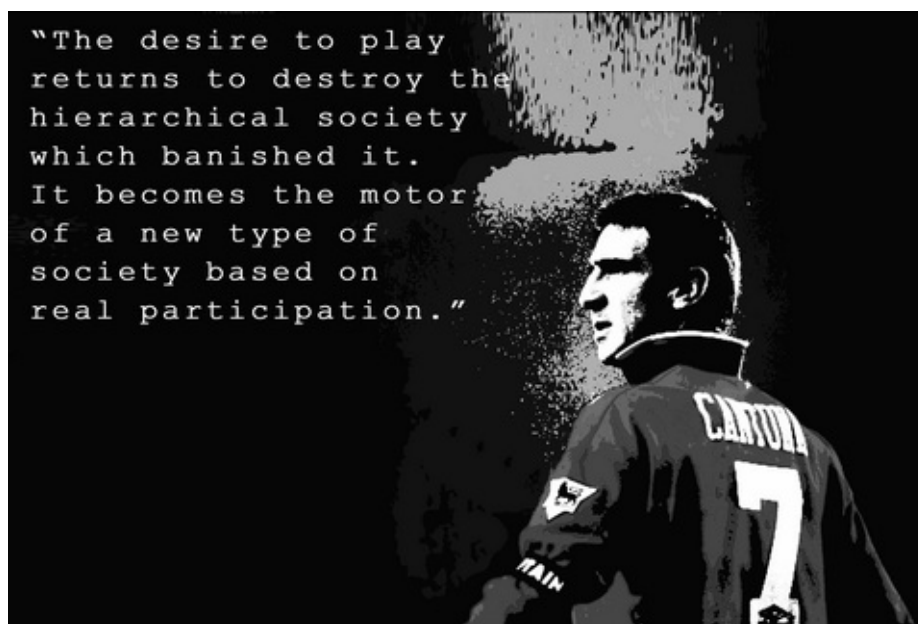


Intakes: The history of tactics – A political reading



Editorial Introduction

We have decided to print this review of *Inverting the pyramid – The history of football tactics* by Jonathan Wilson (Orion books, 2008) despite its spurious nature. We obviously reject the notion that a book can be read politically so as to imbue it with a meaning which was not intended by the original author. And we have little time for the author's apparent targets. But the salient points are worthy of more general consideration and we trust that readers will enjoy extracting them from the bullshit.

Introduction

Despite its obvious importance the relationship between football and communism remains relatively neglected by theorists in both camps. This book in turn also fails to adequately address the problematic. But it does at least point towards a novel trajectory that any theoretical efforts aspiring towards a dialectical approach will be forced to engage with.

Communism and football

Previous embryonic theoretical explorations have in different ways grasped football as essentially either a *precursor to* or *pre-figuration of* communism. On the one hand there has been the focus on the direct correlation between the growth of football and proletarian formation. This school of thought has long held that communism remains a tendency within proletarian subjectivity incapable of adequate realization until the FIFA World Cup has been held in all five major continents. The 2010 World Cup in South Africa thus heralds the end of capital's progressive function of spreading football to all corners of the globe, after which it becomes essentially decadent. The project of the immediate abolition of wage labour and the socialisation of the means of producing football will then become not only imperative, but also possible, whilst the project of reforming capitalist football through the affirmation of the working class will be doomed to failure. The pre-figurative strand has considered *football*

as communism. The early seminal work in this direction was that of Jean-Paul Sartre in his *Critique of dialectical reason* comparing the relationship between individual and collective realisation in a communist guerrilla army to that of a football team¹. As with Antonio Negri's work on *immaterial labour*, however, such attempts to identify select contemporary social practices *within* bourgeois society with its negation, as essentially communist, fail to problematise the question of alienation on the one hand and underestimate the need for rupture on the other.

