

What Happens to Us in Football

On Play, Work, Market and Nation

Kai Froeb

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Author
Kai Froeb
https://kai.froeb.net

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About the Author

Kai Froeb (born 1963) is a German philosopher and IT expert living in São Martinho do Porto, Portugal. His work combines more than 35 years of systematic Hegel research with the possibilities of artificial intelligence, developing a new form of philosophical collaboration.

His thinking is radically interdisciplinary. He studied mathematics and computer science at the University of Erlangen–Nuremberg, business administration at EBS, and cultural studies and law at the University of Hagen. At the same time, he pursued intensive general studies in philosophy, sociology and history. He deliberately conducted his studies without orienting them towards academic degrees, preserving the freedom to follow an independent path of thought and research beyond the boundaries of university disciplines.

Since the late 1990s, Froeb has edited and maintained **hegel.net**. Available in twelve languages, the website ranked among the leading results in international Google searches for Hegel for many years and developed into one of the central online resources on Hegel's philosophy. It is probably still the most extensive multilingual website devoted to Hegel on the internet.

In connection with **hegel.net** and **hegel-system.de**, Froeb also created an extensive, publicly accessible archive of primary sources. The German-language collection alone offers 506 digitised original editions of works by Hegel and nineteenth-century Hegelians for free download. Further collections in other languages include 19 original works in English.

More than 40 years of programming experience, beginning in 1980, form another methodological foundation of his work. His first program was a reimplementation of Joseph Weizenbaum's ELIZA, thus completing a circle from the earliest experiments in artificial intelligence to his productive collaboration with Claude today. Froeb uses his IT expertise not merely as a technical resource but also as an instrument of thought: he analyses social and philosophical structures with the precision of a software architect.

Froeb is developing an independent philosophical body of work that stands in the tradition of Hegel while attempting to continue that tradition under contemporary conditions. At its centre is his own performative approach to truth, which forms the common foundation of his philosophical books. Truth appears here not merely as the object of propositions, but as a movement that must also prove itself in the form of thinking and presentation.

His aim is demystification through conceptual clarification: to penetrate every boundary through thought, including the boundary of what initially appears inaccessible. In his work, form follows content—structure, concepts and method are determined by the subject matter itself. At the same time, he seeks accessibility: to present demanding philosophy as clearly as possible, in the spirit of the best Anglo-American scholarly tradition, without simplifying it.

His guiding motif is Hegel's formula: "The truth is the whole"—the search for a form of integration that need not repress or exclude anything.

Zur Herkunft dieses Textes

In meiner Grundschule in Belgien gab es jeden Morgen Gymnastik. Ich habe jede Stunde darauf gewartet, dass sie vorbei ist, und bei Sportübungen geht es mir bis heute so. Beim Mannschaftssport wurde ich als Letzter gewählt. Im Fußballverein, in den meine Mutter mich anmeldete, durfte ich Torwart oder Verteidiger spielen, weil das niemand wollte; nach ein paar Monaten waren der Verein und ich uns einig. Beim Judo habe ich jahrelang meinen weißen Gürtel verteidigt. Das Beste daran war das Malzbier mit meinem Vater danach. Sportübertragungen im Fernsehen bedeuteten, dass die Zeichentrickserie ausfiel.

Später habe ich mit Kollegen Fußball geschaut, und hier im Café in Portugal tue ich es wieder. Nicht wegen des Spiels — das langweilt mich noch immer. Die Leute freuen sich, und man kommt ins Reden.

Genau das ist der Gegenstand dieses Essays. Wie bildet sich dieser Zusammenhalt? Woher kommt die Tradition, das Gefühl von Gemeinschaft, das „Wir" eines Menschen, der keinen Ball berührt hat? Dass Politiker und Firmenchefs das benutzen, ist die kleinere Frage. Die größere ist, warum es sich benutzen lässt.

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WHAT HAPPENS TO US IN FOOTBALL

A Goal

A goal is scored[1], and a whole stadium leaps to its feet. Strangers fall into each other's arms. In a thousand living rooms people shout at the television as if the players could hear them. The next morning someone at the office says, "We won" — and yet he never touched the ball, knows none of the players, and had nothing whatsoever to do with what happened on the pitch.

Where does this "we" come from?

