

THE TRIUMPH OF PRAGMATISM OVER IMAGINATION: The Defeat of Brazil in the 1982 World Cup Finals

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All social theories have dwelt on the relationship between the practical organization of society that results in the most efficient use of available resources and the forms of social organization that best reflect what could be called the human essence. This relationship between the necessary and the good lies at the heart of social philosophy. For example, apologists for western industrialism argue that capitalism provides both the most efficient system of production, as well as allowing for the freest development of the individual within a system of industrial production. Alternatively, critics of western industrialism (such as Karl Marx in his theory of alienation) argue it is only in communism that there is a true balance between freedom (the flowering of the human potential) and necessity (the material organization of society).

In western society one of the most visible and dramatic examples of the playing out of this relationship between freedom and necessity occurs in the spectacle provided by sport. In part sports are so popular because they offer an escape from the many problems of social life. However, to do this they must reflect those same conditions of life, albeit in an idealized manner. In so doing the possibility of freedom is always shown to be available within the structures of discipline and sacrifice. Through a study of our sports, we can better understand the way society attempts to legitimate the status quo by showing how the necessary and the good can be united and idealized in athletic competition. Necessity and freedom become intimately linked.

The 1982 Soccer World Cup Finals held in Spain have dominated the interest of much of the sporting world in the last six weeks. Officially the tournament ended on July 11 when Italy defeated West Germany 3-1 in the final game to become World Champions. Unofficially, for many it ended six days earlier when a superb Brazilian side was beaten by Italy and thus eliminated from competition. The reactions to both their success and their failure can show much of how we regard the relationship between freedom and necessity in western societies.

Among the non-partisan observers at this World cup the Brazilians were undoubtedly the sentimental favorites, for they showed (briefly) that

freedom and necessity can truly be united in sports. They showed the beauty that is possible in soccer when it is played more like a game than as a contest. Tele Santana, the Brazilian coach, said after the elimination,

"I did my job on the basis of one unshakeable belief. It is that Brazilians are born to play football a certain way. For Europeans this might be a problem. Maybe they couldn't accept a lack of defensive discipline. But I could because I know the Brazilian character. Football isn't anything if it is not played with beauty. The game becomes meaningless otherwise."

The Brazilians did not disappoint. They wove patterns of complex beauty and showed what is possible when you try not merely to achieve an end with a soccer ball but to use it for expression, for imagination, for freedom. Their failure, if it be called that, can be attributed to the lack of a talented center forward and goalkeeper. They played in two of the three outstanding games of the finals (Brazil vs Argentina, Brazil vs Italy, France vs West Germany). Only France came close to providing additional magic, playing with finesse and abandon going forward but weak at the back for which they ultimately paid against West Germany. All the others were stuck within the structures of necessity.

Italy, the eventual winners, hit a run of good form. But as soon as the pressure of results expected of World Champions starts to build, they will resort to the cynicism and brutality characteristic of their play in the first round of the tournament and the last eight years in general. Indeed, the first half of their game against Argentina was a disgrace to any idea of sport. They won because a goal scorer, Rossi, suddenly got lucky.

The West Germans were a sad shadow of the team of the early and mid seventies. Beaten by Algeria, their 'match' against Austria a fraudulent affair, fearful and defensive against a weak England and outplayed by France, the West Germans were lucky even to reach the final. Poland were ordinary and drab, reaching the semi-final through only one good result (the defeat of Belgium).

Argentina, the defending champions, never got momentum as they had at home four years ago, Maradona, their highly touted star failing to live up to his promise. England were physically strong but technically weak and could not snatch the unexpected opportunity that came their way. The Soviet Union,

after a promising opening round, never lived up to their pre-tournament billing as dark horses. Of the rest, Honduras, the Cameroons and Algeria will be remembered for their emergence from among the ranks of the 'underdeveloped'.

However, it was Brazil that caught the popular imagination precisely because they played with imagination. As a Covent Garden porter put it on television when asked his opinion of the Brazilians, "they play football like shopping at Harrods, our lads (England) play like shopping at Marks and Spencer's". What was it about them that inspired such enthusiasm? The answer I think lies in the possibilities that sports give to emphasize the freedom part of the freedom/necessity duality.

In their success it was spontaneity, boldness, extravagance and chance that stood out, and yet when they were beaten these things seemed to be forgotten because they were not successful. The need of necessity overcame the desire for freedom. Such is the contradiction of modern sport. Its appeal lies in its ability to provide the extraordinary, the stretching of human capability—which in turn is sacrificed for success at any price. 'Nice guys finish last'.

The tragedy of the 1982 World Cup will not be Brazil's failure but the fading from memory of their football because they failed.

An examination of our attitudes towards Brazil can show much regarding the perspective we take on the freedom/necessity duality. The almost universal acclaim that greeted the Brazilian side in the first three weeks of the tournament was accompanied also by astonishment that they looked to be the team with the best chance of winning the trophy. Our acceptance of the freedom they gave a hint at was only possible because it was set within a framework where freedom coincided with the necessary. When attention switched to the Italian triumph, no one marveled at how they played the game but only at the fact that they were so effective.

Our appreciation of modern sports is always tilted towards the side of necessity. We sacrifice freedom for effectiveness. If we are willing to do this in a realm where we supposedly search explicitly for the exceptional, for the imaginative, it says much then of how our society views personal freedom within the contemporary industrial setting. We put so much emphasis on the

instrumental nature of our social actions that we are blinded to the possibility for fulfillment and expression that sports (and work) can provide. Brazil, for a brief moment showed that this was possible in the realm of sports before they were smashed under the necessity of instrumental ends.

It is to be hoped that the Brazilian achievement lingers in the mind longer than the Italian victory, that youngsters all around the world take their examples from Zico, Junior, Socrates and Falcao, rather than from the calculated savagery of Tardelli or Gentile. This is too much to hope for perhaps from a society where sports are so professional, where only instrumental ends to do with winning dominate the forms of social organization. I am not making a plea for an end to sports as contest, for competition itself plays a part in the strive for excellence and freedom, but a plea to remember that sports gain their vitality from being portrayed as separate from social life and that we should take this separation seriously.

We should seek to emulate the Brazilian achievement, to tilt the balance in sports towards the quest for freedom at the expense of the stress on necessity. Let imagination triumph over pragmatism. If it is possible on the sports field, then surely it is possible in other realms also.