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# Deconstructing Sportswashing: analytical concept or ideological prejudice?

**Marcelo Moriconi**[1]

## Introduction

Sportswashing has become a fashionable concept when discussing the political usage of sport, especially in the anglophone media (Skey 2022). Its fame led to the Norwegian Language Board choosing sportswashing as word of the year in 2021 (Elsborg 2022).

In 2022, the term increased in popularity and presence in the public discourse, especially with the holding of the FIFA World Cup in Qatar. It even reached the social sciences where an incipient production of articles on the subject has emerged (Boykoff 2022; Skey 2022; Fruh et. al. 2022; Søyland & Moriconi 2022).

Despite the prevalent usage of the term, there is almost no debate around the nature of the concept. Its definition is somewhat limited and contradictory, and its utility generates more doubts than certainties. Given this framework, this chapter presents a critical deconstruction of the concept (Critchley et al. 2003) by denoting the semantic contradictions, analysing the practices and the actors described by journalists and activists, and promoting a non-ideological and critical way of analysing the political usage of sport by governments.

The chapter is divided in several parts addressing issues around the debate. First, the chapter frames the discussion and describes the historical phenomenon of the political usage of sport.

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Then, the text describes when, where and why the concept appeared. The following section explains the conceptual bases of the neologism, and the fourth part presents a practical case analysis of the Arabian countries and shows that the political usage of sport in these countries goes beyond a simple fact of sportswashing. The fifth section critically discusses the limitations and contradictions of the concept. Finally, the chapter proposes a less ideological framework for analysing the contemporary usage of sport.

**The topic: the political usage of sport**

First, it is important to establish the narrative field in which the new concept operates. That field is the political usage of sport and sport diplomacy. None of these questions are new phenomena. Therefore, sportswashing is a *new* concept used for analysing historical practices. In fact, the usage of sport for political purpose is as old as the Olympic Games. Since ancient Greece, governments have used sport as an efficient diplomatic tool to create favourable reputations among foreign audiences and to consolidate foreign relations (Pigman 2010). During the Cold War, the promotion of bilateral sporting events such as the ping-pong diplomacy between China and USA was a means to restart dialogue between hostile countries (Trunkos and Heere 2017).

These practices promoted the concept of "sport diplomacy" (Jackson 2013, Nygård & Gates 2013, Trunkos & Heere 2017), that Murray (2012) defines as "the use of sports people and events to engage, inform and create a favourable image amongst foreign publics and organisations to shape their perceptions in a way that is more conducive to achieving a government's foreign policy goal".

Sport has proven to be a useful tool for fostering national spirit and generating collective identities and social cohesion. Furthermore, the holding of massive events such as the Olympic Games or the FIFA World Cup creates an excellent framework for the organisers to promote a national culture, political and social values (Grix & Lee, 2013), and the national infrastructures and tourism.

To understand the social impact sport has, one just needs to consult a list of the most viewed television broadcasts in history. Only Lady Diana's funeral or the 9/11 attacks managed to get into a list led by 24 Olympic events or World Cup games, some cricket matches, and two fights of the legendary Mohamed Ali. It is estimated that around 5 billion people watched, even if just for a moment, the World Cup in Qatar. The final of the World Cup in Russia was watched by 3.527 billion people. In a world where societies are more and more divided, football unites: for a moment,

half of the world's population had the same interest, was paying attention to the same thing, and perhaps shouting for the same goals regardless of ideology, religion, or culture. In this sense, as Skey (2022) rightly points out, sport is one of the few things that can gather massive audiences amid fragmented and polarised media landscapes, which also makes it very attractive to media companies, sponsors, and of course governments.

In addition to the publicity generated by the possibility of hosting large competitions (Sharp 2009), sport represents universal values such as truth, precision, patience, and loyalty. It also has the capacity to generate social cohesion and to foster cooperation and respect through shared values (Murray, 2012).

Just like contemporary public diplomacy, sport diplomacy uses a large cast of players, both national and international. In current foreign relations, non-governmental actors such as celebrities, scientists or teachers might cooperate as crucial diplomatic agents alongside the traditional diplomatic apparatus (Potter, 2003). The diplomatic usage of sport follows the same premise: states want to use the global influence of stars such as Lebron James, Lewis Hamilton, Cristiano Ronaldo, or Lionel Messi, or they want to invest in world renowned institutions such as football clubs, basketball teams, or other sports brands. And there is no need to have a national link with these actors. Their reach is global (see for instance that sports stars are among those with the most followers on social networks) and thus, even foreign states with radically distinct cultures incorporate those actors as important agents for achieving their national and international goals. In the words of Redeker (2008), the effectiveness of this strategy lies in the fact that almost no one is against sport, and the brightness of its stars seems to produce a moral myopia.

