

Article:

Dissecting the Hydra

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Huge and ornate stadia have been built in order to stage matches from which the primary benefit will accrue to essentially a foreign conglomerate. Massive investments in peripheral transport infrastructure have been allowed to proceed because of an almost superficial connection to the event: Gautrain is a staggeringly expensive taxi service from Sandton to Johannesburg International, costing fifteen-times more than the annual investment in Metrorail in the entire country, despite the latter being used by two million, mostly black, South Africans (compared to the much lauded ten thousand per day of Gautrain during the World Cup). Our football team was involved in the tournament simply because we are staging it; we, South Africa, are the invited guest at what is billed as our party: the guest who has paid to host. Such a situation is bound to result in disappointment. Unless we conspire to forget about the costs; they have already been paid after all, why cry over spilt milk? Just support the boys, and enjoy the party.

In the years leading-up to the World Cup, criticism of the government's and the local organising committee's approach came from a whole variety of quarters. On either side of the event, the Institute for Security Studies released a detailed pamphlet analysing specific, dubious, activities at a local level, while Andile Mngxitama's sixth edition of *New Frank Talk* assessed "How the ANC Sold us for a Cup". In Cape Town there was spirited opposition to the new stadium in Greenpoint. This sort of thing naturally posed a threat to the 'spirit' surrounding the event and had to be countered, dismissed or muzzled. Government, corporate and FIFA spin-doctors, as well as journalistic lackeys, were out in full force to ensure that critics did not gain a firm foothold. Somehow it became racist to object to massive investment in football infrastructure in a wealthy area to the substantial disadvantage of a poorer one (Athlone).¹ To some extent these PR foot soldiers were aided and abetted by commentators and intellectuals, whose

bourgeois discomfort with their privileged social status made them worry about making comments which might be seen as suggesting that ‘the masses’ should be deprived of their fun. Now that the event is over the professional apologists are fading into the background and it is time for some real frank talk.

Support the boys

In April 2010, after two years abroad, I prepared to return home from the UK to South Africa. The former appeared to be on a slow downward spiral toward a vacuously conservative government that would likely entrench all the mistakes made by the Blairite ‘New Labour’. South Africa, at the same time, appeared to be experiencing the social equivalent of massive cognitive dissonance; the behaviour of the ANC Youth League and growing reports of corruption, cronyism and incompetence within the ruling alliance and government contrasting starkly with increasing ‘World Cup fever’.

The UK and South Africa share a seemingly unlikely characteristic in common: both countries are desperate for a national identity, and are floundering in pursuit of this holy grail of the nation state. To an outsider in the UK the desperation manifests in the widespread and pervasive association of war and national identity. The aesthetically garish plastic, red poppies laid and worn to commemorate the fallen soldiers of the World Wars are, besides the Union Jack and St. George’s Cross, the most prevalent national symbol. South Africa has the red AIDS ribbon for a war more than 10% of the population is already fighting on a daily basis, and in its relative scarcity here it mirrors a failure illustrated in the UK by the relative abundance of the red poppy. A poppy is a flower at home in fields and grasslands; plucked from this habitat it is delicate, vulnerable and wilts within hours. In the sun, unwatered, its lifelessness becomes apparent at a rate matching that at which the blood from a corpse drains into soil. The national identity of the English has been reduced to a field of red plastic poppies; a perpetually frozen battlefield littered with corpses.

In that context, criticism of the Iraqi and Afghanistan wars became, for a period, almost taboo; this despite the fact that the anti-war march in London was one of

the biggest protests of its kind in British history. The strategy of the Blair government in that regard was cynical and incredibly effective. The primary obstacle was resistance to the invasion, and that much is unsurprising. What the New Labour strategists realized, as have so many before them, is that once they could cross that threshold, opposition to the war would not only diminish but could be more confidently attacked. The basis for such attacks is a simple resort to patriotism; it is taboo to say a word against ‘the boys’ in the field. A similar strategy was used in the United States, where the media lost its tongue – perhaps for fear of having it cut off in a frenzy of base nationalism and paranoia that had been previously bred so successfully in the McCarthy era.

