

Soccer: Opiate of the People?

REVIEW ARTICLE BY MIKE LONG

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Every Boy's Dream by Chris Green (A & C Black Publishers, 2009) 214 pages, \$16, paper

Soccer vs. the State by Gabriel Kuhn (PM Press, 2011) 264 pages, \$20, paper

Religion may still be bigger business, but soccer is fast rivaling it as the drug that dulls the pain. From the weekly pick-up game in the local park, through seats in the stands at the weekend, to hours at home glued to the TV set, the world's most popular sport by far provides millions of amateur and professional players, and hundreds of millions of fans around the planet, a temporary escape from the drudgery of their everyday existence. For a tiny handful, it can offer a way out of poverty, although very rarely to the riches and life-style that is the dream of so many boys (far fewer girls, as there is very little money to be earned in the women's game as yet), and via their children's success, much better than a pension for their parents.

Viewed more positively, professional soccer brings larger masses of people together, and on a regular basis, than just about anything except wars. Matches at whatever level are one of the few remaining occasions when people express themselves passionately and publicly, and interact with one another instead of with anti-social computer screens and mind-numbing, hand-held electronic devices. Escapism, dulling the senses and forgetting one's own and society's problems for a while may be why states appear to be happy to let the matches continue, not to mention because of the divisive, quasi-nationalistic, "us vs. them" attitudes that being fans of one team, and so "enemies" of others, can fuel. However, especially in the standing section, game-days on the terraces -- or if prohibitive ticket prices make attendance out of the question, watching a match on TV in a pub -- remain important opportunities for the celebration of working-class culture. As recognized for decades by both the political right and left, they can also serve as opportunities for people to educate, organize, and agitate. And then, as Kuhn's book shows, there is the immense potential of amateur, alternative, counter-cultural soccer.

Before proceeding, a note on terminology. It is an indication of the reach of US cultural imperialism that football, the biggest participant sport in the world, is increasingly referred to as 'soccer.' 'Football' in the USA is already "taken" by an extremely violent sport played by over-sized individuals who use their armor-plated bodies and hands, not their feet, to inflict as much pain on their opponents as possible while moving a small rugby-shaped ball up and down a turf field for periods of about ten seconds, preceded and followed by three or four minutes of commercial breaks for TV ads. Despite the fact that the average-sized person is far too small to play, 'football' is very popular as a spectator sport in America, but virtually nowhere else. Yet, sadly, 'soccer,' in which the USA is a

second-rate power on a good day, is fast being adopted as the new name for the real game outside the USA, too, as reflected in the title of Kuhn's work.

The authors and the books

The two books under review are very different, but complementary. Green, an Englishman, is a professional journalist who works for BBC radio and a number of British newspapers. *Every Boy's Dream* is his fourth about soccer. It is a detailed expose of just one important component of the professional game in just one country -- the youth academy system in England. Despite the narrow focus, and while not intentionally "political," the unpleasant truths it reveals about today's heavily commercialized soccer industry have obvious political implications internationally, especially for the working-class.

Kuhn, an Austrian now living in Stockholm, is an ex-semi-professional player and an anarchist, who gave up soccer to devote himself to activist work of various kinds, including founding the DIY publisher Alpine Anarchist Productions in 2000. This is his fourth book with PM Press.¹ In *Soccer vs. the State*, using a mix of hard-to-find and previously published stories and interviews from mass media in several countries, some translated by him into English for the first time, plus original articles and interviews of his own, he sets out to uncover the extent to which what was once a predominantly working-class, community-oriented game has been co-opted and corrupted by politicians and big money. Soccer today is a global business enterprise worth hundreds of billions of dollars a year, with massive commercialization, heavy corporate involvement, and gross exploitation of players and fans alike. Indeed, many individual clubs are now worth more than a billion dollars, and more and more of them have become toys for their billionaire owners (all of whom, needless to say, came by their wealth absolutely legally). Kuhn's story skips around the world, dropping in on the history of famous incidents, players, coaches, clubs and national teams, dwelling on the often close relationship of all of them with state, but also, occasionally, with alternative radical, politics.