All of this is not new. In fact, Murray predicted in 2012 that due to its effectiveness, sport diplomacy had a bright future, yet it was not given the attention it deserved in international relations studies (Murray 2012).

**The emergence of the concept and its usage**

So new is the concept that there is not even a consensus on its morphology. A simple search on Google Scholar reveals that the concept has been presented in various formats: Sport washing (Chadwick and Widdop 2022); Sport-washing (Næss, H.E. 2020); Sportwashing (Lareau 2022);

Sports-washing (Kobierecki & Strożek 2021); and the one which is apparently here to stay: Sportswashing (Søyland and Moriconi 2022; Skey 2022).

The publication dates of the articles that use the term demonstrate the recency of the concept in the academic world. Previously, the word was mainly used in journalistic texts and in policy briefings of Human Rights organisations.

According to Elsborg (2022), the term was first used in a press briefing of the organisation *Sport for Right* about the 2015 European Games[2]. The organisation warned that:

> "Azerbaijan is engaged in *sportswashing*: attempting to distract from its human rights record with prestigious sponsorship and hosting of events including the European Grand Prix 2016, matches in the 2020 European football championship and this month, Olympic spin-off the European Games."

According to the Language Council of Norway, sportswashing occurs "when governments in authoritarian countries use major sporting events to show themselves in a better light or when they seek to achieve the same by buying or sponsoring popular sports clubs" (Elsborg 2022).

This definition helps reducing the operational scope of the concept. What characterises sportswashing is not the *what*, but the *who*. The focus is not on the action (the political and diplomatic usage of sport) but on the actor that carries it out: authoritarian governments.

One only needs to recall Nazi propaganda during the Olympic Games in Berlin in 1936 as well as the FIFA World Cups in fascist Italy in 1934 and in dictatorial Argentina in 1978 to understand that while the political usage of sport is not new, the political usage of sport by authoritarian regimes could be seen as the great-grandfather to the modern concept of sportswashing. No novelties regarding here the *what* and the *who*.

**Metaphor, neologism and… ideological bias?**

In a recent article, Skey (2022) explains that the construction of the neologism follows the logic of two predecessors: whitewashing and greenwashing. Whitewashing refers to:

[2] The text is available in: https://static.poder360.com.br/2021/10/Sport-for-rights-Eurpean-Games-2015-Release.pdf

> "the practice of using low-cost calcium paint to superficially conceal or cover up a structural or substantive defect. Although the painter knows of its problems, a whitewashed wall appears flawless to the untrained eye" (Wexler, 2013: 825 cit. in Skey 2022).

On the other hand, greenwashing broadly refers to forms of "communication that mislead people into forming overly positive beliefs about an organisation's environmental practices or products" (Lyon and Montgomery, 2015: 223).

Now we have the crux of the matter. We are facing a historical practice which is currently used by authoritarian actors as, according to the enunciators of the concept, a façade for a spurious objective. The novelty is the aim (the *why*), which is always intentionally spurious, negative, immoral. Sportswashing, as every kind of *washing*, is a negative and fraudulent phenomenon, always linked to the conscious and purposeful deception of others and to the concealment of reality.

Boykoff (2022) defines sportswashing "as a phenomenon whereby political leaders use sport to appear important or legitimate on the world stage while stoking nationalism and deflecting attention from chronic social problems and human-rights woes on the home front". Sportwashers are resource-rich autocratic states who invest massive amounts of money in international sport as part of their public diplomacy (Krzyzaniak 2016), with the objective of re-branding or altering their image as modern, liberal, and western-friendly, and to gain attraction through their association with global sport (Lenskyj, 2020).

Although the concept has been used to criticise numerous countries such as Azerbaijan, Russia or China, the main target of the concept has been Arabian countries like Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. One of the triggers that led the public to scrutinise this region was the choice of Qatar to host the 2022 FIFA World Cup.

In December 2010, FIFA announced that the 2018 and 2022 World Cups would be held in Russia and Qatar respectively. Neither of the candidacies was the main favourite and various irregularities were denounced from the beginning that would later trigger FIFA Gate. If Russia's election came as a surprise, Qatar's election left the world speechless. Not only was it a small state with little to no football history and with no existing infrastructure for host such an event, but its summer

weather (the time when the competition is historically held) was extremely hot for the normal practice of football. This last problem eventually determined that the World Cup 2022 would be played at the end of the year, in November and December.

Meanwhile, Qatar's political rivals in the Arabian Peninsula were also expanding their sphere of influence in the sport. The United Arab Emirates invested massively in the purchase of football clubs and created competitive teams through the investment of millions of dollars and Saudi Arabia made million-dollar sponsorship agreements and have acquired the rights to organise various sports competitions (Søyland and Moriconi 2022, Ronay 2019). Sport has become a matter of importance for the Gulf States and all those governments kept pushing to become a major force in the world of global sport.

