



This essay takes the 2018 soccer world cup in Russia as a starting point to analyze the contemporary role **of football as the ritual-religion of global capitalism and national power structures**. It tries to explain from both sociological and neurological perspective why football fills a vacuum which the industrial revolution has torn into the individual and collective human psyche and warns that **the eradication of sacred wildness** in our advanced societies triggers mass atrocities not only directed against others, but also against nature and the self. It asks in a last extent if the individual human being has to change or the culture it is engulfed by.

### Football – 21<sup>st</sup> Century Religion or Big Business?

Full disclosure: our living room has been taken over by my wife's friends, a well off parents clique which has formed around our children's Shanghainese ice hockey team. The dinner preceding the match between France and Croatia created such an amount of plastic waste that I offered to my wife to cook for her friends the next time she invites them over. I couldn't be more at odds with my value set: 富二代 | fuerdai, i.e. Chinese second generation nouveaux riche, enjoying their materialism in my house on the occasion of the 2018 World Cup, the pinnacle event in the sport which I detest most of all. Over a half time break discussion on how we could spend our next winter holidays and if we should go skiing in

the Alps, I realize that we watch the World Cup final and am declared an ignorant slug by our Chinese guests with a condescending smile.

Football. The game which moves millions of people and dollars. Why should it receive attention on a blog about the future of work and education? For a declared non-aficionado like me, **it is not the game itself which grabs my attention, but the social rituals it is embedded in.** The moments that stick with me like a fly on a glue-trap are when the camera leaves the grass and zooms into the elevated tribunes where Putin sits in a row with the Croatian president and France's Macron, next to him incumbent FIFA president Gianni Infantino cracking jokes and laughing heartedly. In such moments one thinks that the world is at peace with itself or in the worst case one might get convinced that the simplicity of football indeed has the power to unite people and forget their daily and also generation old conflicts.

The critical mind realizes though that **football is a rampant anachronism**, one which celebrates the concept of nationalism while humanity needs to evolve urgently into a post-nationalist and globalist form of organization. Watch the brilliant [TED conversation between historian Yuval Harari and TED chief curator Chris Anderson](#), if you are not sure if you have fully understood yet, what this discussion between hanging on to a world which is structured in national entities of different size and moving forward to a world which only consists of one economic, political and social entity.

The critical mind does also sees with savant clarity that **football is big business and a religion**, which unites in these times of disorientation and necessary transformation those who fear the formation of a new social order. There are those on the top of the power pyramid who sponsor and strengthen football as a cult to prolong their political or corporate reign. And there are those on society's bottom who fall victim to the millennia old entertainment and control strategy of *panem et circenses*, i.e. bread and games, because they fear freedom as the social psychologist [Erich Fromm](#) has explained in all its paradox complexity. If you are not into reading heavy books but are looking for a quick and fun guide to football then watch Nick Park's latest animation film [Early Man](#).

Another reason why we love football might be that we are, at least in Europe, culturally conditioned to love it like nothing else. It was only this April when I cleared our basement back in Austria and found the [Panini](#) album of the 1986 FIFA World Cup. A shiver of joy befell my aging body, when I pulled it out from a stack of dusty books, my name written in neat capital letters on its front page. I was then in class 4A of an elementary school and would keep the album with me every day even over summer holidays. We would continue to exchange players until late into that year after transitioning into secondary boarding

school. I clearly remember hiding our treasures in the trunk-like study desks from being confiscated by the teachers.



I leaf through the pages and find the still familiar faces of Argentina's winning team, above all the World Cup's super star: Diego Maradona, who was for all of us children then like a demi-god. Brazil's Socrates and Germany's Rummenigge have made it into the Olympus of my memory. My mind trails off into the streets which connected my elementary school with the day care center where I spent my weekday afternoons. I would stop most days in the months before the World Cup at a tobacco shop, which got almost all my little pocket money. I would stop there even if I had no money to spend.

## Football, Education and Addiction

A few minutes of being lost in memory, another shiver of anger bolts through my mind. How in God's name? I push the album away and look at it from a completely different POV. Memory distorts the clarity of our present moment perception as Nobel laureate [Daniel Kahneman](#) has shown lucidly. What a society nudges it's children into collecting pictures of football athletes instead of Nobel laureates? What a society worships athleticism over noble heartedness? Shouldn't we grow up collecting pictures of Gandhi, Mother Theresa, Pasteur, Edison, Tesla and more recent examples of humanism and scientific industry like [2015 medicine Nobel laureate Yoshinori Ohsumi](#)? Maradona, who without doubt had a unique gift of controlling the leather like few others, slipped only years later into heavy drug addiction and became rather a threat to mankind than somebody who deserves veneration.