Play and Labor

Since antiquity, people have distinguished necessary labor, rest, and free activity; in modern times this often becomes the opposition between labor and play. Play seems free because its purpose lies within itself; labor seems unfree because it aims at wages, bread, a livelihood. Play would then be the island of freedom in a world full of constraints.

But this separates what cannot be separated. A footballer runs, passes, shoots, and every step pursues a purpose: keep the ball, find the teammate, hit the goal. The pass serves the move, the move serves the goal, the goal serves the win, the win serves the standings. A whole ladder of purposes, one above the other. Play, too, does not have its purpose purely "in itself."

1 This essay was prompted by the article "Copa do Mundo – futebol, mercado e identidade nacional" by Christian Iber, Agemir Bavaresco and Lutiero Esswein (A Terra é Redonda, 24 June 2026). From it come the guiding threefold division into play and freedom, market and national identity, as well as several motifs — football as a global language of simple rules, the transformation of fan belonging into consumption, the persistence of the nation under globalization. The present treatment starts elsewhere: with the "we" of the fan, with hierarchies of ends instead of freedom from ends, with the mechanics of fan attachment, and with attention as an economic raw material.

The joy is there nonetheless — in the movement, in the successful dribble, in the pass that arrives. But it does not stand apart from the purposes; it is embedded in them. One has it by pursuing the purpose, not instead of it. Even someone who plays only to relax is thereby pursuing a purpose — namely, relaxation.

The difference between play and labor, then, does not lie in one having purposes and the other lacking them. It lies in how the purposes are anchored in life. The purposes of play are framed: they hold within a bounded space, their consequences are limited, the whole thing is repeatable. You lose a game and stand at the starting point again the following Saturday. The purposes of labor stand under the pressure of real self-preservation — whoever fails at them loses not a game but wages, position, livelihood. This lack of consequence is what makes play light, as long as it remains play. In the professional, the seriousness of labor returns into the game.

The professional pursues the same purposes as the boy on the sandlot, the same ladder from pass to promotion. What is added in his case is not a different purpose, but a foreign hand over the whole ladder. He is a wage laborer: he sells his labor power, stands under contract, obeys the coach, serves a club under economic pressure. While he plays, the decision over what he does no longer belongs entirely to him — he trains when it is scheduled, plays where he is fielded, changes clubs when he is sold. His will does not disappear; he improvises, decides, interprets the game every second. But he moves within a frame set by others, and he now wills what he is supposed to will under the purposes of contract, club, and coach. Not because his situation resembled that of the serf or the slave — the professional is legally free and often wealthy — but because, in a milder, voluntary form, the same structural feature recurs: the activity stands under a foreign purpose.

More than football hangs on this. It is not playing that becomes a burden, but playing under someone else's direction. The very same activity delights as long as it is one's own, and weighs one down as soon as a foreign will stands over it. Whoever sees this hears the demand that one "simply work more" with different ears.

In football, something conceals this hardness, which is what makes it so useful as an image. The competition, the cohesion of the eleven, the shared goal outshine the fact that the players render their performance for others — for the club, its owners, its balance sheet. That is why the team so readily serves as a model for the world of work: one pictures the workforce as a team running together toward a common goal, and the capitalist form beneath it — whose purposes are being carried out, to whom the result belongs — disappears from view. That is precisely what makes the image ideologically useful.

In the top player, wage labor tips in two directions at once. Upward: a world-class player is so scarce that he dictates terms an ordinary employee would not dare dream of. Downward: his career is short, his body wears out, his recognition hangs on his performance. A slump in form, an injury, age — and yesterday's celebrated star no longer counts for anything. His capital is his body, and it loses market value faster than an ordinary career ends; no safety net catches this. For the top earners, money cushions the fall: whoever puts aside millions in the years of fame is provided for afterward. It stays harsh for the many below — most professionals, who barely make a living from football anyway and end up with nothing. Elite football is not the exception to the world of work, but its sharpened form.

The players themselves also circulate in this order like commodities and labor power. Talents from poorer regions — Africa, Latin America, parts of Asia — are discovered early, trained, sold, and drawn into the centers of football capital, to Europe and now increasingly to wherever the money sits thickest. It is the same movement as with any other capital: it seeks cheap labor power wherever it grows and draws the yield toward where it is already accumulated. Football mirrors the international division of labor in miniature.

