inequality, tolerance of racist or homophobic behavior within a country's domestic game, etc.

³ Several of the proposals above will hopefully address this over time: 4 and 5 in particular.

- World Cup finals have become prestigious tools of geopolitical soft power, advertisements for nation states, and excuses for socially, economically, and environmentally ruinous neoliberal deformations of the spaces in which they occur. This is as unnecessary as it is wrong: FIFA should restrict (as another condition of hosting) rather than encourage the creation of new stadia and tournament-centric public spending on new infrastructure projects.
- This globally minded proposal will accomplish several things:
 - It will empower footballers, and create tournaments that are more exciting for more people: national teams that may not have a chance to win the competition can still compete to win something meaningful.
 - It will de-incentivize irresponsible spending on the part of host nations, who will have less than four years to prepare, and no need to boast about so-called development schemes as part of a competitive bidding process. Simultaneously, it will incentivize responsible spending: the only way a nation can increase the chances of their hosting a tournament will be long and short term investment in their football development programs and infrastructure, and ensuring they comply with the ethical benchmarks required of host nations.
 - Because of the reduced emphasis on construction and infrastructure, fans will actually get to experience something approximating the actual nations where these events take place, rather than simulacra of those nations. It may well happen that tournaments will take place in smaller nations and that the matches will be played in smaller or older stadiums or that visiting fans will not get to stay in new 5 star hotels. This is the world we live in.
 - It will considerably reduce the cost of the World Cup for FIFA—who earned \$4.8bn but spent \$2.3bn on the last tournament—and even more so for the citizens of host nations, who customarily find themselves paying (and paying much more than they were told) for the spending sprees their governments have undertaken in concert with the tournament.

- It will remove one of the two main sources⁴ of both dependence and outright financial corruption responsible for many of FIFA's troubles.

And finally: not only in the response to the most recent manifestation of the FIFA crisis, but for *decades*, thinking about elite football has been limited by Žižek's *denkverbot*. The current state of unprecedented chaos regarding the international governance of the game, and the fact that it appears likely that its new shape will be largely determined within the next year, have opened up hitherto unimaginable possibilities for world football to be imagined from beyond the parameters of the *denkverbot*. Indeed, if football governance is to be properly transformed, this is precisely what is required: we need a revolution in FIFA, but what would that even look like?

I think it begins with a return to the most fundamental question about the beautiful game which we don't spend nearly enough time thinking and talking about, possibly because it has long seemed a settled issue: *what is football and FIFA for?* Given the specific nature of FIFA's central antagonisms, but also in recognition of its unique potential, I propose the following final idea as FIFA's claim for continued institutional relevance:

10. Since I have argued that FIFA needs to be *for* something, I suggest a *literal* commitment to its existing primary organizational claim: FIFA should actually be "For the Game. For the World." 50% of all of FIFA's income should be dispersed annually to the United Nations World Food Program⁵ into perpetuity, with the rest—vastly reduced existing expenses⁶, operating costs, and other necessary commitments aside—going to the national associations. This should begin with an immediate payment of one half of its current approximate US\$1.5 billion cash reserves, which it has steadily been growing for no good purpose (a decade ago they kept about one fifth this amount in reserve).⁷
 - This first donation alone in the hands of the UN WFP would save the lives of around five million men, women and children who are currently living in extreme

⁴ The other is the FIFA Presidential election, which will also be addressed with proposals 3 and 4 above.

⁵ Why this organization in particular? They are the only one large enough to handle sums of this size: in 2014, they assisted 80 million people, including 17 million school children, in 82 countries. They have exceptionally low administrative overheads and are the most singularly dedicated to the provision of nutrition to anyone, anywhere, who is hungry, which is fundamentally prerequisite to the ability to enjoy football.

⁶ It should also signal an end to the perhaps well-intentioned but practically disastrous Goal program, which quickly and perversely became one of FIFA's most potent tools of corruption.

⁷ <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-32923882>

poverty⁸—roughly the population of Denmark— by providing them with enough food for a year. This would be a historic accomplishment, the greatest thing that has ever happened as a result of 22 humans kicking around a ball.

- This ongoing commitment will help the UN in its Zero Hunger by 2030 campaign⁹, whose aim is to sustainably end hunger and extreme poverty on our planet within the next decade and a half. Imagine a world in which the FIFA family were among those leading this charge?
- This should not be misread an act of charity or of corporate reputation scrubbing: it is rather a long overdue (re)payment that is owed to those from whom it has been taken through the disastrous entangling of the beautiful game with capital and its interests.
- Having said that, it will be hugely politically and publicly popular, is immediately implementable, and would more quickly than anything else help restore FIFA's battered reputation in the eyes of football fans, players, the media, and their corporate sponsors¹⁰, all of whom would now be associated with an organization that was a credit to the sport it represents. It will mark a clean break of the most radical sort with past practices, and help FIFA take first, shaky steps to demonstrating the kind of leadership in international sports governance that one would hope to see from those who preside over the world's most popular pastime.¹¹

Our view of what football's power can accomplish has become so shrunken that much of this may seem fanciful or Utopian: it isn't. As FIFA's very existence currently hangs in the balance, the Utopian view is actually that it can continue indefinitely largely as it has—its dissolution is considerably more likely than its complete transformation, and most of those involved in the organization are, crucially, aware that this is the case. It needs a radical reimagining but lacks a vision of what that might be, and therefore a window of opportunity has appeared within which

⁸ Defined as those surviving on less than \$1.25 per day

⁹ <http://www.un.org/en/zerohunger/#&panel1-1>

¹⁰ It will correspondingly almost definitely increase the value of their sponsorship deals, and perhaps make FIFA a more attractive option for a different and hopefully better class of sponsor.

¹¹ It will also mark an end to the troubled Goal program, which has perversely become another instrument of graft and legal bribery. Last year, FIFA spent almost exactly the same amount in this area as they did on (declared) executive bonuses, as well as on the production of United Passions.

we can and must be audacious enough to change the rules, and offer an alternative answer to the question of what FIFA and football is for. Today, we have the chance to fundamentally revolutionize the ways in which world football is governed, to reshape the ideological framework within which football is defined and understood, and to work toward a game that is *for the people*. We can now change football for good, and we can do so, in the words of the peerless footballing philosopher Socrates, while simultaneously “struggling for freedom, for respect for human beings, for equality, for ample and unrestricted discussions, for a professional democratization of unforeseen limits, and all of this while preserving the ludic, and the joyous, and the pleasurable nature of this activity.”

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