Due to these facts, is it correct to view this political election as a simple "*image washing*" process to hide internal problems and to deflect attention away from human rights issues? Does synthesising this process as a mere *sportswashing* initiative generates a broad and complex framework for interpretation and discussion, or is it more a reductionist view of the conjuncture?

**Sport as a developmental tool: the case of Qatar and Saudi Arabia**

The European Commission (2011) stated that sport has many significant roles in society. In its White Paper on Sport, the institution (European Commission 2007) considers sport as s societal and economic phenomenon that directly contributed to the strategic objectives of the EU for greater solidarity and prosperity, and it is also a means to fight violence and discrimination and to promote health and social welfare, social inclusion, integrity, and ethics.

In the same way as the EC and following the premise that recognises sport as a tool to achieve strategic objectives, Arab countries have included sport in their development and modernisation programmes. In the last decades, for instance, the governments of Saudi Arabia and Qatar have clearly emphasised the need to diversify their economies to become less dependent on fossil fuels and less vulnerable to fluctuations in the energy market (Søyland and Moriconi 2022).

This need is associated with the implementation of a sustainable development policy that allows for having incomes for new sectors, promoting its own development, and keeping a high standard of living for the new generations of citizens (General Secretariat for Development Planning, 2008: 2). In this context, both countries have included sport as a crucial area in their strategic

development roadmap, which is explained in their respective *Vision 2030* programmes (General Secretariat for Development Planning 2008, 2011, 2018; Elsborg 2018).

The Sport Sector Strategy 2011-2016 was one of the fourteen key sectors integrated in the QNV2030, and it was part of the National Development Strategy agenda in 2011 (General Secretariat for Development Planning, 2011). Sport is presented as a means to achieve national and international goals. At the national level, it helps to promote social cohesion, a healthier society, and an increased labour productivity (Qatar Olympic Committee, 2011).

At a global level, through investment in sport and the development of international events, it is possible to forge better diplomatic ties, increase regional status, attract tourism, develop infrastructures, and increase international prestige with relevant victories (Qatar Olympic Committee, 2011). Hosting sporting events that engage hundreds of millions of viewers worldwide "gives Qatar a unique possibility to showcase their country to the global audience and to alter stereotypes of the country and the region, which ultimately gains them soft power in the international system" (Søyland and Moriconi 2022).

Saudi Arabia shares this vision and includes sport in its strategic plan. Sport is an effective tool to obtain political will, improve diplomatic relations, conduct profitable investments, and promote the country and its culture. Sport is also an effective sector for promoting other projects on its modernisation and development agenda, such as the creation of a $500 billion futuristic NEOM megacity (Elsborg 2022).

The Saudi government's action programme is supported by the Public Investment Fund (PIF) created to "diversify and enrich the Kingdom's tourism and entertainment experience to build a more vibrant society and solidify the sport sector's economic and social role on all levels" (Elsborg 2022).

Through the PIF, the country has invested in sports sponsorships and in the acquisition of the English club Newcastle United. Following this acquisition, Saudi Arabia is on par with its regional rivals, which own PSG (Qatar) and Manchester City (United Arab Emirates). The country has also been effective in attracting international figures such as Lionel Messi, who became the country's tourist ambassador, or Cristiano Ronaldo, who decided to continue his career at Al-Nassr and to

become an ambassador for the project with which the country intends to crown his triumphant arrival in the world of sport: obtaining the venue for the 2030 FIFA World Cup.

Considering the case of Qatar, Søyland and Moriconi (2022) shows that what some critics define as sportswashing is actually an efficient multi-actor sports strategy with clear social, economic and political goals. It is based on four pillars: a) Hosting international sporting events and building state-of-the-art sporting facilities; b) Investing in global sport and broadcasting rights along with the promotion of sports initiatives such as sports integrity; c) Promoting and developing sporting success at the elite level, and d) Engaging famous sports stars who publicly speak in favour of Qatar's political regime and society.

***a) Hosting international sporting events and building state-of-the-art sporting facilities***

These countries have been working hard to become a central part of the global circuit of mega sporting events. This includes both the annual reception of events such as the Formula 1 Grand Prix or the organisation of events such as the FIFA World Cup. While Qatar already had its edition in 2022, Saudi Arabia aims to complete its consolidation as a massive sporting event organiser by winning the bid to host the 2030 FIFA World Cup.

In the last decades, Qatar has organised, among other events: an ATP tennis tournament since 1993 and a WTA tournament since 2001, a Golf Masters since 1998, a Moto GP Grand Prix since 2004, the IAAF Diamond League since 2010, and a Formula 1 Grand Prix in 2021 which will continue for a period of 10 years starting in 2023.