South Africa’s hosting of ‘World Cup 2010’ is, as a socially-experienced and politically-directed event, somewhat analogous to what the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have become to the UK. Regardless of the fact that rather than being ameliorated, the reasons for widespread initial skepticism have actually grown, to question the event is to risk being tarred as unpatriotic. In his brilliantly eccentric book *Crowds and Power* (1960), Elias Canetti laid bare the fact that many seemingly unrelated events (wars and football games, for instance) can have a deep commonality in serving to mobilise crowds. The benefits of such mobilisation seem varied, but Canetti is clear that, “The most important occurrence within the crowd is *discharge*...This is the moment when all who belong to the crowd get rid of their differences and feel equal”. The differences are “distinctions of rank, status and property”. By this analysis, mobilisation of such crowds has a deep appeal to leaders needing to paper over social fractionalisation. The World Cup was a papering over of social problems precisely because the societal crowd (in the Canetti sense) it generated *could only ever last as long as the event*.

Dissecting the Hydra: Economics, Transport and Identity

So much for a political motive, but such an event requires a host of actors. On inspection we find a blatant example of an unholy alliance between the interests of big business – reaping the profits from massive government infrastructure expenditure and additional consumption spending by individuals (primarily local

but also foreign) – and a supposedly pro-poor government that is desperate to project an image of success, locally and internationally, that distracts from large and growing failures on virtually every social dimension one cares to name. It is the fact that the failures are growing which should be of greatest concern; distractions from difficult circumstances in the present may well be a good thing provided the root causes of these difficulties are being tackled. To try and distract the country from these failings when they are continuing to be compounded is deception of a most cynical and dangerous kind.

It is enlightening to dissect this hydra, the many heads of which conspire to present a consensus between them as one of South African society as a whole. The consultants hired at generous rates to put together misleading or excessive estimates of economic impact; the sports commentators reminding us how privileged we are to be hosting the event that is such a boon to their careers; the local bid committee who secure absurd rates and bonuses at every stage of the process; the unspecified riches the tourism marketers' claims will follow the revolutionising of 'the world's image of (South) Africa', when the association between event, impression and actions are vague and unproven; corporations selling dreams of a new South Africa back to us, polished and shallow, in t-shirts, beers and days for trademarked patriotism - pocketing the proceeds; and government, asserting confidently that sixty-four games of football are the apogee of post-apartheid South Africa – a signifier of our success. In this farce the fools and lackeys thrive, not least the journalists too incompetent (or politically embattled) to ask critical questions who are saved by parroted marketing briefs. The head of SABC news indicates that the broadcaster has no intention of covering criticism of the event, and subsequently Baleka Mbete praises the 'patriotic media'. A shiver runs down the spine. FIFA, the primary head, has conducted this reptilian orchestra before and a few choice attacks suffice to keep the hydra a coherent entity. Until it moves on to plunder another state.

Economics

A good deal has already been written on the supposed economic impacts of the World Cup, including the costs of various components from stadia to infrastructure. And in fact, damning conclusions were already being drawn by some of the braver journalists at the beginning of the event.² Somewhat less attention has been paid to the details of the sleight of hand involved in construction of supposed economic impacts and the related justification of various expenditures. Over recent decades an increasing number of analyses have found little if any discernible positive economic impact from ‘mega events’ - see for instance the review by Matheson and Baade (2004).³ These studies are of course conducted *ex post*, while those used in advocating for events are necessarily *ex ante*. The technical methods of assessment are therefore different, but the historical results point to serious problems with the impact analyses on which hosting decisions are made; they always overestimate the benefits. The crude economic impact assessment included in South Africa’s ‘bid book’ for the World Cup would appear to have made *all* of the three key errors outlined by Matheson and Baade, inevitably resulting in overinflated *ex ante* estimates of the economic impact. The technical issues are, however, something of a distraction – like a magician’s efforts at misdirection. The really interesting question is why these mistakes are so common. The answer is in fact the obvious one; those making the case for events select consultants who will produce inflated impact calculations - either deliberately or through the latter’s incompetence.⁴