The Fan

The fan does not play; he watches — and suffers, cheers, hopes, despairs at an event he does not influence. What first sustains him is an appreciation of skill. Whoever sees a good match sees people who have mastered something, and knows how to value it; precisely because he cannot do it himself, he senses how difficult it is. This is how one appreciates the skill of a singer, an actor, a dancer — the achievement that shows itself in performance. Applause for a successful dribble is not bought.

But that alone does not make a fan. One can appreciate an opponent's skill and still not be able to stand him. The fan is partisan, and that is the core of it.

He belongs. "I'm a Schalke fan," "I support Argentina" — such sentences place a person. Whoever is a fan is somebody: part of a community with its history, its heroes, its arch-rivals. The old forms of belonging fall apart — religious denomination, social class, the lifelong profession — and the question "Who am I?" stands open. The club offers an answer that is immediately at hand, requires no education, and places one within a larger order.

Behind this stands a need older than the market. The isolated individual, calculating for himself, whose freedom consists in buying and choosing whatever he wants, does not exist in this original form. No one is born a Robinson Crusoe; one is born into a family and thinks in terms of relationships from the start. Where the market has not yet penetrated everything, this is more visible — there the individual first understands himself through kinship, place, shared history, not as a choosing single being. The market dissolves these bonds, piece by piece, into mere individual traders — but it does not dissolve the need for community. It intensifies it. The more isolated the individual, the stronger the longing for belonging, and brands, consumer communities, fan circles, sports all serve it, each in its own way.

Some of these communities are real: colleagues at work, schoolmates — though one might ask how far even these have already been eaten away by competition and money. Others are only imagined, and are not thereby unreal: they do not exist prior to the shared sign but arise with it, and they have real effects. An established commonality helps in conversation, generates sympathy, gives a point of connection: whoever names the same club is no longer entirely a stranger. In football, the signs of dissolution lie plainly in view, and yet the fan experiences himself as bound to other fans and shares with them a feeling that strikes him as fundamental.

The local club, one might think, is at least reasonably grounded — after all, this is "my" team. But the players themselves are not us. They are not our children, not even our friends, but people who happened to be born in the same city — in the case of a professional club, not even that, but expensively bought in from all over the world. We do not know them.

What connects, then, does not lie in the team but in what surrounds it. The closer the matter, the more traces of real commonality can be found. Perhaps a friend's nephew plays on the team. Above all: the colleagues all go together, everyone in the office follows the games with excited anticipation, and one's father and grandfather already supported the same club. And everyone who lives in the place already shares something — the club makes this commonality visible; it symbolizes it. Here a real foundation lies underneath: the people of a place really do have dealings with one another, and in the club they see it once more before them.

This changes as the unit grows larger. In a microstate — Monaco, an island nation — the citizens still share almost as much as those of a city. In large countries like Germany, Brazil, the United States, or China, the shared foundation grows thin; what the national team symbolizes then has hardly any real community

underlying it. The farther away, the fewer the traces — until, with the distant star, nothing real remains but the enthusiasm itself.

Hence the peculiar role of sport today. When there were only two television channels, the nation sat before the same crime drama at the same hour. People watched with family and knew that millions were watching the same image at the same moment. This simultaneity created community beyond the living room. That has fallen apart; everyone has their own series, their own channel, their own screen. Sport is one of the last places where millions still experience the same thing at the same time — a last campfire.

Why It Binds

Why does the club bind more fiercely than would be reasonable? A comparison with other things people attach themselves to helps.

First, the brand. One shows through what one buys who one is — car, label, technology. With most brands, it remains a sign; hardly anyone builds their identity on wearing one athletic shoe brand rather than another. With a few, more is achieved: Apple users, Harley riders experience their brand as part of themselves, defend it, recognize one another. This is the advertiser's dream — turning customers into a congregation. Where it succeeds, the brand is already almost a club.

With the fan, this congregation is there, and it rests on something the brand lacks. The brand binds through possession; one shares what one buys. The club binds through shared fate: victory and defeat, promotion and relegation, the derby, the injury, the transfer. The Apple user does not lose to Samsung on Saturday; the Harley rider does not get relegated. The brand has customers; the club has fellow sufferers. People meet, follow the games together with excitement, share joy and disappointment — a family of like-minded people, more than a shared sign.