Capitalism and football

Both of these theoretical currents have remained inexplicably underdeveloped. But whilst each approach has yielded a number of fruitful insights they remain perhaps necessarily limited by their one-sidedness. Perhaps what is needed is a theory rooted in the unity of the (football-playing) proletariat/capital relationship. Whilst this book undoubtedly fails to make it explicit, the development of football tactics can be read (politically) as an allegory for the changing

¹ This was popularised during the early 1990s by the communist footballers of Brighton Autonomist F.C. The players wore shirts which eschewed commercial sponsorship in favour of subversive propaganda. 'Communist' was emblazoned across the front of the shirt in large letters, 'total proletarian football' in small, and a quote from Sartre was printed across the back.

forms of the subsumption of labour under capital, thereby pointing towards a perspective which could enable the development of a unified theory of communism and football.

Football tactics were imposed on teams by (bourgeois) managers. The freedom of the charging, dribbling mob was replaced by a division of labour in which players were assigned positions on a pitch with specific functions to perform. Hard as it may be to believe given the current backwardness of Scottish football, managers there were the first to impose the passing of the ball between team mates, a revolutionary development which by connecting disparate players to team functionality enabled this division of labour to occur.

Periodisation

Readers of *Aufheben* will no doubt be aware of the major tactical innovations which have led certain team formations to dominate historical epochs and thus be able to easily decipher the title of the book. They will also be aware of the transformations of labour processes and restructured patterns of global accumulation to which they correspond. Wilson resists the temptation however to subsume developments within the categorical prison of periodisation in favour of an account of the concrete experiments and struggles which resulted in the hegemonic dominance of certain tactical formations. The tactical categories defining periods are seen as the results of struggles; the categories themselves are defetishized, echoing Simon Clarke's critique of periodization:

Periodisation does not solve the problem which gave rise to it, that of getting beyond the static fetishism of simple 'essentialist' structuralism, because it merely proliferates structures which remain, each in their turn, equally static and fetishistic. Far from providing a middle way between a fatalistic essentialism and a political opportunism, the periodisation of the capitalist mode of production can only embrace historical specificity in the mutually exclusive forms of historical contingency and structural inevitability, either of which serve to legitimate a political opportunism in the name alternatively of the openness or the determinism of the conjuncture, and both of which cut the present off from the past, and so prevent us from learning the lessons of history².

² P. 149 Simon Clarke, *The global accumulation of capital and the periodisation of the capitalist state form*, in *Open Marxism Vol.1 Dialectics and history*, Bonefeld, Gunn and Psychopedis, Pluto Press London 1992.

Necessity

Given his critique of the dogma inherent in periodisation theories it will be of no surprise to learn that Wilson echoes Marx's dictum that *history* is the *history of class struggle* in his overview of the history of football tactics:

The history of tactics, it seems, is the history of two interlinked tensions: aesthetics versus results on the one side and technique versus results on the other³.

The history of football tactics, like that of the capital-labour relation, has been characterised by the ebb and flow of struggles. For Wilson, however, this history has not merely been about the contingent, accidental or external. Each swing of the pendulum has not, nor cannot, mark a return to a previous era. There has been teleological development. Players have got fitter as the application of science to the labour process has improved nutrition and training. And the development of ever more efficient means of communication has led to greater tactical sophistication, fewer anomalies and fewer tactical surprises from foreign fields as satellite TV enables devotees to watch football matches from all over the world.

This teleology has, according to Wilson, brought us to the brink of the *universal footballer*, able to operate anywhere on the pitch and perform multiple roles, a metaphor perhaps for the post-Fordist worker. But he does not see this process as constituting a *now* with a greater historical significance than was *then*, unless we as communizing footballers make it so; communism is, and has always been, only possible in the future:

Many before have hailed the end of history; none has ever been right⁴.

Conclusion – The unity of theory and practice

It is not enough for would be revolutionaries to merely play football. Our theory and practice must become one in the heat of the class struggle. The contemplative stance of those who believe that history is now on our side can only be an impediment to the realization of football's potential as part of the communist programme. The theoretical problem of football and communism will only find its truth in revolutionary praxis.

K. E. Aug 2009

³ Wilson J., 2008, *Inverting the pyramid*, Orion Books, p. 6.

⁴ Op cit p. 356.