

Whose “World Cup” is this?

Written by Peter Vale

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PETER VALE, JUN 18 2010

Not a stone's throw from where we do our grocery shopping, I heard the BBC describe the opening of the Summer Olympic Games. I say 'heard' because, in those grim days, South Africa's isolation meant that major sporting events — what we today call “global” events — were scarcely mentioned on the bulletins which passed for news as apartheid was making its last ugly stand.

The memory of that particular September Saturday has much been with me this past week as the FIFA 2010 World Cup has exploded in this country and, if what I see on the news-channels is to be believed, seems to have done so pretty much elsewhere too — well, elsewhere, except in Burma which seems to be as isolated as was apartheid South Africa in 1988.

If you think I'm overstating the case about the explosion of “World Cup-fever” — as the press headlined it a week ago, let me explain. Almost every shop worth its proverbial salt is festooned with the flags of all nations, not only those participating in the event. And, it is certainly so, that there's been an outbreak of patriotism in the country. This, incidentally promises to continue even though the South African team — known colloquially as Bafana Bafana — will not make it to the second round. Travelling deep in the rural areas ten days ago, I was struck by all the South African flags fluttering from windows and passing taxis. And, during a brief trip into neighbouring Swaziland, I think I saw more South African than Swazi flags a-flying.

In the great scheme of things international, twenty-two years have certainly taken South — and Southern — Africa from famine to feast. Is it any wonder then, I often think, that my head is in a spin about the changes that have happened to my country let alone academic discipline that I've tried to master, explain and research these forty-odd years past. But this, the World Cup mood, as I have suggested, is totally different to what I've known or even read — let alone theorized — about.

However, the sheer ruthlessness — I chose the words carefully — of the FIFA World Cup juggernaut must open even the most jaded IR eyes to much of the sheer sophistry of the discipline's famous “stuff”.

Take the issue of sovereignty, for instance: this country is under foreign occupation. Not so much by the rapacious Uruguayans who, as I write these words, are celebrating the three goals they put past two South African goal-keepers; nor indeed the wounded (but still colourful) Spanish who must be wondering how they lost to the Swiss, a team whose image was so poor that it hired a local PR company to build it; nor Ivory Coast and Ghana who remain this continent's only hope in what has been celebrated as “Africa's World Cup.”

No, South Africa's sovereignty has been seized by FIFA INC who, if the truth be known, have made South Africans pay in coin — and dearly so — for the privilege of their occupation.

South Africans have paid the foreign invader three times over. First by up-fronting the money to build Stadia — some architecturally interesting, true — but none with any real idea on their long-term use. This has happened in a country where many, if not most people, have no access to running water. Secondly, South Africans have paid in opportunity-cost: most people agree that the country's education system is a disaster and that many, if not most, schools in poor areas are non-functional. If pre-school and primary education had been prioritised over the fifteen-odd years the

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country has been engaged with the World Cup issue, might the country have been in a different place thirty-five years hence? And finally South Africans have paid by the dumping of unsold World Cups tickets a few months back when it became clear that the global recession had hit the World Cup as hard as it had that other great arm of Swiss internationalism, the Annual World Meeting of the World Economic Forum at Davos.

So if this was the great IR fact of sovereignty – what about that great modern social fact – the market? The most exciting thing that happened during the match between the Netherlands and Denmark was the arrest of 36 skimpy-dressed women who were engaged in an ambush-marketing exercise by a leading Dutch brewer who is not one of the FIFA-branded official sponsors. The alleged ring-leaders – two Dutch women – have been charged with violating, not FIFA regulations, but South Africa commercial law! And, more seriously, the informal market folk in Soweto, Johannesburg’s infamous dormitory city, have not been permitted to sell their wares within a 2-square kilometre radius of the grand-dad of South Africa’s stadia which is called Soccer City.

So, the great brands of Europe and a woman selling apples in Soweto’s Rockville have been excluded from the humble pursuit – as Adam Smith called it – by a deal which was struck between a self-appointed committee of sports administrators and South African bureaucrats who declared at the time that they desired to “create jobs” – the one thing of which the country is desperately short.

There is a mood in some quarters of IR to see global events like these as the accepted – indeed, logical – outcome of the much celebrated (but poorly) understood idea of Globalisation. This kind of thinking has driven sections of the IR community to embrace the sloganised thinking around branding. So, an argument runs, these “global” events allow countries to develop their “international brand” in a “highly competitive world”.

This point of view is used in South Africa to both explain and justify what will be going on for the next three weeks . This morning the official FIFA official spokesman – a former student, I think – said that all the money in the world couldn’t buy PR that came from the global TV audience South Africa has enjoyed during this past week. He may well be right of course, but what does this say for South Africa’s history of oppression and struggle and historical figure like Nelson Mandela.

So, here’s a question to IR’s global events groupies: In the world of brands what is history? Or has Frank Fukuyama already provided the definitive answer?

The motto of Seoul Olympics was “Harmony and Progress” – boy, doesn’t it sound as if the Soviets were in the chair when this decision was taken? If this World Cup has a motto – or even a Mission Statement – I’ve missed it. It certainly has a few slogans – the township slang word, “Ayoba” which loosely means, “it’s cool”, “it’s hip”, “it’s great” and “Kenako” which in the Sesotho language means, “it is time” are the firm favourites .

But, as the drift of this (admittedly) curmudgeonly blog suggests, I’m keen to invest in a T-shirt which is carrying a somewhat different slogan, “FICK FUFA”!

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