And the shared excitement is no lukewarm feeling. The heart beats faster, something is at stake, the outcome is open. Similar to a horror film or a thriller, one enjoys the tension and the dread precisely because one sits in the audience and is not really affected. Except the fan, unlike the moviegoer, believes he really is affected — and he is, together with others. The shared anxiety, the shared jubilation, feel to him like something fundamental, almost existential, and this binds more strongly than any calm agreement.

In sport, something peculiar is added: one believes one contributes oneself. The twelfth man, the home match, the belief that one's own cheering makes a difference. In the stadium there is something to this: the noise from the stands carries some and puts others under pressure, and the home advantage is not mere imagination. But in front of the screen, where most people sit, no player hears the shouting — and yet the fan there follows the game with no less excitement, and experiences himself just as much as a co-player in his team's fate. The bond is strongest precisely where the influence is smallest.

Then competition. Apple and Windows do not settle it; each camp feels superior, but there is no referee, no result, no decision. Sport decides, by fixed rules, with a winner and a loser. This is its own source of passion, with two sides.

One is the pleasure of contest itself, of measuring oneself against another. It is found not only in the stadium but in the rappers' verbal duel, in the YouTuber's beef, in the exchange of blows in politics. The dispute pulls one in; one belongs to a side by taking a stand against the other party. The other side is the peculiarity of league operation. An election decides once, and then there is quiet. Here, the fight is fought anew week after week, won, lost, and no sooner has the season ended than the next begins. One never wins finally and is never done; one never loses finally and never gives up. A machine that keeps generating new tension — that is why it binds over the long term like almost nothing else.

Finally, the shared history, even the painful kind. Every club has its saga: one was there when the old stand still stood, traveled together to the away match, suffered together through the loss from a last-minute goal against. Wounds suffered together, but consequence-free ones — one loses the game, not one's life. Precisely this lack of consequence makes them a bonding agent: whoever has weathered a bitter defeat together with others is bound as people are who have survived real hardship together, only without the price. Life itself often has no story in which one appears; it is a jumble of coincidences. The club's history supplies what is missing — a narrative with triumph and tragedy, in which one has a part.

Why Football in Particular

All of this holds not only for football. Every sport has its fans, and in each one finds the same things, applied to it. Some sports do require their own explanation for why they in particular grip a country — often a historical one: cricket in England, baseball in the United States, grown over generations.

Football is more than that. It reaches far beyond its origin — beyond Europe and, along the paths of colonialism, across South America and Africa. In large parts of Asia and in Oceania it does not hold the same cultural primacy; other sports rank above it there — cricket, baseball, rugby. But it is growing there too, and the tournament increasingly draws these regions in. Why it has gripped some regions of the world so much more deeply than others would need to be examined separately. But wherever it has taken hold, it reinforces itself: whatever has status, the media build up further, and because the stars are millionaires, the idea of wealth attaches itself to the idea of the game. But the deeper reason is accessibility. Not everyone can sing, and not everyone can play golf — the one requires talent, the other a course, clubs, money. Football requires an open space and a ball, nothing else. Everyone has played it themselves, everyone can join in, everyone can celebrate along. What one knows in one's own body, one values differently from what only the skilled can do.

The choice of whom to support also has its scope here. By default it is the club of one's city, the team of one's own country. But one can also take skill itself as the model, across all origin — Messi, Ronaldo, as many outside Germany once did with Boris Becker. That the media build up what the masses want to see, and the masses want to see what is built up, is no mere manipulation but a business that reinforces itself both ways.

The Other Side

The fan believes he contributes by cheering. In sporting terms he does so far less than he thinks, and the one in front of the screen not at all; his cheering replaces no pass, no run, no shot.

He contributes all the same, only differently from what he thinks. The fan is not the opposite of the consumer but the most intense consumer: ticket, bratwurst, scarf, jersey, magazine, sometimes the share. And more: by being a fan and being enthusiastic, he keeps his interest in the matches alive. This interest, multiplied millions of times, makes the matches valuable, for the attention of the fans is the commodity sold here. So the sporting effect and the economic effect even come apart: the one who takes part in the stadium is the rarer one; the one in front of the screen, who accomplishes nothing in sporting terms, is the one whose attention sustains the machinery.

So he really does help the club — not by making the eleven play better, but by being enthusiastic and thereby generating the interest on which everything lives.

