

# Soccer for Social Good

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2025

a review of

*Beyond the Final Whistle, Soccer for a Better World* by Vasilis Kostakis. Pluto Press, 2025

On a hot night in Houston Texas, two teams played during a social and political moment that carried more meaning than just the end result of the match. The significance was shown by supporters' shirts depicting half split Mexican and American flags worn by those in attendance.

It's the start of July, and the CONCACAF Gold Cup soccer tournament has concluded with Mexico beating the United States Men's National Team. ICE agents have been on a quest to meet their daily quota of illegal capture and detention of migrants and even US citizens, while a new prison has opened its caged mouth in Florida to accept the incoming torrent. On the TV broadcast, the game sounded as though it were on Mexican home soil, the majority of the crowd roaring in support of the black and gold.

In his new book, Vasilis Kostakis presents football (the predominantly accepted term for soccer around the world) as a catalyst for social change, and shows how the sport itself has informed social movements across the globe. Each chapter is just a few pages in length with titles such as Democracy in football, Democracy in Society, Football is Art, and The football gods are Dead.

Football wears some not so metaphorical disguises from the nationalistic to the corporate, but it may also wear a different cloak too, one that represents a deeper set of core values shared among many social groups, including those acting in solidarity with immigrant populations as in anti ICE actions taking place currently across the United States.

During a protest or a football match, too, there is aspirational cooperation and communication. There is also inherent opposition. If there were no oppositional force, no enemy so to speak, to contend with in the first place, where would the seeds for new ideas and new structures or defensive shapes in which to play the game come from? This is as apparent in sport as it is in movements like anarchism.

Joy and disappointment help to form the bonds that arise in between the highs and lows of success during a match or creation of a social movement. These shared social bonds extend into those of anarchism as well, the desire for play and human connection, whether planning an action or team play, there can be a special brand of solidarity built between a group around a shared goal.

Kostakis shows how football can be a practical place from which to jump into thinking about many subjects such as music, basketball, and art to name a handful of the subjects included in this 132-page book. From Albert Camus to Ursula Le Guin, to John Kunderri Moriarty, the first Aboriginal footballer to play for the Australian national team, Kostakis presents a wide range of examples of the outliers in art and sport, philosophy and literature throughout.

Football remains an arena, just as any other social structure or sport remains a vessel for the socio-political sphere of the world at large. Our collective ideals and hopes, whether purist and moralistic, or corporate and seedy or even downright genocidal, are revealed in how we play, where the game is played, and how we think about sport.

Football is always inherently political, and many fans tend to have an antiauthoritarian viewpoint. Where that energy is channeled depends on the fans and many factors that surround the game. Football is political too, from

where pitches are built, where jerseys are made, and what players are allowed to play at an international level. These facets of the game always implicate the political nature of the world.

In a world of sport often ruled by corporate sponsorships and billionaire investors, there are players and fans who push back against these entities, against accepting unjust rule. An important example of this and one due for emulation is Kostakis' profile of the Brazilian footballer Socrates, who played for the Brazilian club Corinthians Republic (Democracia Corinthiana) a club begun in 1910 by five immigrant railway workers.

Socrates joined the Corinthians in the late 1970s where he was exposed to other players who were compelled to do something about the authoritarian regime in Brazil in the early 1980s. The football player became an important figure in the Brazilian resistance, in part because he was part of a team built on the principles of self-governance.

Football isn't perfect, and neither will the World Cup be perfect when it is tri-hosted by the U.S., Mexico, and Canada in 2026. As in any sport, there are few coaches, venues, advertisers or entities that act with a socially minded sense of ethics around the global power of the sport. It is sometimes within these spaces that athletes, fans, and social groups define themselves with football as the backdrop.

The 2026 World Cup will be interesting to say the least, with the immigration and travel bans issued at present while the status of many nations slotted to compete have been placed on government watch and do-not-fly lists. Which begs the question, who will be allowed to compete, and who will be watching from the sidelines from home? Whose flag will be allowed to wave over the match?

Will the tifo (Italian for tifosi, short for supporter) banners raised at the World Cup game bear political messages? Fans raised a tifo in support of Palestine at a Paris Saint-Germain match against Atletico Madrid in France earlier this year, prompting a statement from the interior minister stating that banners would be forbidden at future matches altogether. People and politics are more than just banners and signifiers, but they remain important symbols in a world where the competition is a deadly one and where genocide is either acceptable or it is not.

Major clubs with corporate sponsorships and big stars make it easy to dismiss the sport as one that goes grossly beyond the ethics of power. But to only look at those aspects would deny football of some of its less nameable traits, the invisible and decisively beautiful aspects that are truer to the essence of why those of us who watch football keep coming back.

Advertisers and clubs, investors and media conglomerates that want our membership dues for watching games may view us as a passive audience. To corporate entities at major clubs, fans may represent just another seat filled at the end of the night, another paying customer. But with attendance also comes the power of being together, which presents the opportunity for shared public expression.

Along with some of the positive aspects of the sport there are the common incidences of hyper-nationalism and racism that take place from the fan level up through the clubs from management through to players, this is, however, not the focus of Kostakis's book. Yet, he does not present football as an illusory balm for the public's soul. This is, after all, as the title implies, soccer for a better world, not soccer for a perfect world.

Football as a whole has often inspired resistance, and *Beyond the Final Whistle* shows many inspired people who have acted with courage as forward thinkers. The vast majority of Kostaki's book is aimed toward readers who are not necessarily football fans and provides many entry points for readers with different interests.

As Kostakis presents at the start of the book, football itself is also an art, and all art presents an opportunity through which to view the world differently or to engage with ideas and positions outside of the norm. Football may be viewed as an art form by the world's millions of players and spectators who appreciate it for its aesthetic qualities, creativity, dance-like structure, problem solving, ingenuity and its innovations. It seems then that football could be an essential tool for engagement whether you are a player, a fan, or are just a curious bystander walking by a pickup game on a Wednesday night as you watch bats circle the streetlights overhead, the dull thud of the ball repeating across a pitch in any small town across the globe.

If we choose to accept football as art, this opens up the possibility that many social and political movements of our time, of any time, (that includes anarchism) can be art, too. Kostakis ends the chapter "So what is football anyway?" with how and why social movements can be art.

Kostakis implicates us all in the creation of and our responsibility to the commons. Of reader and player alike he says; "We don't all make the same decisions. We don't all take on the same risks. Certainly the scorer makes the critical contribution. But they couldn't produce art without the team. The team would have no reason to ex-

ist without the opposing teams. Teams would not exist without the sport. None of it would exist without society. Everything is created in common.”

Emma Weiss is a writer, poet, musician and carpenter from Rhode Island. You can find her working on wood piles or cheering from the supporters section at a Rhode Island Football Club match.



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