Given that the broader facts above were fairly widely known prior to South Africa’s bid, the failure of the primary stakeholder in the process representing public interests – namely, the South African government – to interrogate the estimates is a clear indication that the analysis was not aimed to *inform* a decision, but rather to support one that had already been made. To fuss about the lack of job creation and economic impact now is to miss the point that the likelihood of this outcome was evident from the very beginning. These problems are not at all unique to South Africa of course. An American ‘sport economist’ recently produced a report attacking the claims made about the possible economic benefits of an US-hosted World Cup, in an attempt to head-off the

hype that would inevitably be produced by the various lobby groups likely to benefit.⁵ The cost of this deception, if successful, is arguably far greater for developing countries where the alternative uses for this public expenditure are typically very pressing.

In this regard it is worth putting one argument about economic benefits to rest. The claim is that in the face of the recession that followed the world financial crisis, South Africa's expenditure on the World Cup provided a critical cushion against an economic downturn. To some extent this is true, but it misses the point that virtually *any* form of government expenditure would have had that effect – in other words, it fails to address the question of the counterfactual. With road and rail infrastructure spending backlogs alone going into hundreds of billions of rand, there was no shortage of alternative areas for the spending. When Keynes famously suggested⁶ that economic downturns could be countered by paying people to dig holes in the ground, or burying bank notes that could then be dug up, he was being mischievous; such initiatives are 'better than nothing' but government spending can almost always be directed to investment projects with relatively good long-term returns.

Although much has been made of the fact that controversial spending on South Africa's post-1994 arms deal may have been unconstitutional in its neglect of more pressing government obligations, the case against the World Cup spending is arguably even stronger since it really is just "paying for the right to host a big party".⁷

Transport

On the day of the opening match the trains running into the Cape Town city centre before Bafana Bafana play Mexico are not quite a sea of yellow. Yellow dominates in Metro Plus, but the mostly black workers changing at Salt River are clad in drab, practical clothes – making the often long journey home after a day's work. They stare, somewhat bewildered, at the sudden influx of the wealthier classes. A woman starts singing and leads a blind man through the carriage rattling a cup of small change. There is some good natured banter about Bafana

Bafana's previous World Cup performances. With a bit less colour-based segregation (t-shirts and skin) this is how it could be; how it should be, how it *needs* to be. The social cost of the better-off travelling around in personalised steel cages is too high; whether they are imported motor vehicles or Gautrain rolling stock. Nobody cared to allocate much in the way of funding toward such a purpose for fifteen years. That the World Cup has drawn attention and money to quality public transport is not an achievement, it is an indicator of abject failure.

I have argued before that a good quality public transport system not only has direct social and economic benefits, but is a key factor in reducing social distance – not least in South Africa where deliberate social and geographical cleavages have had so little time to close.⁸ This is not an especially original point, but one that nevertheless remains neglected in South Africa – in no small part one suspects because the vast majority of individuals in positions of power have abandoned personal use of public transport and are typically proud of, or unapologetic about, that fact.

Having been given resources and some political room for manoeuvre, in many cases national and local transport planners have done their best to use World Cup money to build sustainable transport systems – i.e. ones that are still useful after the event. Nevertheless, distorted outcomes are an inevitable consequence of the initial distorted priorities. Even as Gautrain was beginning its post-World Cup operations, Shosholoza Meyl – the long-distance passenger rail service – stopped running after a dispute between Transnet (under the Department of Public Enterprises) and the new Passenger Rail Association (PRASA) under the Department of Transport. Yet in the context where the rail system used by millions of black South Africans remains embattled, senior political officials are focusing on more elitist, 'separate-development' projects like a high speed train between Durban and Johannesburg.⁹