The same tobacco shop where I stopped almost every day spending a few Schillings to get one small pack of pictures, was the place where I would meet adults who satisfied their

adult addictions. Some of them would buy lottery tickets, some would by their cigarettes or a tabloid; all of them addicted to some form of dilapidating consumption. Then in the 80s smoking in the shop while chatting to the owner was still allowed and seen as normal. We kids would stand for quite a while next to the counter, where little Panini shelves were temporarily erected in about an adults hip height, but just in the right position to grab our full attention and a good amount of qualm.

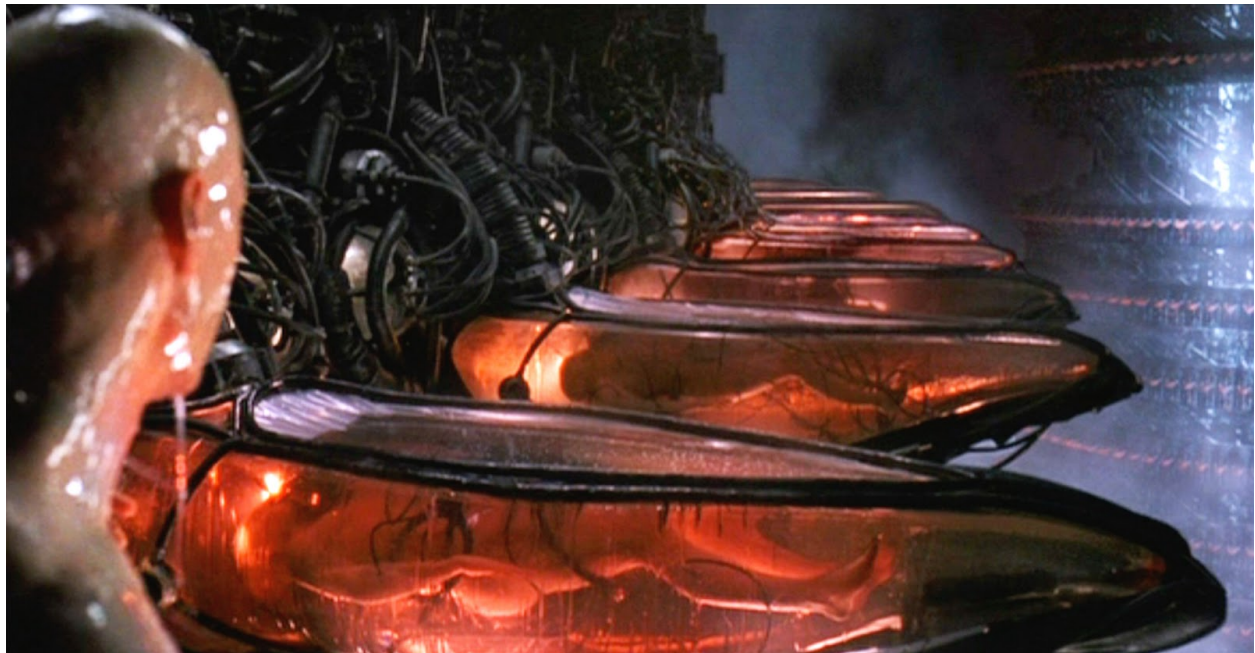
The government's decision to sell Panini football stickers only at tobacco shops exposed us children to the energy of adult addiction like nothing else. One must wonder today if there wasn't some form of strategy behind this or at least a form of malign ignorance. It seems to be an almost too ingenious form of indirect intervention from all those conglomerates which thrive on revenues generated by putting people down instead of lifting them up: Pooling many addictions in one location is a brilliant form of behavioral reinforcement. Children gambling their pocket money on yet another 10 packs of pictures in the hope of acquiring the last missing highly coveted photograph which can be traded against 200 others; smokers getting their weekly dose of lung cancer treatment; gamblers wasting their family income on the national lottery.

The top conglomerate – independent from the political system – is always the government, because it generates a good amount of tax revenue from its citizens' addiction. China finances since decades its national defense and public security budget almost entirely from tobacco taxation. The Thai government wields a monopoly over alcohol and tobacco production; and Germany harvests according to the [OECD](#) 9% of its tax revenue from non-VAT taxes on goods and services. Even in these times of increased awareness over the negative effects of addiction there is a natural antagonism between existing power structures being financed by addiction taxes and the same corporate and regime power structures showing responsibility to set frame conditions which are conducive to personal and collective growth. The anatomy of human destructiveness is certainly one which can be traced back to societies' power structures as Aldous Huxley lucidly explained in [The Politics of Ecology](#).