It is the logic of the Confucian rite: it does not work because it forces a goal, but because its performance affirms the order. In the same way the fan strengthens the club by being a fan and showing it. His performance is the contribution — the economic one, which he does not see, not the sporting one, which he has in mind.

Perhaps it is good that he does not see it. If at every match he knew that his true role is that of the payer, enthusiasm would be harder to sustain. The divergence between felt and actual effect is no accident; it keeps devotion pure.

How far the exploitation of attention reaches shows in the fact that it now rebuilds the game itself. At this World Cup every half is interrupted by a three-minute drinks break, in every match, even in an air-conditioned stadium and in mild weather. Two halves thus become four quarters, as in American sport. The first reason is respectable: the matches take place in the North American summer, and heat endangers the players. But the broadcasters may now place their advertising in the same break — at least where programming and national rules allow it, for not everyone uses it; a full cut away from the live match, which football had never known until then. FIFA assures us that it earns nothing from this itself; the profit goes to the holders of the broadcast rights, and for the US broadcaster alone, estimates of around 250 million dollars in additional advertising revenue are circulating. Whether the exact sum is right matters less than the structure: a stoppage in play becomes sellable airtime.[2] Football was long unusual in that its forty-five minutes ran without interruption — no room for the block in between. It is precisely this empty space that is now being filled.

The same logic includes the halftime break, which at this World Cup, on the model of the Super Bowl, has been expanded into a show of almost half an hour with prominent musicians. Both, the drinks breaks as well as the stage show, have the same origin: none of the fans had asked for them, and both were nevertheless introduced from above, shortly before the tournament and without debate. That is the real finding — not that there is advertising and a show, but the direction of the decision. The format of the game is not shaped by what the game or the spectators require, but by what can be marketed. The substance follows the business, not the other way around; and what is established here on the greatest stage will establish itself all the more easily afterwards in the smaller competitions.

2 Cf. Reuters, 24 June 2026, on the mandatory drinks breaks in the 22nd and 67th minutes and their official justification; The Guardian, 14 June 2026, on the advertising rules that allow broadcasters to run advertising during the breaks, provided they are back in the match thirty seconds before the restart. Not all broadcasters use this (ITV and Telemundo, for example, do not).

Who Earns

The numbers sober up the murmuring. An annual survey tracks the twenty highest-revenue clubs in the world and divides their income into three streams: matchday (tickets, catering), broadcasting, and commercial (sponsorship, advertising, merchandise). Most recently, about 43 percent came from commercial activity, 38 from broadcasting, 19 from matchday.[3]

At the stadium ticket booth, then, the fan pays the smaller portion. But the two large streams both depend on him. What are broadcasting rights worth? They are worth something because so many people watch; broadcasting is paid for because advertising can be sold around it. Sponsorship pays for the same reason: because the fans are looking. Well over eighty percent of revenue ultimately comes down to one thing — the marketing of the attention the fan generates simply by being a fan.

(These figures come from the world's largest clubs, those that have become the most brand-like. In the local amateur league the calculation looks different, with more sausage and less sponsorship. How far down the mechanism reaches would need separate examination; at the top it is clear.)

At this top sits yet another party, rarely mentioned: the organizer. A competition needs someone to run it, set the rules, admit the participants, determine the location, sell the rights. This one entity — FIFA for the World Cup, the IOC for the Olympics — sits on a monopoly. No second "World Cup" can be placed beside it, any more than a second water network could stand beside a city's own. Whoever holds the monopoly sets prices for broadcasting, sponsorship, and tickets almost as it pleases.

At this World Cup, this "as it pleases" took a new form. Ticket prices were no longer fixed but fluctuated with demand, as on a stock exchange: if interest in a match rises, the price rises with it in real time. This is the same dynamic pricing known from flights and hotels, and it moves the ticket close to a speculative object — its price no longer measures what the match costs, but what the market will bear at that moment. The organizer thereby skims off exactly the amount the enthusiasm is worth at that instant. The fan's attention, which is already the real commodity, is milked even at the very moment of its strongest surge.

