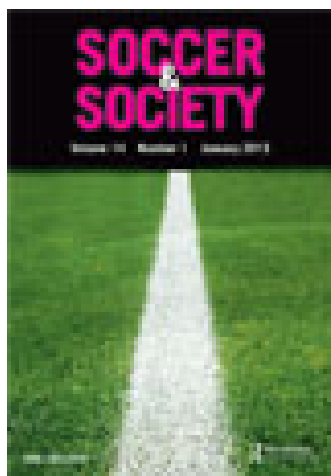


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Soccer versus the state: tackling football and radical politics

Avipsu Halder^a

^a Center for International Politics, Organization and Disarmament, School of International Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University

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BOOK REVIEW

Soccer versus the state: tackling football and radical politics, by Gabriel Kuhn, Oakland CA, PM Press, 2011, 264 pp., US\$20.00 (paperback), ISBN 978-1-60486-053-5

This book by Gabriel Kuhn encapsulates the social, political and economic aspects of football, asking significant questions on class formation in both national and international contexts. It is a common observation that leading corporate houses and politicians often own or exert control over football clubs and national teams. Similarly, the conflict between the developed and the developing nations for hosting major international events such as the FIFA World Cup reflects the existing hierarchy and struggle for power. In order to substantiate the class perspective in football, the author has highlighted three central issues. Firstly, Kuhn believes that attempts to commercialize the game have empowered the capitalist undertaking in the domain of world football. He is critical of the involvement of sporting multinationals such as Nike and Adidas as well as the global media in the promotion and the management of football. Secondly, he enunciates how football has been operationalized as a diplomatic medium in international relations and nation building. Thirdly, the book accentuates aspects of race and gender in international football from a class perspective. In response to the ongoing commercialization and capitalist domination of the game, the author argues in favour of alternative movements among the supporters and patrons of football to thwart the onslaughts of global capitalism. He has marshalled an array of interviews of current and past footballers, supporters and administrators to vindicate his vision which, one suspect, has a socialist tinge.

Kuhn is undoubtedly sceptical of the growing bourgeoisie influence in football. However, his definition of class lacks theoretical rigour, leading to a number of questions. Can a class be defined entirely from the economic perspective, or ought to have cultural explanations? In what manner does the economic explanation of class override the governmental machineries? Can we transcend the conventional explanation of class and explore its transnational developments? Since the book will be read by academics and students from across disciplines, a more complicated understanding of class would have rendered the analysis more subtleties.

The interchangeable use of 'soccer' and 'football' hides the cultural connotations of the development of these terms in two distinctive cultural spheres, the cultural fault lines of which may exemplify the concept of class. Pierre Bourdieu¹ had insisted that the location of an individual or a group in the class hierarchy is determined by the composition and volume of economic and cultural capital. Hence, the cultural dimension of capital plays an equally pivotal role in conveying the idea of class alongside its economic dimensions. Had Kuhn recognized the cultural factors of class formation, the rationale for the invention of 'soccer' and 'football' as homologous terms could be clarified.

The emergence of dependent and dominant classes in football underscores Kuhn's anxiety about the growing influence of capitalism. The critique reaches

crescendo as he reprimands the practice of using cheap child labour in the manufacturing units of international sporting goods in developing countries. The class aspect in this explanation could be substantiated more conclusively had Kuhn extrapolated it by introducing the concept of comprador class, which would rectify the arbitrary North–South divide in world football proposed by the author. The theory of comprador class implies the existence of a dominant and exploitative class even within the developing (exploited) countries.² Therefore, alleging the developed nations for perpetuating the capitalist dynamic is not so wise an idea. The process of nation building in South Africa through football as mentioned by Kuhn stands out as a classic illustration. During the 2010 World Cup in South Africa, several government policies negatively affected the economically weaker sections of the society. The arrangements made by event organizers in collusion with sponsors and the multinational corporations led to limited improvements. In the context of the book, the personalities comprising of the administrative machineries of the state can be regarded as the comprador class. Also, they resemble the nucleus of the Transnational Capitalist Class (TCC).³ These people operate hand in glove with the leading capitalists of the world. It is evident that the economic and sporting plight of the Global South has resulted from a number of internal causes. Hence, a class distinction between North and South is not always a feasible explanation for developmental disparities.