Looking back into these behavioral patterns, it is without question civilization which conditions us already in our very early years to give in to addiction. Psychologist [Daniel Levitin](#) writes that *children are more likely to want immediate gratification, and they are less likely to be able to foresee the future consequences of present inaction; both of these are tied to their underdeveloped prefrontal cortices, which don't fully mature until after the age of twenty (!). This also makes them more vulnerable to addiction.*



Education is not only about what we teach children in school, but about the frame conditions in which we bring them up. Raising our offspring in an addiction culture will result in lots of addicted adults. Levitin recommends to strengthen so-called *foundational concepts and habits of mind*. *They are mental habits and reflexes that should be taught to all children and reinforces throughout their high school and college years*. Training children in these habits, but letting them grow up in a culture which is an addiction mine field makes Levitin look like a Don Quixote and makes me recall [The Matrix](#): we need to be taught critical thinking and sound habits of mind, there is no doubt about it, but as long as we live in a culture which places each individual already in its early childhood years into an addiction cocoon, which grows thicker as we grow older, it won't be possible to construct a sane society.



Levitin contradicts his recommendation of teaching foundational concepts and habits of mind in the very same book, where he writes only a few paragraphs earlier that *the primary mission of teachers must shift from the dissemination of raw information to training a cluster of mental skills that revolve around critical thinking*. Teachers who succeed in doing so must be wizards of neurology able to change the human brain development. How are we supposed to teach children critical thinking, if the very brain region for critical thinking, the prefrontal cortex, is not yet fully evolved and is under permanent attack to be rendered useless by excessive screen time, sugar floods and many other habits of consumption which civilization pressures us into?

Football is big business. Like Coca-Cola, Monsanto, Red Bull and all the other corporations which generate billions of revenue with the addiction of their consumers. That's why football is backed by governments worldwide. Football is mainly about money and power. And somehow it seems that it has made it to the top of the global power structure with FIFA presidents keeping kings in reign or taking power from them like once only Popes were able to. It is big business and a religion. [FIFA's revenue](#) stood at \$734 million in 2017, totaling over \$5.65 billion between 2015-2018. The country that wins the hosting bid attracts a lot of interest from investors, which can help to boost the economy. With so many countries vying to host the World Cup, FIFA naturally gets a big bargaining chip and gets away with dictating most of the terms. Russia invested more than USD 14 billion into the 2018 tournament.



### The Neurology of Football

Our crazy love for football could also be explained as a pleasure addiction. As humans we are social beings with a strong need of belonging. The disruptive forces of the industrial revolution have vaporized the social structures which gave us the feeling of belonging in the past. We are left with nuclear families and pluralist anonymous societies. Many live in single apartments and are stressed beyond measure by work, shadow work (lucidly explained by cognitive psychologist Daniel Levitin as *the service we expect from companies but has been transferred to the customer*) and a multitude of daily consumption choices.

Modernity with all its material endowments makes us pay a heavy price: **information overload and decision fatigue**. Attending football games takes this toll off our brains. Whether you join your 2<sup>nd</sup> league home team or the national selection, there is only one choice to be made: are you with or against us. This triggers the production of [oxytocin](#), i.e. one of the four hormones which alter our brain chemistry towards a brighter outlook. Oxytocin is for both the fan community as well as the playing team a major asset, but it can turn like the nuclear bomb into an almighty force which we asked for but are not able to control. Paramount and horrifying examples are Nazism and the Holocaust or more recently [anti-Japan riots in China](#) in the course of the Diaoyu Islands conflict.

Oxytocin is a hormone released by the back half of the pituitary gland, that has been called by the popular press the **love hormone**, because it used to be thought that oxytocin is what causes people to fall in love with each other. When a person has an orgasm, oxytocin is released, and one of the effects of oxytocin is to make us feel bonded to others. Evolutionary psychologists have speculated that this was nature's way of causing couples to want to stay together after sex to raise any children that might result from that sex. In other words, it is clearly an evolutionary advantage for a child to have two caring, nurturing parents. If the parents feel bonded to each other through oxytocin release, they are more likely to share in the raising of their children, thus propagating their tribe. A more recent theory gaining traction is that oxytocin regulates the salience of social information and is capable of eliciting positive and negative social emotions, depending on the situation and individual. Its real role is to **organize social behavior**. Promising evidence suggests that oxytocin pharmacotherapy can help to promote trust and reduce social anxiety, including people with social phobia and borderline personality disorder. Nondrug therapies, such as music, may exert similar therapeutic effects via oxytocinergic regulation; music has been shown to increase oxytocin levels, especially when people listen to or play music together (Levitin, 2014).