The country also organised the FIFA U-20 World Cup in 1995, the Asian Games in 2006, the IAAF World Indoor Championship, the Asian Football cup in 2011, the Handball World Championship in 2015, and the IAAF World Championship in 2019.

Saudi Arabia has not been left behind. The country organised the FIBA 3x3 World Tour, will have its Formula 1 Grand Prix from 2021 to 2031, and organised a Moto GP Grand Prix in 2023. It annually organises the Saudi cycling tour and since 2020 the Dakar Rally. It hosts the Spanish and Italian Football Super Cup and international golf competitions and equestrian championships. Likewise, from 2020 to 2030, the Saudi Arabia Snooker Masters will be held every year. Finally, the country is a great promoter of activities related to eSports.

This pillar of the Arabian sport strategy is associated with the promotion of the country and the creation and modernisation of infrastructures. Likewise, the flow of people generated by the events and the massive broadcasts at a global level offer a possibility to promote tourism.

On the other hand, and as it happened in the case of Qatar, the government recognised from an early stage the opportunity generated by holding an event of the dimension of the FIFA World Cup to accelerate the modernisation process of the country (Søyland and Moriconi 2022). According to the Qatar Olympic Committee (2011: 4), "hosting of the 2022 FIFA World Cup will accelerate the development of the objectives of QNV 2030, which aim at transforming Qatar into an advanced country by 2030". The government spent billions of euros on infrastructure, including a new metro system in Doha, roads, a new airport, hospitals, hotels, an entirely new city named Lusail, and seven new state-of-the-art stadiums which will be used during the World Cup in 2022 (ESPN, 2017).

Although there are infrastructures that can later be recycled or used for other purposes, such as the promotion of golf-related tourism on the new pitch, there are others that exceed national requirements. The FIFA World Cup needed a series of stadiums which exceed the demands of a small and sparsely populated country like Qatar. In this case, the creation of infrastructures was planned based on environmental premises and with the aim of being sustainable and preventing the stadiums from subsequently becoming useless or abandoned white elephants, as has happened elsewhere in the world. Some stadiums, for instance, have been built using a modular design that can be removed from venues after the events. After the competition, the country will donate them to poor countries that need sporting facilities. Other stadiums will be transformed into hospitals, schools, and hotels (Supreme Committee for Delivery & Legacy 2020).

***b) Investing in global sport and broadcasting rights along with the promotion of sports initiatives***

The second pillar is related to sponsorships and direct investments in global sport. In terms of advertising, various flagship companies and organisations[3] from the countries that are accused of sportswashing have used sport to promote themselves and improve their world ranking in their sector, such as Emirates or Qatar Airways in 2022[4]. This type of commercial link can be direct

[3] Among others, Qatar Foundation and Qatar Tourism Authority (both from Qatar), Emirates and Etihad Airways (from UAE), NEOM and Aramco (from Saudi Arabia), Gazprom (from Russia).
[4] https://www.worldairlineawards.com/worlds-top-10-airlines-2022/

advertising on top clubs' jersey like Qatar Airways with Barcelona FC, AS Roma or Boca Juniors; Etihad with Manchester City; or Fly Emirates with Real Madrid, Benfica, and Olympique de Lyon, or the sponsorship of events like NEOM and the Spanish Super Cup or Emirates and the Roland Garros tennis tournament, or federations like Gazprom with UEFA or Aramco with the Indian Cricket Council.

But the economic injection in sport goes beyond mere publicity. All three countries have created a branch of national sovereign wealth fund to directly invest in sport.

The Abu Dhabi United Group for Development and Investment (ADUG) is a pioneer institution in its sector. It purchased Manchester City in 2008 and quickly transformed it in a strong competitive team thorough a flurry of bids for high-profile players, such as Emmanuel Adebayor, Gareth Barry, Carlos Tevez and, then Sergio Aguero, among others.

In 2013, ADUG launched the City Football Group (CFG), aiming to become a global multi-owner club organisation for resource sharing, academy activities, networking, and marketing. Currently, CFG own several institutions around the globe: New York City FC (since 2013); Melbourne City FC (2014); Yokohama Marinos (2014); Montevideo City Torque (2017); Girona FC (2017); Sichuan Jiuniu FC (2019); Mumbai City FC (2019); Lommel SK (2020); Troyes AC (2020); and Palermo FC (2022).

The Emirates also have a professional cycling team, the UAE Team Emirates, which participates in the highest category, the UCI World Team[5]. Slovenian cyclist Tadej Pogačar, who won the prestigious Tour de France in 2020 and 2021, is one of the team's stars.

