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White outrage, colonialism and the game of capitalist greed



Sources: Middle East Eye / South Wind - Image: Flag displayed at a Bundesliga (German Football League) match; Borussia Dortmund versus VfB Stuttgart

It is no coincidence that liberal denunciations of human rights in Qatar come entirely from the US and European imperialist countries whose repressive policies have not been the subject of the same concern.

When the World Cup kicked off last week, the liberal European and US offensive against Qatar's record of human rights [violation], including an Amnesty International report, filled the airwaves and social media, with a particular focus on migrant workers, LGBTQ rights and the country's religiosity.

It seems, however, as if the passions that football has aroused for decades are alien to the colonial, racial, national and capitalist history of this sport. The truth is that the issue of

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human rights does not seem to have worried white liberals much before the 2018 games in Russia or this year's games in Qatar. That liberal human rights concerns almost always (if not always) come from the imperialist countries of the US and Europe is no coincidence.

Liberal hypocrisy

When England hosted the World Cup in 1966 homosexuality was still illegal, as it remained in Scotland until 1980 and in Northern Ireland until 1982. Once it was finally amended, the law was limited to "decriminalizing private and consensual homosexual acts among adults over the age of 21 although it imposed harsher penalties for homosexual behavior in public places."

As far as workers' rights are concerned, the constant discrimination of the non-white working class was entrenched even within the British unions themselves.

Britain maintained its colonial possessions around the world – from the then white and belligerent settlement colony of Rhodesia, through Hong Kong and the Falkland Islands (Malvinas), to Kenya, which had just gained independence in 1963 and was still suffering from recent crimes against its people. Human rights defenders did not care about them. Qatar itself was then under British colonial rule.

In Britain, then as now, blasphemy laws were in force, and the Church of England was and remains its official religion. Even so, it hosted the World Cup without a complaint from European civil liberties advocates, let alone Amnesty International.

In 1974, when West Germany hosted the World Cup, the population of that country was immersed in the last blow of government repression. By 1972 the government had undertaken a purge of *radicals* within the civil service (which then comprised 20% of the country's working population). West German trade unions systematically expelled their *activist* members. The Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution investigated 2.5 million citizens. 800,000 candidates for civil servants were investigated for their *fidelity* to the Constitution, which led to a policy of *blacklisting or Berufsverbot* of those who were considered guilty of signing demands, joining demonstrations, etc.

Repression in universities, the dismissal of professors and the *voluntary* withdrawal of books with *controversial* content by publishers were the order of the day. Nazi laws against homosexuals remained in force until their repeal in 1969 but official discrimination against homosexuality remained in the country until 2000.

West German racism against Turkish immigrant labor was also widespread. Not surprisingly, between 1949 and 1973, many of the leaders of the West German Ministry of

Justice remained members of the Nazi party, including dozens of former paramilitary members of the SA.

But West Germany hosted the World Cup without European civil liberties advocates complaining, least of all Amnesty International, whose intervention was required to support Baader-Meinhof prisoners in the course of a hunger strike in German prisons in protest at torture. Amnesty refused to endorse them because, in its view, the allegations of torture were *unsubstantiated*.

When the World Cup was held in the United States in 1994, half of the states in the country had laws against sodomy and homosexuality; The widely circulated narrative that AIDS was *agay disease* had not yet subsided. At the time, the country was in the midst of sanctions against Iraq that resulted in the deaths of *half a million Iraqi children*.

Police killings and beatings of black men on the streets of American cities became a public scandal in 1991, when video of police violence against Rodney King in Los Angeles went viral. That, and also the system of incarceration of blacks in American prisons – known as New Jim Crow and to which the government of Bill Clinton contributed considerably – or the use of the prison population as slave labor, as allowed by the 13th amendment of the US Constitution, or the continued violation of the rights of the Native American population.

But the U.S. hosted the World Cup without European and American civil liberties advocates complaining, let alone Amnesty International, whose report that year condemned the death penalty, police brutality and forced return of Haitian refugees, but not anti-gay laws, let alone the abuse of immigrant workers.

When the US hosted the 1996 Olympics in Atlanta, Georgia, Amnesty's annual report didn't even mention them; He reiterated his usual criticism of the death penalty, police violence and the forced repatriation of Haitian refugees as he had done in previous years. However, it issued a brief statement condemning the execution of a man by the State of Georgia.

By contrast, Human Rights Watch (HRW) published a 1996 report on the death penalty, anti-sodomy laws, racism, and anti-poor policies in the state of Georgia, criticizing the city's hosting of the Olympics despite this appalling record (in its 1994 report on the United States, HRW did not mention anti-sodomy laws.)

Neither organization was part of an orchestrated international campaign against the U.S. for hosting the Olympics. The truth is that although the United States, Canada and Mexico will host the next World Cup, no campaign has been proposed, at least for the moment,

about the continuous violations of human rights in the three countries. And we must remember that the US won the joint bid to host the 2026 World Cup in 2018, during the administration of Donald Trump.

Colonial roots

The continuing liberal European and American attacks on Qatar's human rights record must therefore be seen in the context of this illustrious history in which Europe and a white-ruled America are exempt from almost all criticism unlike non-white countries.

The campaign has been so intense that even Israel, one of the world's most human rights violations – including the rights of non-white migrant workers – has brimmed with morality when referring to Qatar's trajectory.

FIFA President Gianni Infantino responded to these criticisms at the opening of the games last week: "With what we Europeans have done in the last three thousand years, before we start giving moral lessons, we should be asking for forgiveness for the next three thousand." The Western press was outraged and *CNN* called his words *ablunder*.