I found this telling introduction to oxytocin on a [company website](#) called oxytocin accelerator selling the hormone like a nasal spray against a cold. It promotes advanced behavior modification, improved trust, energy, empathy, reduced depression and fears:

*When it comes to team performance, testosterone may be the power force to winning but it is the oxytocin hormone which is the head coaches' number two assistant. Let's call this assistant Coach Oxytocin. Coach Oxytocin's role is one of social coordination. His job, is first and foremost, is making sure that every member of the team is all in and fully committed to the head coach's philosophy. [...] Coach oxytocin doesn't run drills or teach tactics or skills, he is the "bucket filler" the positive energy guy who manages loyalty, respect, reliability, liability, duty, and the collective desire to be, not just on the team, but OF the team! There is no in-*



*between with coach oxytocin. Oxytocin achieves this by drilling an “Us or them, kill or be killed,” philosophy into his player’s heads. But wait, how can the hormone of love and empathy also be the hormone of kill or be killed? [...] Several reasons actually.*

*#1. Oxytocin cultures emotional contagion in groups such that they develop a singular identity.*

*#2. Oxytocin engenders cooperation with the group.*

*#3. Oxytocin engenders a laser focus on the enemy.*

*#4. When challenged, oxytocin manipulates the part of the brain, the amygdala, that immediately lowers the stress hormone known as cortisol.*

*#5. Oxytocin is a very fast acting analgesic or pain killer.*

*Put these physiognomies under the direction of a good army general and you can have an force second to none. That’s right, in any fight on the field; oxytocin will lowers the pain threshold, putting all players’ right up there in a league with women having babies.*



These interesting thoughts are to be read on a [blog called sportsneuromarketing](#) which advices on how to get and keep fans in a stadium: *Humans are social animals. Of course you’ve heard it before. The brain gives a positive reaction when a human being is among other*



*human beings whom he/she includes into his/her group. Having a person feel respected and trusted and providing him/her with the opportunity to improve his/her social status is the way to ensure that fans (customers) are with you always. [...] In order to realize the importance of society for a human, let's consider an example from suicidology. One of the main factors contributing to committing suicide is a phenomenon of rejection by human society. When a person doesn't understand the rules of society and can't grasp the logic of the way it functions, then the likelihood of suicide increases significantly. So it is extremely important for our species to socialize, not to have the program implanted in us evolutionarily undermined.*

In short, oxytocin is the hormone which equally unites and divides people, which gives them the energy to live and which takes it from them. If applied with the right universal mindset it could lift humanity into an entirely new era, one which sees the [2nd Great Commandment](#) become a global reality, i.e. a global village: thou shalt love thy neighbor like thyself. If it is used to separate people and nations it turns into the chemical agent for sabotaging social progress or at its worst destroys entire civilizations.

### The Mass-Psychology of Football



We need to understand that football (and other passive mass sports phenomena) indeed does fill a psychological vacuum which 400 years of capitalism and 250 years of industrial revolution have left us with. Football satisfies our need of being part of something larger

than ourselves. A vacuum and a need which can be linked to our contemporary – seemingly endless – search for happiness. Neurologist Viktor Frankl has recognized this truth in a time when medicine did not yet have the tools to visualize brain activities as we do now with technologies like [functional neuroimaging](#). He said in the plain words of a psychotherapist what oxytocin can do at its best shortly after WWII: *For success, like happiness, cannot be pursued; it must ensue, as personal dedication to a cause greater than oneself or as the by-product of one's surrender to a person other than oneself. Happiness must happen, and the same holds for success: you have to let it happen by not caring about it.*

In our search for happiness we give in to the temptation of experiencing oxytocin kicks by subjecting ourselves to something larger than ourselves, i.e. to nationalism or football teams. This happiness naturally doesn't last but turns into an addiction which drives us into the next football game for yet another kick. We do so because modernity has left us with low oxytocin levels. We long for the intimacy of an extended family, a tribe or village life, but we must take what we get and that's anonymous mass events.



Nuclear proliferation has created since WWII societies which have reduced open violence for over 70 years to the lowest levels ever recorded in human history as psychologist [Stephen Pinker](#) has shown. The massive application of surveillance systems in totalitarian nations like China adds to this disappearance of open violence and will within a few years have exterminated it from this planet. Braveheart is history and so is all the addictive

warfare brotherhood about which psychologists and journalists like [Sebastian Junger](#) have speculated so much in the past. We live in oxytocin deprived societies.