Since class is a hierarchical category, economic segregation is not an exclusive criterion for class formation. Political and social factors also lead to compartmentalization of the society on the basis of class. As mentioned before, the author has not examined these aspects with the required analytical precision. There are instances of political and the economic power emanating from the same source. The ownership and control of clubs by Silvio Berlusconi substantiate this point, conforming to the classical Marxian doctrine.⁴ In some other cases, it is witnessed that the economic power holders influence the political class to further their interest, as manifest in the recent actions of the FIFA over sponsorship and merchandising issues. Most importantly, it demonstrates a shift from conventional Marxism in the sense that the economic powers achieve their objectives without assuming any political control. Ralph Miliband⁵ has discussed this line of thinking with considerable degree of precision. Moreover, for further strengthening the Marxian line of argument, the author could have invoked C. Wright Mill's⁶ concept of the power elite for highlighting the exploitative traits of the dominant economic and political class in the game. The concept defines dominant classes as a conglomeration of the powerful sections of the society (the leading industrialists and politicians). Hence, analysing the aspect of class in world football involves broader questions of political economy. Cavalier treatment of such theoretical underpinnings leaves several loopholes in the author's arguments.

Due to this inadequacy some of the arguments made in this book are self-contradictory. On one hand, Kuhn seems to support that socialist dictum that football is an attempt by the capitalist elites of the society to divert the revolutionary potential of the socially and economically weaker sections. On the other hand, he proclaims that the working class and the socialist minded people use football as a forum for channelizing their grievances against the ruling elites. He fails to integrate the two opinions in a single framework. Even if the game becomes a symbol of resistance against the ills of capitalism, the author ought to have focused adequately on the development of ideology. This could have been achieved by

introducing the Marxist concepts of ‘class in itself’ and ‘class for itself’, and positing football as the process by which the oppressed classes transform themselves from being a ‘class in itself’ to a ‘class for itself’.⁷ However, the book hardly pays attention to either Marxist philosophy or its revisions.

In its final section, the book explores the increasing growth of associations among football fans that has primarily emerged as a counter to capitalist domination and oppressive actions of the state institutions. However, Kuhn could have questioned whether these bodies constitute a part of the civil society, and if their activities can be identified as a social movement. It will not be unfair to presume the union of football supporters as a pressure group that seeks to bargain with clubs and organizational settings in order to prevent the influence of capitalism in football. The book reveals a tendency of anti-institutional behaviour on the part of supporters as well as players, showing their discomfort with the state apparatus. However, both Marxian and the Anarchist⁸ ideology showcase their grievances against state institutions. Kuhn would have certainly made a stronger case for his arguments had he critically chalked out the nuanced differences that exist between Marxian and the Anarchist line of thinking. Nevertheless, Kuhn deserves credit for making an attempt to unpack contemporary soccer-state dynamics and encourage further research in the same direction.

Notes

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2. Samir Amin, *Maldevelopment: Anatomy of a Global Failure* (Tokyo: United Nations University Press).
3. Leslie Sklair, *The Transnational Capitalist Class* (London: Blackwell Publishers, 2001).
4. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Manifesto of the Communist Party* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1975).
5. Ralph Miliband, *The State in Capitalist Society: The Analysis of Western Systems of Power* (London: Quarlet Books, 1969).
6. Mills C. Wright, *The Power Elite* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1956).
7. Karl Marx, *Early Writings*. trans. Rodney Livingstone and Gregor Benton (Middlesex: Penguin, 1975).
8. Roger Eatwell and Anthony Wright, eds., *Contemporary Political Ideologies* (London: Printer Publishers, 1993).

Avipsu Halder
*Center for International Politics, Organization and Disarmament, School of
 International Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University*
halder.avipshu@gmail.com

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