Whereas Kuhn starts with the big picture -- the game's history, notorious incidents, famous clubs and famous players -- and drills downward, Green begins at ground level with the nuts and bolts of the English youth academy system, and works upwards. Green's focus is the deplorable state of youth coaching and the exploitative nature of the academy system, each a major contributor to the dismal quality of English professional players and the appalling record of the national team since its only World Cup win back in 1966. His exploration of the youth soccer system, however, exposes much of the same corruption and exploitation as Kuhn's. Unlike Green, Kuhn's focus, meanwhile, is not only the professional game, but also soccer's amateur, often radical, intensely local under-current, which sometimes features informal, explicitly anarchist soccer.

¹ His previous titles are *Life Under the Jolly Roger: Reflections on Golden Age Piracy* (author, 2010), *Sober Living for the Revolution: Hardcore Punk, Straight Edge, and Radical Politics* (editor, 2010), and *Gustav Landauer: Revolution and Other Writings* (editor/translator, 2010).

The academy system

Soccer academies, some residential, most not, are training schools attached to professional clubs around the world, where mostly local, school-age children, some as young as seven or eight, and the vast majority from working-class homes, are taught the game several hours a day by seasoned coaches of widely varying knowledge and ability until they either “make it,” or in the vast majority of cases, are cut. The statistics are shocking. A tiny number enjoy a soccer career. Of the school-age players who attend tryouts and manage to win a place in one of the academies affiliated with professional clubs in England -- already the talented elite -- only one in 100 ever obtain a professional contract, and two thirds of those who do are out of the professional game within three years. That is to say, just one in 300 of these would-be professionals can look forward to a soccer career at any skill and salary level, let alone as one of the miniscule number who end up earning millions playing for glamorous professional clubs in England, Spain, Italy, Germany, and elsewhere -- ‘every boy’s dream’ of the title. The other 299, Green shows, typically have little else going for them when they are denied access to the professional game, as school work, despite the clubs’ pious assertions to the contrary, has inevitably taken a back seat to work on the training ground, which most believed would render the other kind irrelevant. Consequently, they lack marketable academic qualifications or professional skills, and where the sport is concerned, some are so demoralized, they give up playing soccer altogether.

Well aware of the odds, the large professional clubs continue to take in thousands of young hopefuls each year. The relatively small outlay required to sign up and cultivate the most talented youngsters around, a few of whom will become serious professional players, each potentially worth millions to the club either as a player or sold on to another club, pales to insignificance when compared to the tens of millions they will have to pay to buy the finished product from someone else’s youth academy or club roster. It is a no-brainer from a business standpoint, and explains why more and more wealthy European clubs are “adopting” amateur youth soccer clubs in the USA, Canada, Latin-America, Africa, Asia and elsewhere in the developing world as official club affiliates. For a minimal financial outlay, they secure first option on additional pools of thousands of young players without having to pay for most of their training. Soccer players are a commodity, bought and sold for profit like anything else. Given that by signing for a club, players lose the right to leave and join any other club for a fixed time period, there are parallels with the indentured labor system (supposedly) of years gone by.

Sadly, as some coaches readily admit (of other coaches), much of the coaching in England for which academy recruits give up their few academic life-chances is simply not very good. With a small but slowly growing number of exceptions, such as Arsenal (head coach Arsene Wenger, a Frenchman of professorial demeanor), British clubs and coaches remain stuck in the era of very physical, fast-paced soccer, where player size and speed are at a premium and in which a major avenue of attack remains the aerial long-ball launched skyward towards a tall striker posted in the opponents’ penalty area. Youth soccer in the USA is of the same persuasion, with player size and speed valued more than ability on the ball. Meanwhile, the far superior technical skill level of often smaller

players from South America (especially Brazil and Argentina) and continental Europe (especially France, Spain and Portugal) continues to rise, their vision, velvet first-touch, silky dribbling, and short, on-the-ground, to-feet passing game leaving their lumbering opponents struggling for possession and fighting for breath.