Regarding its neighbours, the Qatar Sports Investments (QSI) has become a pivotal actor in the sports strategy since it bought the famous French football club Paris St-Germain (PSG) in 2011. The takeover by the Qatari investment fund transformed PSG into one of the most popular and successful teams in the world, winning 7 national titles since 2012. Prior to the Qatari takeover, PSG had only won 2 league titles in their history.

The activity of these funds in sport transcends the world of football and, in some cases, aims to radically modify their ecosystem. For instance, QSI and the International Padel Federation (FIP)

[5] http://www.uaeteamemirates.com/

launched in 2022 a new world tour called Premier Padel to replace the older World Padel Tour (WPT).

Following the same logic, Saudi Arabia has promoted investment in sport through its Public Investment Fund (PIF). The two milestone of this strategy were the takeover of British Premier League club Newcastle United FC and the establishment of the LIV Golf Investments, which launched a novel professional tour called LIV Golf[6].

***c) Promoting and developing sporting success at the elite level.***

Qatari SSS 11-16 clearly states that a purpose of the program is to improve the performance of Qatari athletes at all levels (Søyland and Moriconi 2022). At the Olympic level, Qatar started to have an impact and good results in the 2012 Summer Olympic Games. Before this event, the country had modest results with one bronze medal in Barcelona 1992 and another in Sydney 2000. In London 2012, Qatar won a silver and a bronze, then got another silver in Rio de Janeiro 2016, and confirmed the evolution in Tokyo 2020 with two golds and one bronze.

Regarding the Asia Games, Qatar is the most successful of the Gulf Cooperation Council countries with a total of 120 medals, including 43 gold medals, 31 silver medals, and 46 bronze medals.

The Qatari national football team won its first ever title with the victory in the Asian cup in 2019 and has risen in the FIFA ranking from 112th in 2010 to 55th place in 2020.

Qatar has put a lot of resources into its sports talent development programmes. The Aspire Academy is at the forefront of Qatar's sports talent identification and development. Founded in 2004, the academy has state-of-the art facilities, leading expertise in sports science, as well as highly qualified international scouts and coaches who seek to develop elite Qatari Athletes.

Qatar's sports successes have not been without controversy. Many of them were due to the usage of nationalised foreign athletes. The athlete naturalisation policy has helped a country with a small population to have more impact in the world of sport (Reiche & Tinaz, 2018; Campbell, 2010). In fact, Qatar's Olympics medallist Mohamed Ahmed Suleiman was born in Somalia, and Said Saif Asaad, who was born under the name Angel Popov, changed his name when he received the Qatari citizenship prior to the Sydney 2000 Summer Olympic Games. Another controversial case was

[6] https://www.livgolf.com/

former Kenyan Stephen Cherono who became a Qatari citizen in 2003 in exchange for a reported $1 million in addition to $1,000 per month for life (Longman, 2003). He is the 3,000-metre steeplechase world record holder. Only two of the sixteen players who composed the Qatari national handball team that won silver at the 2015 Men Handball World Championship were born in Qatar. (Handball World, 2013; Nygård, 2015). This controversial situation led to the IOC and FIFA to amend the regulations on the nationalisation of athletes.

In the case of Saudi Arabia, the Saudi football federation aims to strengthen its national league and to build its national team into one of the top 30 in the FIFA rankings. The arrival of Cristiano Ronaldo in the country to play for Al-Nassr has been a clear example of the economic power of the league and its intention to seduce great world stars.

***d) Engaging famous sports stars who publicly speak in favour of Qatar's political regime and society.***

The fourth pillar pertains to the attraction of high-profile sport stars to the national competitions as an added value or to their hiring as sponsors or ambassadors of national initiatives.

Regarding the first model of action, the Qatari football league has been a pioneer in the Arabian region in attracting international football stars in the twilight of their careers play in the national championship and earn massive salaries (Amara 2005). This trend began in the early 2000s and Argentine strikers Gabriel Batistuta and Claudio Caniggia, Spanish defender Josep Guardiola, and Dutch defender Frank De Boer are emblematic examples. The influx of international stars to the Qatari league has continued and in recent years players such as Spanish legend Xavi Hernandez, the Dutch Wesley Sneijder, and the Cameroonian Samuel Eto'o have played in it. Many of these players also serve as FIFA World Cup 2022 ambassadors.

In 2022, Saudi Arabia shocked the world of football when Al-Nassr announced the signing of Cristiano Ronaldo for around 200 million euros per year[7], the biggest salary ever paid in football. Cristiano Ronaldo's brand transcends sport. The player will also be an ambassador for Saudi

[7] https://www.aljazeera.com/sports/2023/1/19/what-does-ronaldos-signing-for-al-nassr-mean-for-saudi-arabia

Arabia's bid for the FIFA World Cup and will promote the country. The country also hired world superstar Lionel Messi as a promoter of Saudi tourism[8].