Junger has spent much time with soldiers reporting on wars and raises questions which go beyond the brutality of single incidents or temporary combat actions: *Sometimes, we ask ourselves if we can save the vets," Junger says. "I think the real question is if we can save ourselves."* Junger returned one day after a reporting job to his home town New York and went through a series of severe panic attacks, when he realized that something was seriously wrong with him: he suffered from PTSD, i.e. post-traumatic stress disorder.

He started to research into the clinical picture of this mental disease and discovered that 20% of all cases turn into chronic long-term PTSD. He also found that the intensity of combat has gone down with every war that the US has fought since the Civil War in the 1860s. He assumed that disability rates would fall as well, but to his surprise they went up to such an extent that half of the US military has filed at present time for some kind of PTSD compensation from the government. He continues his account:

*I studied anthropology in college. I did my fieldwork on the Navajo reservation. I wrote a thesis on Navajo long-distance runners. And recently, while I was researching PTSD, I had this thought. I thought back to the work I did when I was young, and I thought, I bet the Navajo, the Apache, the Comanche -- I mean, these are very warlike nations -- I bet they weren't getting PTSD like we do. When their warriors came back from fighting the US military or fighting each other, I bet they pretty much just slipped right back into tribal life. [...] And maybe what determines the rate of long-term PTSD isn't what happened out there, but the kind of society you come back to. And maybe if you come back to a close, cohesive, tribal society, you can get over trauma pretty quickly. And if you come back to an alienating, modern society, you might remain traumatized your entire life. In other words, maybe the problem isn't them, the vets; maybe the problem is us.*

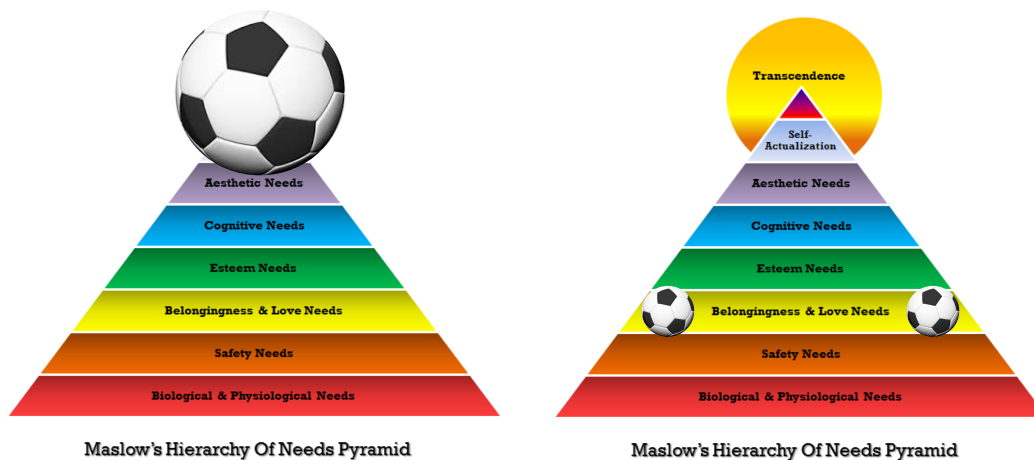
The nuclear bomb and big brother have deprived us by far and wide from warfare, killing and murder and have catalyzed the transition of these human activities into the sports arena. This is nothing new. Gladiators have shed their blood in the sand of Roman amphitheatres more than two millennia ago. And politicians knew then as well as now that these spectacles would pacify the mob for a little while until they cook up some strategy to keep it under control or throw in a few more slaves fighting for their life. *Panem and circenses* then is by no means different from what we witness now with cheap burgers, beer and global soccer championships.

In order to understand better what happens with each one of us, we could think of the human being as a vessel which is constantly under pressure, sometimes more and sometimes less – a very common analogy amongst 19<sup>th</sup> century psychologists like Sigmund Freud. It is a vessel equipped with different valves to ease its internal pressure and there are certain techniques to keep the internal pressure – in the very first place – under control. Lifestyle and diet choices, physical exercise and meditation are such techniques. The valves are to be found in consumption behavior, nationalism as an expression of an abstract need of belonging; and social aggression as a substitute for open violence or warfare.

Like most confessions, an institutionalized religion like football does not satisfy the human need of transcendence, but rather the need of belonging. The American psychologist [William James](#) has shown that transcendence is a rather individual and solitary experience, while belonging must be by its very definition of the human animal as a social mammal a collective experience. Football can therefore be very well compared to Christianity and each soccer club might well be seen as a church with its own reverend and congregation. What footballistas pray to are nevertheless idols and mammon.



