Screaming U-S-A!
(and Other Imagined Things)

Us versus Them at South Africa 2010

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There should have been something discordant about finding oneself in semirural South Africa surrounded by jolly mobs of drunken Americans wearing Uncle Sam top hats complemented by sequined red, white, and blue tuxedos screaming “U-S-A” on an endless repeat. Without the proper context, it might well have been a cartoon satire on neoimperialism. Yet amid the dusty blocks of modest homes and taverns outside the Royal Bafokeng Stadium in Rustenburg for the United States–England World Cup game on June 12, 2010, it seemed just right. In fact, on that day, all the ultimately bizarre claims of nationalism somehow made sense: the American fan as a cartoonish Uncle Sam; the English fan as an aging knight in shining armor; the South African fan as a good-natured host blowing a horn and wearing a funny hat. It was an eclectic mashup of global identities of the sort that perhaps only a World Cup can supply. For a short while, it was intense and absorbing—good, silly fun.

That short while, however, was a long time coming. As a professional academic and soccer blogger with two years of Peace Corps service in Malawi and a long-standing interest in Africa, I was thrilled to have made it back for the first African World Cup. As an American soccer fan, I worried that Team USA could be in for a thrashing, but I hoped that the English would, as usual, disappoint. As a whole, when I joined the throngs of fans earlier that day shuttling by minibus from accommodations in the greater Johannesburg-Pretoria metropolis to the outskirts of Rustenburg, I felt engrossed in the peculiar excitement of a grand game.

We arrived in Rustenburg hours early, descending like a thirsty, good-natured hive of locusts onto the neighborhood around the stadium, an area on the poor side of working class without being destitute. We trampled about through dirt yards and improvised taverns full of entrepreneurial locals inviting us to eat, drink, and spend. The English congregated with their patriotic football songs and St. George’s Cross, the Americans countered with stars, stripes, and loud staccato “U-S-A” chants. As an American, I wished desperately for more creativity, but I also found myself joining in periodically just to get in the spirit of things. The wide-eyed local children peering around fence posts and piles of bricks seemed to expect nothing less.

Once inside the stadium, nationalist spirit came to a crescendo with the singing of the national anthems. With the players swaying stoically in line, carefully uniformed in national colors and brands, the crowd immersed itself in “God Save the Queen” (“Send her victorious / Happy and glorious”) and the “Star-Spangled Banner” (“The bombs bursting in air / Gave proof through the night / That our flag was still there”). The game itself was anticlimactic. An early positional error by the American defense led to an easy English goal. A slapstick mishandling by the English goalkeeper gifted the United States an equalizer. The rest of the game was mostly sound and fury, signifying nothing.

On the way out of the stadium, the feeling was of civil resignation, but the scene was utter confusion—the roads were a stagnant cluster of idle buses, eager hawkers, and perplexed fans. I was lucky to find my minibus shuttle after a long, lonely walk, but we were stalled against a dusty curb and a row of jacaranda trees. In the traffic and disorder, our driver seemed reasonably content to smoke and listen to radio reports of a Springbok rugby friendly from earlier in the day. He perked up when a pair of viscerally drunk American fans stumbled to his window looking for a ride to the Johannesburg airport: “500 rand [70 dollars]. Each.” The rest of us had paid something like half of that for the round trip, but the two consulted only briefly before jumping in without bothering to negotiate.

One of the Americans immediately passed out in his bench back seat. The other immediately began blathering to anyone who would
I have long been skeptical of grand claims about the unifying power of sport. Do national rivalries like the United States versus Mexico or derbies like Rangers versus Celtic, Boca Juniors versus River Plate, and Kaizer Chiefs versus Orlando Pirates bring people together or divide them with a sharp cleaver? In fact, as an academic psychologist familiar with some research on group conflict, I have often been struck by the idea that football offers a nearly perfect context for antagonizing groups that might otherwise have much in common. The basic idea, drawing off social identity theory, is that for various evolutionary reasons, one of our most fundamentally human psychological instincts is to identify and divide the world into groups: us versus them. Us is good; them is bad. In our ancestral past, this instinct may have been oriented by clans, but now it is up for grabs—we are constantly, often unconsciously, affiliating with cities, countries, schools, political parties, genders, ethnicities, companies, teams, products, and whatever else becomes salient in our daily lives.