Whether by contract or through simple life experience, these stars have provided a wealth of positive messages about those countries in the global press. There are many sports stars who have spoken positively about those countries and some, like Xavi, have even questioned those who criticised Qatar.

**Limitations and contradictions of the concept**

The first limitation of the concept is related to its usage and particularly to the agents that are presented as *sportswashers*. Those who carry out the actions, according to the limited existing conceptualisations, are autocracies and authoritarian governments. That is not a concept that analyses practices, actions, and interventions. If the same actions, practices, or programmes are implemented by "democratic actors", then it is not seen as sportswashing, but rather as the political usage of sport or sports diplomacy. As explained above, both the European Commission and the governments of Qatar and Saudi Arabia have defined sport as a motor for modernisation and a means to achieve strategic objectives. Beyond this political premise, the mere implementation of a political programme based on this idea is understood by those who currently use the sportswashing concept as a fair political action when used by governments considered democratic, but as propaganda aiming at laundering a stained human-rights reputation when used by authoritarian/autocratic governments.

In other words, is there no sportswashing by democratic governments? The easy answer would be no because there is nothing to launder in a "democracy" or at least human rights are protected.

What about the Black Lives Matter movement in the United States then? Faced with this dilemma, Boykoff warns that "human rights violations happen daily in Western democracies too" and establishes that sportswashing can also be used in those regimes because mega sporting events "distract the public from unfair processes like gentrification, homelessness, and hyper-surveillance". The author recalls that Eric Garcetti, the Mayor of Los Angeles, which will hold the Summer Olympic Games in 2028, "used the scourge of homelessness to sportswash, stating that

[8] https://english.alarabiya.net/News/saudi-arabia/2023/03/09/Lionel-Messi-Kingdom-s-tourism-ambassador-to-visit-Saudi-Arabia-in-March

‘I’m confident that by the time the Olympics come, we can end homelessness on the streets of LA.’” (Baykoff 2022).

On the other hand, it is a pejorative and despotic concept. The concept, in its semantics, determines a fraud or a hoax. Any political programme that uses sport as a means of development, modernisation, or even economic growth, is transformed through the conceptualisation of sportswashing into an act of propaganda tending to launder stained human-rights reputations. Beyond the documents, evidence and concrete facts that could demonstrate the political successes of the usage of sport, whoever despotically enunciates the concept determines that such programmes are a mere façade: the real objective of the usage of sport for political purposes is not written but rather hidden, and it is to wash condemnable and immortal acts. Given this enunciative and semantic situation, there is no possibility of a debate. The concept itself establishes that *sportswashers* do not have good intentions; it is a critical judgment by the enunciator. Therefore, the concept does not try to understand or describe a reality; it tries to denounce and condemn the action, without the possibility of defence by the actor who is criticised. Any evidence, argument, justification, or defence on the part of the *sportswasher* will be understood, by the enunciator, as a new washing action. It is therefore a limiting concept, authoritarian in its essence.

Other problem: the logic of power and human action that underlies the concept is of little use for the analysis of international relations. The concept loses sight of the fact that, for laundering to occur, there must be complicity and legitimacy on the part of the other parties involved in the process. In this case, the legitimacy would come from the sports governance bodies, from the clubs and institutions which agree to be sponsored by *sportswashers*, and from the stars who become sports ambassadors. One could even include the public as complicit to an extent.

The 4 pillars of an efficient multi-actor sports strategy presented above require external legitimation and acceptance. Thus, if the objective is mere sportswashing, the effectiveness of the *washing* practice will not depend on the promotor, but on those who legitimise it.

For instance, the right to organise sports competitions is beholding to international sports federations. They are the ones who analyse and chose among the proposals and determine whether it is appropriate or not to go ahead and keep the same schedule and events. Even in the cases where there is a contract, if there is any inconvenience or the if services are not provided efficiently the

contractual link can be revoked. A good example for this would be a racing circuit that cannot guarantee the integrity and safety of the drivers: the contract can be voided.

In a globalised world, the construction of infrastructures necessary for the holding of mega-events of any kind is generally in the hands of foreign companies. In the case of Qatar, for example, the stadiums were built by foreign companies, many of them European, which took full advantage of the Qatari labour system.

The investment in clubs and broadcasting rights would be a fair market transaction in which at least two parties must agree. And it is generally clear who is selling, and who is buying. The owner of the club or the event to be broadcast decide whether to accept the offer.

Regarding sporting success, athletes are required to agree to defend the colours of national institutions, be it at an individual, collective, club or national level. In the same way, there is no coercion on athletes who agree to publicly recount satisfactory experiences within authoritarian countries or on athletes who, through a contract, decide to become sponsors of supposed *sportswasher* countries.