For *ASR* readers unfamiliar with the history of soccer, especially during the Franco dictatorship, it will be pleasing to know that the finest exponents at the club level of this successful, 21st century style of technically highly skilled football are F C Barcelona, long a symbol of resistance to the fascist dictatorship, and at the national level, Spain, winner of the most recent European Cup in 2008 and World Cup in 2010. Seven of the 14 players who participated in Spain's World Cup final win over the Netherlands figure in Barcelona's first team, including six -- Puyol, Pique, Xavi, Iniesta, Pedro, and Fabregas -- who came through the club's own famous academy, La Masia, which also produced the club's current coach, Pep Guardiola, numerous other top players, and the world's greatest current player, the Argentine Lionel Messi, who entered La Masia at 13. What a contrast with the situation in England!

That the English Premiership continues to be arguably the best -- certainly the most physical, highest tempo -- professional league in the world is no fault of the English academies, but simply because over two thirds of the Premiership's 20 clubs' first-team players, and an even higher percentage of players for the top six clubs, are not English, but highly paid foreign stars. (By contrast, over two thirds of players in the top professional league in Spain are Spanish.) Many are from impoverished backgrounds in South America and Africa, who make their fortunes plying their trade in Europe. Over 4000 Brazilians play professionally outside Brazil, for instance, most for European clubs, with Argentines close behind, and African players, especially in France, also more and more numerous.

Green's information is gleaned chiefly from site visits and interviews with coaches, players, child wannabees, and their parents, as well as from study of the statistics and periodic official reports on the woeful state of the game in the UK (reports whose recommendations are routinely ignored). While his book is directed chiefly at the parents of the tens of millions of hopeful soccer players, its extensive informational content, coupled with true stories of soccer's many casualties among the young -- cannon fodder for soccer as big business -- provide the hard facts and figures often lacking in the broader sweep of Kuhn's overtly political book. Green's work exposes the academy system, and indirectly, the whole modern game, for what it is, and should be fair warning to families who naively interpret their young hopeful's superior abilities at the local club or school level, followed by entry into an academy, as an automatic ticket to the high life on the world stage.

Soccer and politics

Soccer has long been mixed up in right-wing politics, nationalism, and even religion, at the local, national and international level. Politicians around the world have striven to be associated with the game (with winning teams), because they know it is by far the most

played and most loved by the common people. Franco doted on Real Madrid throughout his reign of terror, which accounts for the hatred still felt for the club by most Spanish fans to this day, especially, but not only, in Catalonia and the Basque Country. The 1934 World Cup, held in Italy, featured matches accompanied by fascist chants and symbols on the terraces, and fascist salutes for Mussolini from many of the visiting delegations. From the late 1970s to the 1990s, the fascist British National Front and British National Party (BNP) recruited heavily among the racist skinheads and other disillusioned white youth on the terraces, especially among fans of three major London clubs, Chelsea, West Ham (then managed by Harry Rednapp, for whom self-described fascist Paulo DiCanio played for a while), and Millwall. Groups of fans, sometimes numbering in the hundreds, would frequently mount violent attacks on groups of supporters of other clubs, sometimes clashing with them outside the stadium for previously arranged brutal fights with which police found it hard to cope.² Today, media-mogul, champion of women's rights, and occasional Prime Minister, Silvio Berlusconi owns one of the two top Italian clubs, AC Milan, a relationship, like every other, that he exploits to the full in his political life. 70 years after the event, British tabloids still present matches between England and Germany as re-runs of World War 2 (until Germany wins). International victories are often celebrated with national holidays in many countries, and have led to at least one war (between Honduras and El Salvador). Bitter club rivalries are fuelled by half-forgotten religious differences (e.g., in Glasgow, that between Rangers, historically Protestant, and