The history of football goes hand in hand with that of European colonialism, especially the British. The first final of the Football Association Cup, which was played in 1872, was created by the British and soon after a football league was organized.

Between 1863 and 1877 the rules of football were established that prohibited touching the ball with the hand, which also coincided with the rise of the Protestant notion of *muscular Christianity* that combined the proselytism of faith and sport for pagans.

From there, the imperial export of football would begin firmly. Its spread throughout Europe led to the creation of the football associations of France, Germany, Belgium, Sweden, Spain, Denmark, Switzerland and the Netherlands in 1904.

FIFA established the World Cup in 1930. Europeans have continued to control the world's governing body: all FIFA presidents have been white Europeans – except for a white Brazilian president the son of Belgian immigrants, and a sitting Cameroonian president who took office for less than five months in 2015-2016.

The British introduced their games in their colonies as a means of teaching the barbarians discipline and teamwork and instilling Christian values in them. When football was brought to Calcutta in the 1880s only British referees were allowed.

In 1911 an Indian team, Mohun Bagan, defeated the British East Yorks Regiment 2–1. In Egypt, indigenous teams began playing against British teams as early as 1916, and competed in the Olympic Games starting in 1924.

Not to be outdone, the French also brought football to their North African colonies. Teams from Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia competed in the North African championship created in 1919, and competed for the North African Cup established in 1930.

Like other European colonialists, the Zionist movement turned from its foundation to sport and athletics. One of its founders, Max Nordau, emulated the Protestants in claiming muscular *Judaism*. Nordau founded gymnasiums for Zionist Jewish youth throughout Europe.

By the early twentieth century the Palestinians already had some football teams due to British influence and missionary schools. Once the British conquered Palestine in 1917, they used their sports to normalize and integrate the Jewish settler population they were introducing into the country through sports clubs to which they invited both settlers and natives in order to prevent native Palestinian resistance.

But the plan did not work and most of the teams remained separate and independent of the British. The Zionist settlers soon created the Palestine Football Association which remained exclusively Jewish (except for a Palestinian who only participated in one of the meetings of its board) although it attended FIFA as a representative of Mandatory Palestine. The only ones who played in their championship – in which the Zionist anthem was played – were teams composed exclusively of settlers.

Anti-colonial resistance

Despite British intentions, colonized Palestinians, like Indians and Egyptians before them, saw football as a way to assert their anti-colonial nationalism. During the 1930s they created more sports clubs independent of British colonial rule.

In 1931 the Palestinians created their own Palestinian Arab Sports Federation in which 10 clubs were integrated; it would disappear in the course of the Palestinian Revolt of 1936-1939. In 1944, despite continued British harassment, the Palestinians created the Palestinian Arab Sports Association which was joined by 21 Palestinian clubs. In 1947 the membership reached 65 clubs. It held its football championship in Yafa in 1945. In fact, to the joy of the Palestinians, a Palestinian team won that year in the match against the British army team.

Although the Palestinian Association sent teams to play in neighboring Arab countries and Iran, it could not register with FIFA because FIFA had already recognized the Jewish settlers' association as representing Mandatory Palestine. Arab sports associations protested against FIFA's decision. While the Zionist conquest of Palestine was taking place in 1948, FIFA reconsidered Palestinian and Arab requests.

But while the colonized peoples used football against their colonizers to assert their anti-colonial aspirations, this also led to endemic *hooliganism* on the part of British and European spectators, and nationalist discord among the colonized themselves, particularly in the Arab world.

In Jordan, football has been since the late 1970s one of the main scenarios of representation of an exclusivist Jordanian identity and nationalism in the face of the Palestinian identity and nationalism that concurs in the country. It is a sustained confrontation that last month led to the death of a 12-year-old boy at the hands of another after a match between *AlWehda* and its most bitter opponent, *Al Faisaly*, which required the public intervention of personalities from both teams to contain the exaltation.

The permanent rivalry between the Algerian and Egyptian teams since 2009 provoked a diplomatic and popular confrontation between the two countries. Apart from this, national pride in French-Algerian players like Zinedine Zidane, and Egyptians, like Mohamed Salah, who play for European teams, is spreading across the Arab world.

The commodification of passion

Noam Chomsky once said that "(...) One of the functions of things like professional sports in our society and others is to provide a space that diverts people's attention from what matters so that those in power can do what suits them without public interference."

Football matches – the most popular British colonial game bequeathed to the world – have mainly served to divert people's attention from the political and economic struggles that concern them. Although it is not sport or football itself that causes the deviation but the prevailing nationalism and FIFA itself.

As Uruguayan anti-imperialist writer Eduardo Galeano put it, FIFA and its *monarchs* – and the capitalist industry itself that produces sports paraphernalia – are "guilty of transforming every player into walking advertising while forbidding them to carry any message of political solidarity." It is they, he added, "who aspire to *commodify* passion and identity."

It is not surprising that FIFA and the World Cup have become powerful and very profitable capitalist enterprises. Those who run the world sport understand well the political and financial role of international football: that the host countries of the World Cup have to spend tens of billions of dollars to organize the matches – and that Qatar has surpassed them all with more than 200 billion – is for them a good capital investment.

Denunciations of the human rights of white liberals – not to mention Amnesty International – would have been more convincing to a global audience if the same

standards had been applied to the US and Europe as they are now to Qatar, or Russia previously.

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