Far from wanting to investigate the channels and incentives (the causes and reasons) for which legitimisation occurs, the sportswashing denouncers directly attack the promoters of these pillars as if the process itself depended on them.

But the most obvious weak point of the concept of *sporswashing* is the evidence that shows that if an expected situation does not happen (at least in an effective way), it is an image washing process. Quite to the contrary, the success of any programme for the political usage of sport led to an increased scrutiny regarding national internal policies and conflicts (Søyland and Moriconi 2022).

The case of Qatar is a clear example. The mere fact of getting the venue for the 2022 FIFA World Cup brought all the international spotlights to that small and relatively unknown country in the Gulf. If one thing increased, it was the public scrutiny of this unknown (for many in Western countries[9]) microstate situated in the Arabian Peninsula.

[9] A quick search on YouTube allows everybody to see the number of journalistic reports that were made prior to the World Cup to "know" the culture, politics, and economy of that small country. The author's search was conducted in Portuguese, Spanish, and English. In all languages there are journalistic reports of this type that show that "meeting the unknown Qatar" was a premise of the global journalistic agenda.

In terms of human rights, one can simply carry out a small search on the amount of news about the Kafala system in Qatar before and after the 2022 FIFA World Cup was awarded to find interesting results. *The Guardian*[10], for example, is a recurring publisher of news on the cruelty of Kafala in Qatar and it published the first news on the subject in 2013. The amount of news about it then increased a lot in 2021 and 2022. The news on Kafala were always related to Qatar as the future host of the World Cup. It must be remembered that Kafala is a cruel system of promotion and control of labour migration that takes place in the countries of the Persian Gulf, and it is not only a Qatari issue. However, a quick search on the search engines of the world's leading newspapers demonstrates the limited journalistic attention that has been and is still being given to Kafala abuses in Bahrain, Kuwait, Lebanon, or Oman, all of which are other countries of the same region, where the regimen also exists.

In other words, what matters is not Kafala and its abuses: what matters is Qatar. And human rights in Qatar are only of interest because the FIFA World Cup is being held there. The World Cup did not wash the issue, the World Cup brought it to light. If it had been in Oman, we would be talking about Oman, and there would still be very few in Western societies who manage to find Qatar on the map. Qatar had nothing to wash because it went unnoticed until 2010.

This is far from being a problem. It is a great opportunity which sport generates to promote good universal values, notably human rights values, thanks to the strength and impact that the sector has. But for that, in addition to reviewing the cognitive limitations of the concept of *sportswashing*, it is crucial to understand the drivers and incentives that allow for a globally legitimised and efficient political sport-strategy.

Edgar Morin (2015) considers that there are two approaches to human reasons and the knowledge of the world: rationalisation and rationality. While rationalisation seeks to lock reality into a coherent system and all that is contrary to that coherent system is discarded, forgotten, put aside, and seen as an illusion or an impression, rationality is the ceaseless dialogue between our spirits, which creates logical structures which are applied to the world, and the real world. And when the

10 https://www.google.co.uk/search?q=kafala+qatar+site:www.theguardian.com&lr=&safe=images&as_qdr=all&ei=P3b3Y-mcOoXgkgWK9JLIDg&start=90&sa=N&ved=2ahUKEwipuOXA66v9AhUFsKQKHQq6BOk4UBDw0wN6BAgFEBc&biw=1536&bih=714&dpr=1.25

world is not in accordance with our logical system, there is a need to admit that our logical system is inadequate and covers only part of what is real.

Until now, the concept of sportswashing has been a process of rationalisation reduced to criticising the enemies of the ones who enunciate it and, necessarily, to discarding all the evidence that could contradict that criticism. For the debate around the political usage of sport to be fruitful and useful, it is necessary to dispense with concepts that limit the analysis and, following what Morin exposed, to establish channels of rationality that allow us to approach reality without dogmatic and ideological limitations.

**Legitimation through values**

Michael Sandel (2000) considers that we have moved from a market economy to a market society. While the market economy is an efficient way of managing production and trade, the market society is a society in which market values pervade all social practices. In some cases, the extrapolation of these values to social spheres that should be kept out of financial logic radically modifies the intrinsic objectives of these practices. This premise can be even more useful than the concept of sportswashing to analyse and promote a sustainable and favourable usage of sport.

More than sports diplomacy, public diplomacy, or even soft power, what is seen in the political strategy of the Arab countries and in the process of legitimisation by external actors is a mere financial process or at the very least economic diplomacy. The entire process of action and engagement of actors is marked by the imposition of market logic on the world of sport. And that is the biggest criticism that should be made.