² Much has been written, including what amounts to a veritable genre of ghosted "soccer hooligan" autobiographies, and many movies have been made, about the intensely racist, neo-fascist culture on the terraces in that era. An exceptionally good read is the quasi-ethnographic study, *Among the Thugs* (New York: Vintage, 1993), by the American Bill Buford, founding editor of the literary magazine, *Granta*. Buford infiltrated Manchester United's 'Inter-City Firm' (ICF) to try to understand what motivated the young thugs who were its members. He brilliantly describes the guilty thrill of mob violence he experienced, after temporarily "going native," when United's toughest fans would do battle with those of rival clubs, wrecking major European city centers after away games if their team lost, and sometimes even if it didn't. Buford found the ICF's members, like those of many such "ultras" fan groups in Europe and Latin-America, to consist mostly of nationalistic, xenophobic, and racist young blue-collar workers. Instead of the disenfranchised youth he had imagined, they were predominantly people making good wages (necessary for the considerable expense involved in paying for match tickets and travel to away games) who simply enjoyed the opportunities weekends brought for alcohol-fuelled hedonistic outbursts of wanton violence and destruction. For an example of the "soccer hooligan" genre, see *Good Afternoon, Gentlemen, the Name's Bill Gardner*, by Bill Gardner and Cass Pennant (London: John Blake, 2006), real-life members of West Ham's ICF, and for the movie equivalent, the somewhat fictionalized *Green Street Hooligans* (2004), based loosely on exploits of the same ICF, or *The Football Factory* (2004).

Celtic, historically Catholic) or by affiliations with rival power blocks (e.g., Moscow Dynamo, the secret police, and CSKA Moscow, the army).³

Despite all this right-wing involvement, Kuhn shows, soccer has always maintained a radical political side, too, with the occasional outspoken famous left-wing coach or player, a radical fan culture associated with some clubs, and other manifestations of what he sees as hopeful pockets of resistance. A handful of successful managers of famous clubs, e.g., Bill Shankley (Liverpool) and Brian Clough (Nottingham Forest) openly supported socialist causes, including, in Clough's case, the British miners' strike of 1974 and, financially, the Anti-Nazi League. Others were victimized for their political beliefs. Joao Saldanha, for example, a communist, was removed as manager of Brazil's successful national team by the military dictatorship shortly before the start of the 1970 World Cup.

Some famous players have taken public stands against injustice of various kinds. Beginning in 1982, for instance, the wonderful Brazilian mid-fielder, Socrates, also a practicing physician, led his club, Corinthians, in its struggles for players' rights, and on a larger scale, for democracy in Brazil during the country's brutal military dictatorship. Volker Ippig, goalkeeper for the German club F.C. St. Pauli, would periodically interrupt his professional career to join workers' brigades to Nicaragua, had a close, active relationship with Hamburg's squatting scene, and always greeted St. Pauli's famously left-wing supporters with a raised fist. (Today, now retired, he is a goal-keeper coach and dock worker.)

Unfortunately, however, these and many other cases described by Kuhn are exceptions that prove the rule. Professional soccer, like most professional sports, has traditionally been associated far more with the political right than left, let alone the non-authoritarian left. Many more soccer players, managers, and teams have knowingly served, or at least played footsie with, the political interests of their pay-masters and governments than have stood up to them. For every Socrates, Lucarelli, Breitner, Cruyff, Romario, Ippig, Tommasi, Pires, Wright, Thuram, Oleguer, and Zanetti, there is a Paolo DiCanio, currently managing a League Two (i.e., fourth division) English club, Swindon Town, who, as a (very good) player, liked to greet his Italian club Lazio's right-wing supporters groups in the 1990s with the fascist salute, or a Gianluigi Buffon, current Italian national team goalkeeper, who has also sported fascist symbols on his soccer clothing. Ignorance generally lies at the heart of things, perfectly captured, as Kuhn notes, in German national team manager Berti Vogts' response to a journalist who asked if he was worried about playing in the 1978 World Cup in a country, Argentina, full of torture chambers. "Not at all," he replied, "I don't think anything will happen to us."