## Football – A Basic Human Need?



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## Gladiators of Capitalism: Football, Work and Idolism



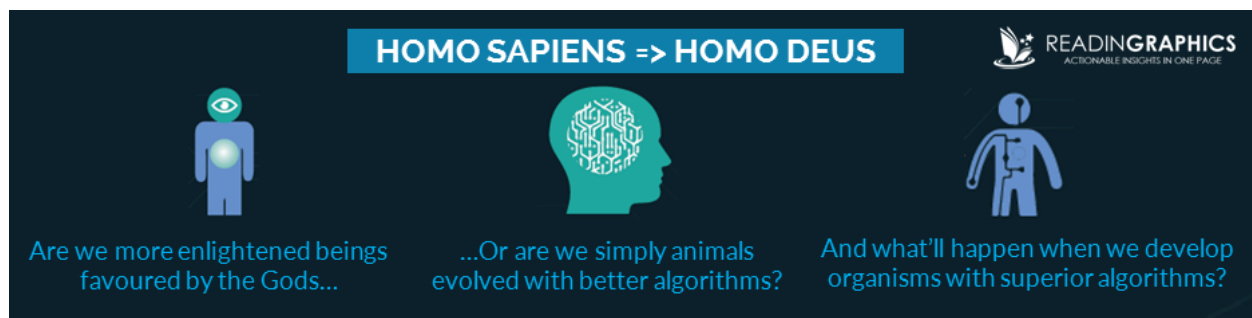
Historian Yuval Harari explains increased unhappiness in contemporary societies with how the *media and the fashion industry expose us to a totally unrealistic standard of beauty. They search the most gorgeous people on the planet, and then parade them constantly before our eyes. No wonder we are far less happy with the way we look.* He writes these lines in [Sapiens – A Brief History of Humankind](#) next to a picture of an oversized Cristiano Ronaldo dressed in underwear only.

Whether Ronaldo, Messi or Beckham, they all exemplify a cult around football, which reflects how our societies operate and how our subconscious is influenced by media, industry and regime. We might think that George Orwell's 1984 dystopia is far from reality, but as a matter of fact modern media delivers it in daily snippets directly into our homes and minds. It is though not anymore an external big brother watching over our most private lives, but our own socially conditioned superego, which compares our modest achievements and looks with what we are served by an industry which pays its gladiators more than any other. We are left in an increasingly individualist culture with a big dent in our self-esteem chassis.

A look into the [current annual salaries of the world's top soccer players](#) is a revealing exercise. It told me that 7 out of 25 play in Chinese clubs. Indicating a global shift in economic power and a convergence of Chinese socialism and Western capitalism. What hasn't changed since I first complained about the value system on our labor markets are the outrageous amounts which these people are paid. Ronaldo tops the list with almost 40 million Pound while Romelu Lakaku still makes 9.8 million coming in last. An oncological PhD researcher, who has probably spent the same amount of time on his academic training as most football players in their prime, might get a scholarship of 2000 EUR monthly. Am I the only one who thinks that our value systems are deeply flawed? There is something wrong with these modern mercenaries, whom we teach our children to look up to. We live in societies that see it as normal that millions of people wear Messi or Neymar shirts. Why do we feel awkward if people wear a shirt with Dalai Lama or behavioral economist [Dan Ariely](#) written in capital letter on their back? Both have in a way devoted their life to show us how to generate collaboration based positive oxytocin. They are our true heroes.

We are conditioned to think that football stars who look gorgeous and earn a killing are at the top of human achievement, but what is it that they deliver apart from their athleticism? What kind of feelings do they spur in society and what kind of experiences do they garner? Our previous analysis of football's neurology has answered this question: they deliver a superficial and short-lived form of happiness and belonging by giving us an oxytocin kick. If only more people would ask themselves how their work impacts others and society at large. Football stardom would probably be history. Probably. Probably not.

I recall our hike in the German Alps not too long ago. We overheard two ten-year-old boys slowly moving up the mountain in a long queue of pupils guided by three teachers. One asked the other, “Do you know the difference between this and football?” The other replied, “Football is cool, this is dead boring.” Soccer will always be a great way for children to build their motoric skills and to have fun playing a physical game with each other. The problem only starts when the game slips off into the mechanism of capitalism and power. Then it turns into a ritual-vehicle to strengthen and prolong the status quo system.



*God did not, as the Bible says, make man in His image; on the contrary man did make God in his image. [Ludwig A. Feuerbach]*

### Football and Transhumanism

Now, there has always been stardom in our societies and actors, artists and athletes were paid more than average citizens, but there is without a doubt a new dimension to how we idolize appearance over essence, i.e. looks over heart. I can't help noticing a general tendency towards [transhumanism](#), the religion which hails man to have become God – as Harari has put it nicely in evolutionary terms – man who has evolved from homo sapiens to [homo deus](#), capable of creating and altering life himself.