The political usage of sport cannot be limited to the mere development of sporting events and driven by the power of money. As Abdi et. al. (2018) has warned, competent sports diplomacy agendas should be built on the respect and promotion of universal and national values. While "universal values are those that theoretically have global validity, such as human rights, respect for the environment, fair play, professionalism and the fight against manipulation and doping", national values "differ from country to country, and are related to specific national and local traditions, customs, and cultures that can generate respect from other nations" (Søyland and Moriconi 2022: 356).

On the other side, sports institutions cannot just be driven through economic incentives. That can dilapidate sports sustainability or destroy intrinsic values such as fair competition to the risk of fostering the proliferation of *State clubs*, the abrupt budgetary differences between clubs, the increase of multi-club ownership, the payment of astronomic salaries, etc. The normalization of such practices threats competitions integrity and might create new incentive and structures opportunities for match-fixing (Moriconi 2020).

A serious and robust investigation on the political usage of sport cannot neglect the analysis of the legitimation factors (or not) by the actors external to the political regimes who promote the initiatives. And these legitimation processes are not exempt from conflicts of values.

For instance, in 2018, Bayern München's fans promoted a strong protest against a sponsorship agreement between the club and Qatar Airways. Supporters considered that the controversies about human rights and the bid to organize the FIFA World Cup struck with traditional moral values of the institution (Smith 2018). The same criticism happened with FC Barcelona during its shirts' sponsorship by Qatar Foundation and Qatar Airways from 2011 to 2017 (Schaerlaeckens, 2015).

However, the opposition to the arrival of foreign capital is not exempt from dilemmas. The case of the Saudi-led takeover of Newcastle United FC is a clear example. Some fans of the club, and even many English football fans, questioned the operation because of Saudi Arabia's record on piracy and human rights. What can be morally reprehensible opens up, however, an unbeatable opportunity at the sporting level due to the current situation of sports governance and, particularly, of the English league: without money it is impossible to compete, and super teams today cannot be achieved through based on tradition and sportsmanship but based on the injection of external money. Currently, Newcastle is fighting for a place in the Champions League representing the competitive Premier League. What would the sporting reality of the team be without the arrival of Saudi capital? Again, the power of money seems to beat the power of sport. And that situation was not normalized by sportswashers, but, on the contrary, for the global football institutional ecosystem. Rather than creating a situation in their favor, the Arab countries (aware of their economic power) planned efficient modernization strategies through sports, taking advantage of the opportunity structures, the values scale, and the internal governance failures of sports' institutional ecosystem.

But, on the other hand, far from hiding uncomfortable situations and sources of internal conflict, as the defenders of the concept of sportswashing claim, the political usage of sport magnifies international scrutiny and creates an opportune ecosystem for the discussion of values. And the same happens with the cultural shocks that the realisation of mega sporting events promotes.

In the World Cup in Qatar, for example, a woman was the main referee of a match for the first time in history. And that happened in a Muslim country where women do not have the same status and rights as men. The spectators even had to put up with a Croatian pseudo-model walking around the stands almost naked throughout the tournament. For its part, the Western public had the opportunity to receive abundant information, explanations, and arguments about life in the country and indigenous social and cultural practices.

The labour regime was questioned a lot. But it is also true that due to social pressure, the Qatari government introduced reforms in the Kafala regime. Although it is not a radical change, it is an incipient beginning that the international sports governance entities who continue to develop events in the country can monitor and reinforce through pressure.

However, while talking about the Qatari Kafala and without talking about other similar regimes, nobody is approaching the situation of the populations in the countries where the workers who join the Kafala come from. If the system is so enslaving, how desperate is the life of these workers in Bangladesh, Pakistan, India, etc., for them to wish to emigrate and accept those working conditions.

In other words, if people in those countries had a dignified life, they would not need (or want) to emigrate and Kafala would cease to exist. The hypocrisy is to naturalise and hide these realities (*journalismwashing*) and only seek to discredit actors who successfully use sport in a political way because they are able to achieve the necessary legitimation from sport governance bodies, governments, sport stars, and public in general.

**Concluding remarks**

This chapter described the emergence and use of the concept *sportswashing*, realizing its limitations and its ineffectiveness to analyse the political usage of sport. More than window-dressing operations, modernization programs through sport are a window of opportunity for the

promotion of national and universal values and for the re-legitimization of sport as a factor of cohesion, influence, and social development.

The current reality also presents an unbeatable panorama to openly discuss the values that underlie current sports management and governance, and the weight that the market logic is having in the development of competitiveness. Therefore, more than problems (as compulsive sportswashing whistle-blowers see) what we have is a panorama full of possibilities to defend and promote a better World. But that will depend on the legitimation processes and, in consequence, on the values and incentives that truly drives the political will of both sports entities and governments.

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