Identity

One striking feature of South African life is the extent to which our shared notions of national identity are commercially constructed. (This is true for sub-national identities too of course, but that is less important for our purposes here and has been more extensively discussed). Commercial entities, especially large corporations, rely for a significant proportion of their sales and profits on optimism, buy-in (an interesting phrase in itself) to, and association with, leisure- and pleasure-related events. Unlike the majority of citizens, advertising departments have the time and resources to come up with innovative expressions of national identity. Aside from the nebulous, and increasingly platitudinous, notion of ‘ubuntu’ (even Huffington Post columnists are writing about it!), a common identity - including among black South Africans - is essentially absent.¹⁰

So it is that expressions of identity, even racial identity, can come to rest on commercial constructs. A young black man carries a poster at a race-related protest that reads, “You can keep your white wine, we will drink our Black Label”. SAB has, of course, been profiting from the impoverishment and community fractionalization of black South Africans for decades. On the odd occasion that someone dares to point this out, as Justin Nurse so successfully did with his ‘Black Labour, White Guilt’ t-shirts, the importance of these facades becomes immediately apparent in the reaction of the corporation in question. Perhaps the AWB drank Castle, while the black workers they attacked drank Black Label... FIFA is far from the only commercial entity that creates hydras to give the impression of diversity. That some otherwise intelligent individuals grasp at these geegaws of national identity is indicative of just how desperate we are.

None of this is to suggest that shared components of identity are not important; to the contrary, they are too important to be based on beer commercials and soccer matches while the economic, geographic and social chasms are widened by the very same processes. The World Cup hype sought to convince us that we were closer together, even as it pushed us further apart.

False Dawns

Renaissance

Amandla
awethu!

Blacks are inferior
blacks are superior!

What's yours is ours
what's ours is ours!

You will never rule
it is a matter of time!

It will be a bloodbath
we will have peaceful elections!

You cannot manage an economy
we will manage it just like you!

Corruption is bad
condemning is against Ubuntu!

Democracy is good
democracy is a Western concept!

You will never drive a BMW
we must drive Ferraris!

ARVs are critical
Western drugs are poison!

You don't need high-speed rail
all aboard the Gautrain!

You will never host a World Cup
we must make a bid!

It will be a failure
we will spend heavily!

Amandla!
awethu?

Many have pointed out that a successful World Cup will demonstrate the folly of those who doubt Africa's (sic) capacity to host such an event. This, it is claimed, will then have a positive effect on perceptions of (South) Africa's 'investment potential', attractiveness as a tourism destination and, in some nebulous sense, improve our image in the world. While it is true that there has been no shortage of shallow, often racist, criticisms by genuine Afro-pessimists, these are peripheral relative to the huge vested interests behind the World Cup. In reality, there wasn't anything to prove in the first place. It was easy to see that South Africa had a private construction sector capable of completing world-class projects; subject to a high enough price of course.

The reduction of the identity of individuals to brands has been effected successfully by corporations for some time; the equivalent process for nation states is a comparatively new one, but no less lucrative. In each case it requires the entity (individual or state) to internalize the standards that would make them desire the goods or services of the profit-making organizations. A gullible teenager is convinced that expensive jeans will give him credibility among his peers, and a gullible government is convinced that a very expensive football tournament will do the same at the national level. Vested interests make the latter case somewhat more complicated, so perhaps we should refer to the government 'convincing' its citizens rather than being 'convinced'. So successful has this propaganda been that one hears some black South Africans calling in to radio shows, discussing criticisms of the World Cup, to complain that the individuals in question are wanting to hijack 'our African Renaissance'. The stink of irony is unmistakable. Internalisation of externally constructed standards in this way can only be met with a Fanonesque diagnosis.