Where one party alone decides what turns a worthless good into a valuable one, corruption is near at hand — no different from the local politician who decides whether a field becomes building land. FIFA's history is riddled with corruption, from bribery schemes to disputed tournament awards. The mechanism

3 Deloitte Football Money League 2026; figures for the twenty highest-revenue clubs of the 2024/25 season, totaling roughly 12.4 billion euros.

that keeps it stable resembles that of the United Nations: more member associations than there are UN states, and each has one vote. That of a small island federation weighs as much as that of a major footballing nation. This sounds democratic and has a predictable consequence. The many small associations together form the majority, and they depend on support from above — money for pitches, coaches, youth development. This support is real and necessary; precisely there lies its dual nature. Whoever distributes it creates dependency and gratitude, whether they intend to or not, and whoever wants to stay on top cultivates it. Not every subsidy is bribery; but a system in which access, recognition, and money all run through a single hand is vulnerable to patronage — rule through allocation. Thus legitimate assistance becomes an instrument of loyalty, without an outright purchase ever being necessary. The lucrative business continues undisturbed as long as the majority is held.

How this mechanism operates is shown by the expansion of the tournament. The field of participants was first enlarged to forty-eight teams, and even while this World Cup was underway, the next expansion to sixty-four was floated — as a response to criticism from Europe. Little speaks for it in sporting terms; the calculation is a different one. More slots mean more chances to participate for the small associations of Asia, Africa, and Central America, and their votes secure the majority. The expansion looks like greater participation and is at the same time the means of enlarging the majority that is held. It costs the one at the top nothing — the price is paid by the tournament, which grows ever more unwieldy, and by the fans, for whom it becomes more expensive and farther away.

The same power decides who is even allowed to play. Russia has been excluded from all competitions since the attack on Ukraine; the United States, whose military carried out violence across foreign borders repeatedly in the same years, is hosting the World Cup. One need not equate the cases to notice the missing standard: there is no rule that bars the aggressor from the stage, or else it would strike more than just the one. Russia could be excluded because it was already isolated; the United States is host, major market, media power, the center of the order that carries the tournament — excluding it would mean shattering the tournament itself. Who is allowed to stand on the stage of nations is decided not by law, but by power.

The sharpest case played out around Iran. The host country waged war before and during the tournament against a participating country: it dropped bombs on Iran, whose team was competing in the World Cup at the very same time. The consequences hit the sporting side directly. The domestic league, in which a large part of the team plays, was suspended for months because of the war; the team had to relocate its quarters from the United States to Mexico and received only

short-term visas for the days around each individual match, forcing it to travel back immediately every time; some staff members were not permitted to enter the country at all. And yet the tournament continued as if nothing had happened. A competition that presents itself as a festival of international friendship can bear the fact that the host bombs one of the participants — nothing shows more clearly that it is not law that orders the stage, but the power that holds it.

The circle closes. The devotion of the many below and the monopoly rent of the few above belong together. The fan’s enthusiasm, the most genuine thing about the whole affair, is the raw material from which profit is made above.

The Great “We”

There remains the “we” from the beginning, the one the man at the office says even though he did nothing. At the World Cup, it becomes largest of all.

Who says “we” there? Before the same screen, in the same jersey, at the same goal, the worker and the executive cheer together, the cashier and the chief physician. For the duration of the match, what is real all year round seems suspended: the difference of class, of status, of wealth.

Football relates to this difference in three ways. Some clubs carry it: where two clubs of one city face each other, it charges up socially — the refined against the plain, the bourgeois against the alternative, and the choice of club says who one is and who one is not. Other clubs bridge it: behind the industrial city’s club stands the whole city, from worker to director. The national team seems to erase it; it connects across all classes.

This community does not exist outside, in the real economy — quite the opposite. There one is divided — above and below, capital and labor, poor and rich. In the stadium, what is separated outside appears united, as in the army, where all ranks likewise merge into a comradeship that otherwise divides them. A symbolic sublation of class, real in experience and null in consequence: after the final whistle, everyone returns to their situation.

At the World Cup, the nation is added to the “we.” The eleven represents it; it is not merely a community one experiences, but one that represents a whole — the nation. With this, the rules change. It is not clubs that compete, but federations, and whoever wants to play for a country must hold its citizenship. Here the logic tips into the open: the player of different origin, born elsewhere, is naturalized so he can play, and the supporters welcome it when he scores. But the exclusion otherwise attributed to nationality does not simply disappear; it is suspended

as long as the player successfully embodies the national we. Whoever scores, belongs. Whoever fails can suddenly appear again as the foreigner whose origin one now remembers.