The striking thing about football is that - despite its political anachronism - it answers today the always existing human need for a religion and blazes a trail towards a full blown form of transhumanism. The word religion comes from Latin *religare* which means to bind or hold together. A religion is thus nothing more than something that creates a bondage between people, a common denominator which unites us. Historian Harari wrote that he is concerned about the path that humanity has taken and tried to explain the potentially dark scenarios of mankind making itself redundant by falling victim to a mechanistic worldview which leads to dataism or transhumanism. He concludes that capitalism is a global religion and that *modernity has turned 'more stuff' into a panacea*.

*Today Hindu revivalists, pious Muslims, Japanese nationalists and Chinese communists may declare their adherence to very different values and goals, but they have all come to believe that economic growth is the key for realizing their disparate goals. [...] That Modi, Erdogan, Abe and Xi Jinping all bet their careers on economic growth testifies to the almost religious status growth has managed to acquire throughout the world. Indeed, it may not be wrong to call the belief in economic growth a religion, because it now purports to solve many if not most of our ethical dilemmas.*

Capitalism is though too abstract to be understood as a religion. A religion requires rituals and objects of veneration – patterns of behavior and things which translate a belief system into the midst of our lives. Another scene from the World Cup final appears from my memory: Infantino, Putin, Macron, Croatia's president and a few other honorable FIFA capos stand in a line on a low podium, all players parading in front of them. Heavy rain, much too heavy to be covered from with umbrellas, pours onto dark suits of statesmen and FIFA representatives alike, giving the situation something of a happy ending in war movies like *Platoon* or *A Thin Red Line*. Even static Putin smiles when he shakes the athletes' hands, but Macron throws his arms around each player's neck and kisses them from his elevated position like the Pope delivering his blessings. The body language of some men is striking, in particular French star Griezmann tries to escape from Macron's embrace. The scene is again an anachronism which reminds us of absolute governments and paternalistic family structures. I watch in disbelief. I would have never thought that a post-modern syncretic politician like Macron would be capable of abusing football for his own power game; but populism doesn't know boundaries of ideology.



Interestingly all official footage of this scene is not available online – I only found this [private upload](#) which is though telling enough and is the only MUST watch in this essay. Don't miss it. And watch it again. The ritual climax is when the World Cup trophy is handed over to the French team by incumbent FIFA president Infantino. Not only each single French player, but also Macron and Croatia's president kiss the trophy as if it was a holy object. What we witness is a mass euphoria which asks for an explanation, because it goes far beyond some politicians performing according to the script of their PR advisors. What we watch in this scene is collective irrationality. It is a fleeting moment of a sacred wildness which - as Gary Snyder has shown – has been eradicated in our industrialized and overregulated societies.

Infantino, I couldn't believe it, holds the title H.E. (his excellency). He is the pope of football and by all means the leader of the largest – and by all national governments not only accepted but welcomed - religious affiliation on this planet. There are more nowadays who flock to the stadium than those who attend the liturgy in a mosque or in a church. The last time I have seen such a crowd phenomenon like the World Cup closing ceremony was 2007 in the small city of [Lourdes](#). It is France's largest pilgrimage site and takes in some five million pilgrims a year, most of them during a Catholic holiday called the [Assumption of Mary](#) celebrated on August 15. Lourdes' significance is explained through the apparitions of Our Lady of Lourdes and numerous miraculous healings. A fountain unearthed by Bernadette Soubirous in 1858 is believed to have special properties that heal the ailments of sick people. Thus ardent Catholics practice a similar behavior like fanatic footballistas. But what is it that Macron, Grabar-Kitarovic, Infantino, Putin and all the others expect from kissing this [18-Carat gold and six kilo heavy trophy](#)? Healing? A transcendental experience? Or is this ritual nothing more than sacrilegious wildness, i.e. an anthropological behavior which we need as a species even if the spiritual and ethical frame conditions have gone missing?

Germany's former national team player and trainer [Oliver Bierhoff](#) argues that the German team lost against South Korea because its two team members with Turkish migration background had themselves photographed with Turkish premier Erdogan before they lost the match. Bierhoff thinks that they destroyed the team moral. The incident might indeed have lowered the teams average oxytocin levels, but, so I was told by laymen experts, the defeat must be attributed to choosing the wrong strategy: ball possession instead of counter attack. [The Guardian](#) debates if France's victory will lead in the country to unity or division considering that more than half the team's players hail from the African continent. The World Cup title triggers in the winner nation a public debate about race and ethnicity. Interesting and confirming that football doesn't spread a feeling of people from different



backgrounds belonging to something larger. Quite on the contrary it revives 18<sup>th</sup> century sentiments of blood and soil.