What’s fascinating about the basic us versus them binary is how quickly and irrationally this instinct activates. Start with a vague sense of commitment to a group (such as simply paying attention to a team’s results), add a dash of competition (which is intrinsic to any football match), and mix in some external markers of group identity (anthems, scarves, jerseys, and flags work well), and we have a combustible blend ready to ignite at the slightest provocation. For example, I had decidedly mixed feelings about many members of both the United States and England national teams as individual players, but on that crisp night in Rustenburg, I was willing to cheer zealously for every American while barely containing a totally irrational ire toward the English.

Of course, the heightened sense of us versus them that can be so divisive between groups also has a powerful ability to unite people within abstract social groups—an ability on vivid display among South Africans at the 2010 World Cup. From a distance, in the run-up to the World Cup, we heard much oversimplified rhetoric about how soccer in South Africa was a sport for poor blacks with no appeal within the rugby and cricket worlds of white South Africans. And while there are unquestionably stark divisions and inequalities in South African society, it was equally clear during the World Cup that people across race, class, and gender lines were enthusiastically supporting Bafana Bafana. Street hawkers did a brisk business selling replica South African flags, while
everyone at the malls was making a run for the bright yellow Bafana jerseys. It was oddly sweet to watch a black counter worker compliment a white shopper with a heavy Afrikaans accent on her purchase of a Bafana jersey: "Ack—400 rand [57 dollars]... But what can you do?" said the white woman with a shy smile.

The implicit togetherness and shared South Africanness among the local population fostered by the games occasionally seemed to translate into genuine realizations. On my way to the gleaming new Soccer City Stadium to watch Netherlands–Denmark, for example, I sat on a "soccer express" train next to two white South African thirtysomethings who had never before ridden a local train. As we passed crowded working-class townships and frenetic station platforms teeming with black commuters (no admittance to the train without a game ticket), these two men stared out the window and held a bewildered conversation: "We really do live a privileged life in our suburbs, don't we?"

That sentiment made all the more poignant the analysis of Soccer City offered by South African writer Mark Gevisser in his column in the Mail and Guardian on June 13, 2010. Drawing from the writings of Frantz Fanon, Gevisser observed, "What is so striking about Soccer City is that—unlike Ellis Park or the FNB Stadium which it replaces—you are entirely enclosed within the perfectly cambered calabash once you are inside; there are no vistas of the city or the world outside." For Gevisser, the stadium's architectural design may have been inspired less by ideology and more by Beijing's Olympic Stadium (the Bird's Nest), "but the effect is intense all the same; at a time when it seems increasingly difficult to hold the Rainbow Nation together, the 'African calabash' seems to provide South Africans with the fantasy of containment within a single shared national identity." Of course, South Africans are not unique in maintaining the fantasy of a shared national identity. As Benedict Anderson has famously argued, all nations are "imagined communities." Even when not enacted in the glorious architecture of a stadium such as Soccer City, our sense of a national us competing against another nation's them is made real primarily through symbols.

Cue the vuvuzelas. As much as the infernal noise disturbed my eardrums and even if the bleating monotone drowned out other more authentic expressions of fan culture, I came to think of the colorful plastic horns as another unifying symbol for those of us who were there. Divided in our allegiances, in defiance of television broadcasters and audiences around the world, we were united by the call of a plastic horn (and perhaps the need to buy earplugs).

The authentic feelings of national unity evoked by the sharec symbols of South Africa 2010 may have been part of the reason being at this World Cup challenged my skepticism about football's ability to bring people together. But whatever the reason, in and around all the games I attended there was a surprising spirit of diplomatic understanding. I was particularly impressed after attending the United States–Algeria game, a group finale that was to determine who advanced to the knockout stage. Before the game in Pretoria, on the upmarket streets of shopping plazas and university buildings around Loftus Versfeld, the almost exclusively male Algerian fans seemed agitated—one particularly large group stationed itself in front of a Middle Eastern restaurant bang- ing drums and defiantly waving Algerian (and a few Palestinian) flags. They seemed to be spoiling for a fight, and the rest of us gave them a wide berth. My group of American fans slipped carefully into the walled courtyard of a sports bar, singing a mix of the silly and the patriotic as we readied to march on the stadium. The game itself intensified these powerful feelings. It was an anxious, scoreless draw deep into second-half injury time, when Landon Donovan finished an end-to-end American counterattack with aplomb. 1–1: U–S–A!