And what the teams represent, they also express. Each has its colors, its emblem, its mascot, often its own style of play and self-presentation by which it is recognized. The fans carry this further, adorning themselves with flags and painted faces, and drive the national-typical into the folkloric — Viking helmets, sombreros, a beer in national colors. Thus the imagined unity becomes colorful and visible for a summer, and the diversity of nations appears side by side on one stage. It is also the occasion on which a television audience incidentally learns something about distant countries that otherwise never appear — a kind of geography lesson between matches.

Support for one's own country is not the only relationship at play here. Alongside it stands appreciation of teams that play with particular beauty — an enjoyment in itself, independent of origin. Some cultivate this as a distinction of their own: they do more than merely wave flags; they can also discern and praise beauty. Both run side by side, and in case of doubt, one's own country still wins out. And curiously, the accounting always works out: if one's own team beats the favorite, it is a great achievement; if it draws, it is an honorable result; if it loses, well, it was against the best. One's own country can, in effect, never lose.

A particular sympathy belongs to the small side — not the one that simply goes under, which is merely quaint, but the one that knocks a big team out of the tournament before failing itself. This resonates with something real: in actual life, most people are David rather than Goliath. Just as one dreams oneself, small, into the great one, so one dreams oneself into the small one who shows the great one up.

Further still is the one who charges the matchups with whatever comes to mind about the countries involved — their politics, their history, their place in the world. Then the final is not Spain against Argentina, but the old colonial power against the rising, self-confident Third World; and whoever knows the winner knows where the world is heading. But one can cast the same match differently: the country of ultra-neoliberalism and closeness to Trump against a country of a different tradition. Both readings arise from the same encounter, and the outcome confirms whichever one has brought along. Whatever serves two opposite conclusions supports neither. Every country has enough history that one can assign it whatever role one currently needs; the choice of category follows the desired result. A few years ago, an octopus in an aquarium was consulted to predict match outcomes by choosing between two feeding boxes. There was no connection whatsoever between its choice and the outcome, and

everyone knew it. The political charging is, in structure, the very same move — a connection brought to the matter from outside, one the matter itself gives no support for — except it takes itself to be profound. Eleven play against eleven; who wins depends on form on the day, chance, and refereeing decisions, not on the governments' economic policies. What is satisfied is a need for meaning that the game does not supply.

Yet the nation is not the club. Nothing but choice binds one to a club; but one really does depend on one's own country — through laws, taxes, protection, the life one leads within it. That is why national identification is not as consequence-free as identification with a club. Beneath the veil of international friendship and good sportsmanship, a competition among nations still runs on, and it touches something real. The Marxist critique that already saw an ideology, an opiate, in class reconciliation finds its sharper case here. The "we" of the game also encompasses those who govern the country, and their policies — precisely when one is dissatisfied with them, or when they run counter to one's own interests. One sees this in how criticism of one's own country is easily branded as fouling one's own nest, and in how leaders like to sit in the stands, in the glow of the game, some of which rubs off on them.

But the glow does not rub off only on those who govern. It reaches the ordinary citizen too. Whoever comes from a country whose team is currently shining gets addressed about it abroad — as if he himself had achieved something. One's own country has a great team, so one is, along with it, a little bit great. Not much follows from this, but a bit of sympathy does, and that counts in dealings with strangers.

What this means can be seen in two ways. Perhaps the symbolic reconciliation defuses the pressure to address the real division — football gives, for a few hours, the feeling of equality and takes the edge off the demand for real equality. Bread and circuses. Or the experienced unity, however consequence-free, is a foretaste of what is possible — a reminder that the classes can meet, that division does not have the last word. Then football does not pacify but awakens. Which view is correct depends on circumstances that would have to be examined case by case.

What Remains Open

Some things have only been touched on. The pleasure of contest, the deep-seated need for "us against them," whose root remains unexplored. The violence of hooligans, which is not explained by fandom itself but by its inversion: where

people otherwise feel effective at nothing, the symbolic contest tips over into the real one, and the outlet becomes a source of flame. And the question of how far all this, shown here through the big clubs, holds for the small local club around the corner, where more of the real traces of commonality remain.

Football is play and labor at once, community and business, genuine feeling and sold attention, symbolic reconciliation and perhaps the foretaste of a real one. In the single word “we” that comes from a thousand throats at the goal, all of this is contained. Whoever shouts it can take it apart afterward — and shout it again at the next goal all the same.