On a more positive note, some whole clubs have a socially progressive reputation. For example, the top Spanish club, Barcelona, currently the best in the world, with its Catalan

³ For vivid historical explanations of many of the bitterest club rivalries, see *How soccer explains the world: An unlikely theory of globalization*, by Franklin Foer (New York: Harper Collins, 2004).

slogan, “Mes que un club” (More than a club), whose President, Josep Sunol, was murdered by Franco’s soldiers, was beloved of Republican Spain because of its association with opposition to the dictatorship. To a lesser extent, the same goes for the Basque team, Athletic Bilbao. In addition to the fact that its side plays the most attractive soccer in the world today, Barcelona’s role in Spanish history during the Franco dictatorship accounts for its popularity in most regions of Spain (outside Castille) to this day. This is despite its equally strong association with Catalan nationalism and the Catalan middle class, as compared with Espanol, the other major professional team in Barcelona, whose supporters are found mostly among Barcelona’s Spanish-speaking working-class.

There are many other examples of “progressive” clubs, or as is usually the case, clubs with a more progressive fan base. Ajax of Amsterdam is favored by many liberals, not only because it plays attractive soccer, but in part as a reaction to the anti-semitism to which it is still subjected by neo-fascist groups, due to its Jewish origins, and because, like Barcelona, most of its players are products of its own fine youth academy. Other clubs popular with radical soccer fans beyond their immediate catchment areas include Livorno, representing an Italian dock-workers’ town and communist stronghold; Real Vallecano, based in the poor, working-class area of Madrid; the Czech club Bohemians, owned by a supporters’ cooperative since 2005, after they saved it from bankruptcy; Besiktas of Istanbul, whose supporters network, Carsi, even has the anarchist Circle-A in its logo, although seemingly with no serious anarchist significance in this case; and Hapoel Tel Aviv, the standard-bearer of the Israeli left, with historical ties to the trade union movement and Labour Party, and second only to Maccabi Haifa in support among Israeli Arabs.

Many more cases are described by Kuhn, but perhaps most famous of all is the German club, St. Pauli, situated in the poor working-class port area of Hamburg. Its terraces in the 1980s boasted leftist chants, banners with revolutionary slogans, and large numbers of punks and black block members from the local squatting battles who had made St. Pauli their team. The club’s reputation spread with its promotion to the Bundesliga in 1988, whereupon its status as one of the poorest clubs in the top German league, competing with powerful, corporate-sponsored behemoths like the widely hated Bayern Munich, attracted radical fans from across Germany. Volker Ippig’s presence in goal only helped. Thus, while the club’s management never embraced their supporters’ radical culture, it was St. Pauli fans who founded the Association of Antifascist Football Fans in 1993, and such initiatives as Women in Football and Queer Football Fanclubs, and who led a radical soccer fan movement that spread across Europe and beyond.

An important example was the British underground organization, Ant-Fascist Action (AFA). With a considerable anarchist presence, the largely white, working-class AFA formed to confront the neo-fascist skinhead groups, often meeting violence with violence (hence, its underground profile), and achieved considerable success in thwarting the best efforts of the BNP. In Scotland, the AFA’s work was led by supporters of Glasgow Celtic and Hibernian, who took the fight to the BNP-infiltrated Glasgow Rangers fans, often with ties to Ulster loyalist groups. Many clubs have avowedly left-wing ultras fan groups,

too, some of which maintain contact with one another informally, and formally through such organizations as the *Alerta* network and the Italian *Fronta di Resistencia Ultras*. A prominent example is the close cooperation between the left-oriented Glasgow Celtic Green supporters group and St. Pauli fans, and between Celtic Green and Herri Norte Taldea, the militant anti-fascist and pro-Basque independence fans of Athletic Bilbao. These and many groups like them consistently oppose right-wing ultras groups, and fight long and hard against the increasing commercialization of soccer. They oppose the decreasing access for fans to the once working-class game caused by such factors as ever higher ticket prices and clubs' and club accountants' preference for all-seater stadiums.