After this cathartic game, back in the sports bar complex, I found myself nervously situated on a bench next to a small group of Algerian fans. We were all watching the next games on television, and I gave a tentative nod. One of the men, coiffed in a baggy green-and-white sweat suit bearing the Algerian crescent, leaned in and said in heavily accented English, "It was a good game. Both teams had chances. The U.S. just wanted it a bit more at the end." I agreed. All of us who were there agreed: It was a good game.

At the same time, it is certainly true that all was not peace and harmony around the World Cup. But when acrimony came, it was often from a far. For example, in the U.S. match against Slovenia, a potentially game-winning American goal a few minutes from the end was disallowed when the referee whistled a phantom foul. The match ended in a 2–2 draw. Those of us in attendance at Ellis Park were confused but ultimately content as the Americans had made an impressive showing by coming back from two goals down to take a valuable point and keep alive our hopes of advancing to the next round. Even watching replays
or television later that evening, the disallowed goal was still just a minor talking point amid conversations about a thrilling match. It was only when I checked in online with the American media that I saw the righteous anger so familiar to perceived sporting injustice. Bloggers were calling for the scalp of Koman Coulibaly, the Malian referee, using that one peculiar judgment as an indictment of the whole developing world. Talking heads on American cable television whispered something about an anti-American conspiracy. The mainstream American media were demanding retribution through official channels. Peter King, in South Africa writing for *Sports Illustrated* (the urtext of American sports journalism), used the decision to impugn entire nations in a single tweet: “Putting a ref from a small African country in charge of a vital WC game is like a Mid-American Conference ref doing the Super Bowl.”

The Slovenia controversy seemed to fade from the American media when Team USA went on to win that final group game against Algeria, but it was clear that the tensions of us versus them were more precarious from a distance. Even after the collective effervescence of the Algeria win, it was fascinating to read Dave Zirin, writing for the venerable liberal-progressive magazine *The Nation*, question whether fans’ reactions to Team USA amounted to “joy or jingoism.” Though Zirin’s piece was mostly a set of balanced thoughts evaluating his own reaction and that of sports radio programs in his hometown of Washington, D.C., he was immediately pilloried by other writers and online. “You must be either a biased foreigner or a self-loathing American,” read a typical online comment. “If you don’t take simple joy from the game,” user comments seemed to be saying, “then you can’t be one of us; you must be one of them.” In other words, the soft power of sporting nationalism could not completely submerge the nation’s internal tensions for very long.

Jingoism, of course, is not just an American malaise, and its evil cousin, xenophobia, also came up for discussion in and around South Africa during the World Cup. The organizers’ slogan was “Celebrate Africa’s Humanity” (Does FIFA believe “Africa’s Humanity” differs from other types of humanity?), but this heavily marketed ideological statement of pan-African unity and solidarity could not mask the anxiety of many Malawians, Zimbabweans, Nigerians, Mozambicans, Kenyans, and other African immigrants I talked with in South Africa. They had not forgotten the xenophobic violence of 2008 or the many instances of everyday insults and intimidation, often pitting low-wage local workers against low-wage immigrant workers in a pattern sadly familiar around the world. In the midst of a World Cup where the South African government and many of its citizens had taken seriously to put on their best face for the sake of projecting a positive image internationally, there was an eerie sense that further violence lay just below the surface.

Immigration denoted another virulent shifting of the us versus them dynamic. A congenial Malawian working at my guesthouse explained to me that he thought his compatriots had a relatively good reputation, “but the Zimbabweans—those ones can’t be trusted.” A white South African I met at a pub warned me sternly about my intention to walk home: “Don’t go by that big apartment block; Nigerians live there.” And, on another day, a black South African told me that the problem with the rural village he had left was “the Mozambicans; they are always just stealing.” Even the concept itself was regularly assigned a definite article: “the xenophobia.” It was as if national identity were being infected by the plague, destroyed by the bomb, or overturned by the army.

My Peace Corps service in Malawi had given me a special affinity for the Malawian worker who claimed that in his Johannesburg township there was much talk of many poor South Africans having been on their best behavior for the sake of the World Cup and national pride: “But they tell us, ‘Wait till the World Cup ends. We’re going to kick your ass.’ I’m telling you, after the 11th July when you are [back in the United States]—well, just watch the news.” But I have watched the news, and fortunately to this point, the more serious threats apparently have not come to pass.