It is no exaggeration to say that aside from insufficiently inhibited greed and incompetence, the failings of South Africa post-1994 can be attributed to an obsession with what one might loosely call 'Western' values. This, as obsessions are wont to do, fluctuates between two polar extremes. Either these values are embraced so whole-heartedly that they are even more zealously applied than

would be the case in the Western world; unnecessary reductions of trade tariffs, or hosting of events costing relatively more per capita than would be considered in most developed countries, for instance. Alternatively, actions are defined by the negation of these values; corruption is tolerated ostensibly because Western governments are concerned by it, dictators are befriended because ‘the West’ is obsessed with democracy, the HIV-AIDS connection is dismissed because foreigners think of Africans as sexually depraved and drugs are made by Western companies, and resigning before criminal conviction is rejected as a foreign notion (somewhat ironically on the basis of an overly-literal interpretation of the Roman-Dutch law principle of being ‘innocent until proven guilty’). What this demonstrates is that the development of notions of Africanness under the post-apartheid administration *has been defined by foreign values*. A genuinely African approach would not obsess itself with doing the opposite of foreign prescriptions, any more than it would obsess itself with adhering to them. Such is the logical definition of independence.

So, for instance, in the case of HIV/AIDS we might recognise that some of the opinions about AIDS in Africa were racist, and that Western companies might profit from the provision of treatment, but nevertheless conclude that the science was broadly correct. If South Africa is seen as too ‘backward’ and this is hindering beneficial foreign investment, perhaps that could be addressed by developing social and economic infrastructure (roads, public transport facilities, electricity capacity and telecommunications systems) that would benefit the majority in a meaningful way as well as benefitting businesses - rather than staging a ‘mega event’ to try and convey the same message. To assume that development is illustrated by massive stadia or high-speed trains for the elite is to buy into aspects of Western society that are not only inappropriate given South Africa’s social priorities, but crass displays of grandeur even within those societies.

We see, again, in the actions of the nation state, a reflection of individual psychology; either Fanon’s psychologically oppressed black people doing their

best to don white masks, or avarice cloaked in feigned rejection of the masks' source. In this context it is no surprise that among the most biting criticisms of the current state of affairs is that which is coming from thinkers and commentators grounded in the rhetorical bequests of the black consciousness movement.¹¹

Let me make the point clear: given the lack of genuine societal benefits, claiming that the World Cup disproved the sneers of Afropessimists is a national example of cutting off your nose to spite your face. In failing to spend the resources on much more pressing national issues – land reform, housing, education and more sustainable forms of job creation – we have *increased* the risks of proving the pessimists right in the medium- and long-term.

The Dangers of Intellectual Sentimentalism

In the context of the above, a point Mngxitama makes bears noting; we don't have a problem with the game. Writers like Veblen, in a chapter of *The Theory of the Leisure Class* entitled 'Modern Survivals of Prowess', have commented more cynically on the role of sport in society. Amongst other comments, Veblen argues that "sports satisfy the requirements of substantial futility together with a colourable make-believe of purpose". And indeed many African football supporters might find in the behaviour of the Venezuelan Luis Suarez, an echo of Veblen's argument that sport becomes an area for the practice and exercise of 'barbarian' instincts to prowess through "force and fraud". But Veblen was distant from his society to an extent only beneficial to sociological dissection, whereas many of us are, or wish to be, parts of the societies we try to understand. Fanon might seem to agree with Veblen and Canetti since he says – also referenced by Gevisser¹² and Mngxitama – that, "The stadium ought not to be a show place erected in the towns".¹³ However, he goes on to say, " but a bit of open ground in the midst of the fields that the young people must reclaim, cultivate and give to the nation", and is known to have overseen the construction of a football stadium for mental patients.¹⁴ So we must emphasise again: criticism of the World Cup – soccer packaged and trademarked – need not be a criticism of the game per se.

Despite this, and the innumerable problems with the World Cup (as sold and implemented), it would seem that many social scientists feel the need to draw positive morals from this story. Mbembe suggests that, “We should use this global event as a moment of cultural exuberance – a historic moment in the chronology of our life as a nation, the first modern Afropolitan nation, a universal nation”; Gevisser says, “It is up to us to ensure that the stadiums the state has built, with our money and allegedly for us, do not become the empty shells of Fanon's prophecy. The joyful work of doing this begins today”; while Steinberg says, “The World Cup gave us a gift: the opportunity to imagine some things a little differently. We can take that gift, or we can let it fade and die”.¹⁵ It is ironic that Mbembe criticises the instrumentalism inherent in the rhetoric preceding the World Cup since the above comments smack of nothing more than sentimental instrumentalism. Unfortunately, a more holistic instrumentalism does not rescue failed objectives; indeed in some respects it compounds them. To hope for job creation from the World Cup is bad enough, to expect national rebirth is arguably a good deal worse.