Kissing the trophy is the ritual act which confirms that football has turned into a full blown religion which celebrates materialism. 18th century philosopher Ludwig Feuerbach described *religion as the outward projection of human inner nature*. Capitalism might be the economic system in which this materialism is embedded, but what we witness is the mass-psychology of a materialism, which completely ignores the spiritual nature of humanity. Religious football is the result of *citified mythology which denied first soul, then consciousness, and finally even sentience to the natural world*. Religious football is the result of humankind's failed search for the wild.



*What lies between those two brackets is not dead and gone. It is perennially within us, dormant as a hard-shelled seed, awaiting the fire or flood that awakes it again. [Gary Snyder]*

### Lost Wildness

Poet Gary Snyder explains in [The Practice of the Wild](#) the difference between nature and wildness. He defines natural in a broad sense as *“the material world or its collective objects and phenomena,” including the products of human action and intention*. By these lights, he writes, *there is nothing unnatural about NYC, or toxic wastes, or atomic energy, and nothing – by definition – that we do or experience in life is “unnatural.”*

Snyder continues to dissect the meaning of wild, which is *largely defined in our dictionaries by what - from a human standpoint - it is not*. Wild according to the Oxford English Dictionary means:

- *Of societies – uncivilized, rude, resisting constituted government*
- *Of individuals – unrestrained, insubordinate, licentious, dissolute, loose*
- *Of behavior – violent, destructive, cruel, unruly*



Snyder suggests to look at the meaning of wild by trying to define what it is, not what it is not. He formulates these intriguing definitions which are in clear contradiction to civilization:

- *Of societies – societies whose order has grown from within and is maintained by the force of consensus and custom rather than explicit legislation. Primary cultures, which consider themselves the original and eternal inhabitants of their territory. Societies which resist economic and political domination by civilization. Societies whose economic system is in a close and sustainable relation to the local ecosystem.*
- *Of individuals – following local custom, style, and etiquette with a concern for the standards of the metropolis or nearest trading post. Unintimidated, self-reliant, independent. “Proud and Free”*
- *Of behavior - fiercely resisting any oppression, confinement, or exploitation. Far-out, outrageous, “bad”, admirable, spontaneous, unconditioned, expressive, physical, openly sexual, ecstatic.*

Most of the senses in this second set of definitions come very close to being how the Chinese define the term Dao, the way of Great Nature: eluding analysis, beyond categories, self-organizing, self-informing, playful, surprising, impermanent, insubstantial,



independent, complete, orderly, unmediated, freely manifesting, self-authenticating, self-willed, complex, quite simple. Both empty and real at the same time. In some cases we might call it sacred. It is not far from the Buddhist term Dharma with its original senses of forming and firming (Snyder 1990).



The “supernatural” encompasses according to Snyder *all phenomena which are reported by so few people as to leave their reality in doubt. Nonetheless these events – ghosts, gods, magical transformations, and such – are described often enough to make them continue to be intriguing and, for some, credible.* In as such, Snyder makes a similar differentiation between the natural and the supernatural like Buddhist sage Choegya Trungpa between phenomena and numina, or the founder of anthroposophy Rudolf Steiner between the material and the spiritual world. But - and this is important – Snyder indicates that the wild bridges the gap between natural and supernatural world. Without wildness, there is no access to the sacred. Man being limited to the natural is condemned to the shackles of profanity, which he is compelled to cast off once in a while. Wildness, thus, emerges as a necessity from deep within, and it either does so in form of uncontrolled atrocities like genocides, controlled mass hysteria like the FIFA World Cup or in benign ways which I will elaborate in the next part of this essay on oxytocin.

The lessons we learn from the wild become the etiquette of freedom. We can enjoy humanity with its flashy brains and sexual buzz, its social cravings and stubborn tantrums, and take ourselves as no more and no less than another being in the Big Watershed. We can accept each other all as barefoot equals sleeping on the same ground. We can give up hoping to be eternal and quit fighting dirt (Gary Snyder, 1990).



Further reading & watching:

- [Early Man](#) (great animation about the mythical beginnings of soccer)
- [How oxytocin and emotions can bring fans to the stadium](#)
- [The Love Hormone as Sports Enhancer](#)
- Sebastian Junger on [why our lonely society makes it difficult to come home from war](#)
- [The Organized Mind by Daniel Levitin](#)
- [The Practice of the Wild by Gary Snyder](#)
- [Homo Deus by Yuval Harari](#)
- [The Politics of Ecology](#) by Aldous Huxley
- [Daniel Kahneman about memory](#)
- [The Varieties of Religious Experiences](#) by William James