South Africans seem instead to have continued living, managing like they always do, perhaps without some of the visceral bonding brought out by the hosting of the World Cup but perhaps also with a new imagining of what South Africa is. In a roundtable published in the *Financial Times* on July 10, 2010, the day before the final, Ferial Haffajee, editor of the *City Press* newspaper in Johannesburg, explained that prior to the tournament, “I was really worried about 20 years of democracy. I’m not so worried any more. I’d always thought that nationhood and non-racialism were evaporating dreams, and in fact I see they can still be made tangible and real.”
The World Cup was not, however, solely responsible for sharpening a sense of nationhood and making it more "tangible and real," for bolstering the imagined community of South Africa. Most of that responsibility goes to the many South Africans who embraced the event with a magnificent mix of engagement, critique, and celebration. I think here of the Muslim engineer of Indian descent, married to the daughter of an Afrikaner military man, who spent a day showing me "his" Johannesburg, an energized but familiar global city of square walled neighborhoods, leafy shops, and quiet eateries spared from FIFA's corporate partners, just because he'd read some of my pretournament blogging. I had used a throwaway line about my disappointment that international media prone to sensationalizing and stereotyping showed relatively little interest in the "normal" daily experiences of forty-nine million South Africans who somehow manage—as most people everywhere do—to muddle through. This reflection struck him as funny. I think back to the jubilant South Africans who welcomed me at a township fan park despite my being so obviously lost and out of place at the sports ground in Temba/Hamnamskraal, to watch the Bafana Bafana game against France. At that point, South Africa still had an outside chance of qualifying for the knockout stage, but the team seemed not to believe it. Despite leading by two goals against a team down to ten men, the South Africans played a lackluster second half, as if beating a demoralized Les Bleus was enough. And for the crowd at the fan park that day, it was enough. Mesmerized by the beautiful game on three large portable screens spread across acres of sprawling green, a 2–1 victory over a former World Cup winner seemed to generate meaningful pride despite South Africa's dubious accomplishment of becoming the first World Cup host country not to qualify for the second round. The South African fans seemed to be saying, "It is enough just to be us."

So, did the tournament help to create a more robust version of the imagined community of South Africa or the United States of America? From up close, I have to admit that it did despite the legitimate sociological, economic, and psychological critiques of the event and its impact. The energy in and attention toward South Africa during those weeks was unlike anything I could have imagined. But at the same time, from a distance I realize that popularity risks distracting from the more serious and enduring schisms that comprise our usual social identities as rich or poor, male or female, citizen or alien, black or white. David Goldblatt, in his magisterial history of world football, *The Ball Is Round*, quotes from Peruvian Nobel Prize laureate Mario Vargas Llosa's coverage of the 1982 World Cup: "Football offers people something that they can scarcely ever have: an opportunity to have fun, to enjoy themselves, to get excited, worked up, to feel certain intense emotions that daily routine rarely offers them." Vargas continues, "A good game of football is enormously intense and absorbing... It is ephemeral, non transcendental, innocuous. An experience where the effect disappears at the same time as the cause. Sport... is the love of form, a spectacle which does not transcend the physical, the sensory, the instant emotion, which unlike, for example, a book or a play, scarcely leaves a trace in the memory and does not enrich or impoverish knowledge. And that is its appeal; that it is exciting and empty."  

But while it may sound pejorative to talk of football as "empty," I prefer to think that the World Cup is only empty in the uncertainty of its potential. Like an empty signifier in semiotics, the World Cup is there to be filled in with meanings according to whoever is paying attention. From a distance, those meanings seemed potentially divisive: it was easy to imagine the games as us versus them. But in the moment, the meanings seemed genuinely unifying: We were all simultaneously imagining—together. Months later, it strikes me that those opposing impulses created an inevitable tension: Though our minds want to define us versus them, our understanding of who we are as individuals and members of a larger community depends on negotiating between us and them. And this World Cup in South Africa offered an invaluable space for that negotiation: for South Africans, for Americans, and for many of the world's imagined communities.

Going back to the end of that long day in Rustenburg for the United States–England game, after a tedious night drive listening to a young and very drunk Manhattan investment banker rambling about how he represented the "heart and soul of America," I found myself still struggling with that tension. I was still upset that he was wearing the same USA jacket as me. Fortunately, I was the first of the passengers to be dropped off in the freezing Johannesburg night, and I didn't have to suffer for long. Yet when I stumbled off the bus into the dark winter night and the banker reached out his hand to me, his fellow American, I could not bring myself to reciprocate. It was petty and unbecoming, I know, but I just turned and walked away.
NOTES


2. For a classic football travelogue that highlights conflict and rivalry, see Simon Kuper, *Football against the Enemy* (London: Orion, 1994).