In long discussions with a Canadian friend visiting Cape Town in the first half of 2010 we compared his perceptions and my experiences of the place, concluding – as Steinberg did in his article – that what we're missing in so many areas is what my friend called “eyes on the street”; communities where people are not cloistered behind high walls and are, implicitly and explicitly, looking out for each other. I suggest that it is a fundamental intellectual mistake to try and link the validity of insights regarding national identity, public transport, economic impact and vested interests - which in fact many thoughtful individuals had, or were capable of having, before the event - to the World Cup.

In conclusion I suggest that no forms of positive success can come from the event, only different kinds of failure. By making the bid for World Cup 2010 we agreed to invest heavily in a façade whose appearance would be externally dictated. Just one more structure to demolish before real national construction

can begin. In the interim, one hydra is morphing into another, creeping out of a crumbling Athens. Already the fake consensus for a South African Olympics is building.¹⁶

A true, albeit negative, success would be to recognise the corruption – of values and priorities - hidden beneath the World Cup façade, so that in future we may as citizens, with some effort, not allow our society to go down this road again. There is no shame in learning from mistakes.

Notes

¹ This contrasts sharply with Fanon's statement regarding the location, and conceptualization, of stadia quoted later in this piece. Some of the opposition to the new Greenpoint stadium was almost certainly driven by conservative and racial biases, but dubious motive is not a sufficient intellectual basis to dismiss an argument.

² "Taxpayers take World Cup pain", Rob Rose, Sunday Times, 6 June 2010. The Mail and Guardian was notable in its consistent, but measured, criticism.

³ See for instance the review by Matheson and Baade, *South African Journal of Economics*, 72(5), 2004.

⁴ In this context I find it useful to distinguish between strictly 'economics' issues (like whether to do very basic multiplier calculations or run computable general equilibrium models) and questions of 'political economy' (like why someone would want to use a method that is known to produce overestimates).

⁵ "World Cup Economics: What Americans Need to Know About a US World Cup Bid", Coates, 2010.

⁶ *The General Theory of Employment, Interest and Money*, 1936.

⁷ "Should the U.S. Really Try to Host Another World Cup?", Stephen Dubner, New York Times, Freakonomics Blog, 19 July 2010.

⁸ "Revolution of wheeled variety needed", Business Day, 13 July 2006; "Rapid Rail Links Bypass the Real Issues", Business Day, 30 July 2010.

⁹ Some arguments against this idea are summarised in the second op-ed piece referenced above.

¹⁰ "South Africa Rolls Out the Ubuntu in Abundance", Shari Cohen, *Huffington Post*, 15 June 2010.

¹¹ Unfortunately, that movement itself is continually distorted by its own reactionary tendencies, not least the romanticisation of various pasts. Mngxitama writes: "They don't play Black soccer anymore. The soccer Blacks played during apartheid was far superior". Lest the irony be lost, notice that it was partly this kind of romanticisation of South African football that led SAFA to get us a very expensive Brazilian coach; are we not the Brazilians of Africa?

¹² "A joyous burden", Mail and Guardian, 13 June 2010.

¹³ *Wretched of the Earth*, 1961.

¹⁴ *Frantz Fanon: A Portrait*, Cherki and Benabid, 2006.

¹⁵ "We could be each other's safety zones", The Times, 31 July 2010.

¹⁶ "SA Bids for 2020 Olympics", *The Times*, 13 July 2010. And indeed some sources indicate that a bid is definite: "South Africa bids to host Olympics in 2020", *Xinhua News Agency*, 30 September 2010.