The radical undercurrent

Kuhn devotes the final 57 pages of his book to 'alternative football culture.'⁴ The section begins with a historical account by one of its members of the Easton Cowboys and Girls Sports Club, based in Bristol. The writer attributes the club's 20-years-and-counting success to its insistence on autonomy (independence from political parties or other formal organizations, such as trade unions), participatory democratic internal organization, inclusivity ("anyone but coppers and Christians"), and internationalism. Although anarchist-inspired, it has intentionally not allowed itself to be ghettoized in anarchist (or any other) sub-cultures. This has allowed it to attract all sorts of people who might have been put off if they had had to "be an anarchist" to join. Easton started small in 1992 with about 20 people who created a men's soccer team and entered a local league, and has gradually added more men's and women's teams for soccer and other sports. The majority of its members are working-class. The club's activities have extended into cooperative relationships with anarchist and other (non-anarchist) progressive teams, leagues and tournaments in many countries, leading to long-term solidarity work with groups in other parts of England, Chiapas, Brazil, Palestine (the West Bank), Morocco, Soweto, Los Angeles, and elsewhere. The Easton club's success is considered to be due to its not having been so much a club for anarchists, but rather, a club that puts anarchist ideas into practice.

The remainder of this section of the book introduces the reader to numerous anarchist soccer teams and clubs that play in their own alternative and/or regular leagues in many countries. Just a few of the better known are Lunatics FC of Antwerp, Chicago's Black and Red Football, San Francisco's Kronstad FC, Tokyo's Rage Football Collective, Austin Texas' Anti-Border Patrol, FC Volvus of Vilnius, Lithuania, Denmark's Christiania Sports Club and FC Utopia, Zurich's FC Bakunin, Republica Internazionale FC of Leeds, Roter Stern of Leipzig, Autonomos FC of Sao Paolo, and Hamburg's Standard Alu (*alu* is short for aluminium) -- a Sunday league team that values hitting the cross-bar over scoring. There are anarchist soccer leagues, like the US mid-Atlantic region's Anarchist Soccer League and mid-West's Anarchist Football Association. Kuhn

⁴ There is also a useful 11-page appendix listing alternative-oriented soccer books, films and music, and contact information for numerous clubs, organizations, projects, tournaments, supporters' groups and networks, and grassroots clubs and tournaments, including many of those mentioned in the book.

also includes brief interviews with organizers of some of the longer-running alternative international tournaments, including Stockholm's Libertarian Football Cup, an annual event since 1989, and Italy's Mondiale Antirazzisti, which began in 1997 and now attracts about 200 teams annually from all over the world.

Members provide histories of some of the teams and clubs. The pattern usually appears to be similar to that of the Easton Cowboys and Girls. Informal soccer scrimmage games were an easy way of bringing people together. The game is cheap, easy to play almost anywhere, and unites people from very different backgrounds. Recognizing broad (not exclusively anarchist) political affinities, a team was formed, and then a club, often with many active non-playing supporters. The number of women members soon matched that of men, the role soccer plays in empowering women being noted by a number of the writers. Participation in local leagues, and sometimes national and international tournaments followed, including, since 1998, the annual summer Alternative World Cup, as did social activities and political work, such as participation in anti-fascist, anti-racist, and anti-homophobia campaigns. Clubs also appear to experience similar problems, ranging from occasional disagreements about internal organization, in part due to the inclusion of people with somewhat differing political views, to such practical matters as the temptation to recruit good players with iffy politics (e.g., membership in the Socialist Workers' Party) and concern over whether anarchists should respond in kind to what can be very aggressive tactics used by other teams in competitive local leagues, or, indeed, whether anarchist teams should have a competitive orientation at all.

In sum, it is easy to point to the massive problems afflicting professional soccer -- its cooption by the state, the grotesque commercialization, its use by politicians and the gutter press to stoke nationalism, the exploitation of young people that Green exposes, the baser competitive instincts it encourages, and its potential for dividing workers, pitting one group against another and making both forget their own and society's problems. Yet, at both professional and amateur levels, and as Kuhn's survey of alternative, mostly anarchist, soccer culture shows, it is also a game with vast potential for unifying people across ethnic, racial and class boundaries. At some level, there is even a natural affinity with anarchism. Soccer is quintessentially a team game, after all, where success is impossible without cooperation, camaraderie and mutual aid. Between them, and in different ways, each of these books provides considerable insight into both the negatives and the positives of the beautiful game.