# International Studies and the ”Beautiful Game:” A lesson in power and change

## Lecture by Dr. Crystal A. Ennis

**Preparation**:

1. Warm up 1: https://www.amnesty.nl/actueel/toekenning-wk-2034-aan-saudi-arabie-zet-levens-op-het-spel

2. Warm up 2: https://www.hrw.org/news/2026/06/11/world-cup-fifa-sponsors-should-back-an-ice-truce

3. Opinion in the New York Times: https://english.aawsat.com/home/article/4014131/abdullah-al-arian/why-world-cup-belongs-middle-east

**Academic Reading:**
7.5-page excerpt (pages 325-333) included below:

Bucher, Bernd, and Julian Eckl. “Football’s Contribution to International Order: The Ludic and Festive Reproduction of International Society by World Societal Actors.” International Theory 14, no. 2 (2022): 311–37. https://doi.org/10.1017/S1752971920000676

**Questions**:

1. What do you think the authors mean by "international society"?
2. Do you agree that football reflects international society?
3. Who holds power in the international system?
4. Who is responsible when things go bad?
5. Who can influence change and how can they do it?

## FIFA and 'Its' World cup

Today, FIFA is situated at the heart of a highly complex global football field.[93] But its unique role, with its 211 affiliated associations, should not be taken for granted.[94] FIFA's standing was historically contested and FIFA could have developed a much more conflictual relation with international society. But its development mirrored the expansion of international society, and the manner in which FIFA determined membership largely reflected membership criteria and practices of international society.[95] This led to striking parallels between international society and the infrastructure of this global sport – which we will discuss next before focusing on the World Cup finals.

### *The infrastructure of football*

Today, football reproduces and naturalizes the segmentation of 'the global' in terms of 'sovereign, territorial nation states'. This process is driven by the general requirement of having only one official football association per nation state. Historically, however, these modalities of membership were contested and could have developed differently.

They became an issue soon after FIFA was founded by its seven original members in 1904,[96] and concerned the status of the four British associations. These were founded prior to FIFA and had organized their own 'international' cooperation since the 1880s (via the International Football Association Board – IFAB). Only England had joined FIFA in 1905 with Scotland and Ireland applying for membership prior to the FIFA congress in 1908. But their application was opposed by the delegates of France, Germany, and Austria, on the grounds that 'if the same policy was followed with regard to Germany some 26 states would apply for admission'. Consequently, 'Germany wished that a single Association should be recognized representing football in the United Kingdom'.[97] Following discussions, the applications of Scotland and Ireland failed to gain the necessary 2/3 majority.[98]

As is well known, all four British associations had eventually joined FIFA by 1911. But their status was defined as an *anomaly*. While allowing for rare exceptions, this process consequently affirmed that normally only one association per country would be recognized.[99] This created an overwhelming parallelism between FIFA membership and membership in international society.[100] By the same token,

[93]Giulianotti and Robertson 2012, 217.

[94]For instructive discussions of the historical emergence of the field of football, see Cleland 2015; Harvey 2005; Cardenas 2015.

[95]For the classic and contestable account of the expansion of international society, see Bull and Watson 1984.

[96]FIFA 1904a, b, Article 1.

[97]All quotes from FIFA 1908, 2.

[98]Along the same lines, 'Austria proposed to recognize Finland provisionally until a Russian Association had been formed' (*Ibid.*), and the admission of the Czech/Bohemian association was revoked as 'only the Austrian F. A. [was to] be recognized in that country' (*Ibid.*, 4).

[99]FIFA 1910.

[100]This practice proves challenging whenever a political unit is recognized only by some members of international society.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1752971920000676 Published online by Cambridge University Press

the scope and domain of the authority of national football associations became closely modelled on international society's institutions of sovereignty and territoriality, while FIFA membership became increasingly seen as an indicator for being a member of international society.

Not only were member associations legally equal, but any association that joined FIFA could also claim internal and external 'sovereignty' over the territory it represented. It thereby excluded potential competitors and alternative approaches to organizing football.[101] These alternative organizational forms were not merely hypothetical. For example, the application of the Amateur Football Association to be admitted to FIFA as a second English association was rejected[102] and workers' football teams and associations were excluded from participating in the FIFA system even though they organized not only their own national leagues but even international matches among national teams.[103] As such, the basic membership rules and practices of FIFA not only reproduced key aspects of sovereignty and territoriality, but also linked nationalism (as a collective identity) to specific states.

Once FIFA had become the principle organization for international football, the representational logic and the symbiotic relationship between FIFA and international society made it outstandingly difficult for any competitors to emerge. This held true, even though FIFA (as a private organization) could not claim any official or unique mandate that would have formalized its monopolistic position.[104] The exclusive and exclusionary character of this setup was not only a consequence of membership as such. It was further reinforced by the provision that FIFA had to be asked for permission if members wanted to play a non-member, thereby effectively marginalizing non-members and generating network effects.[105]

Historically, membership criteria and admission practices could have developed differently. FIFA could have granted membership to non-territorially bounded associations of people representing political views or different professions. Similarly, privately owned associations or associations linked to transnational co-operations could have become members. The role of football today would be different if it had admitted them, and it is through these exclusions that a mutually supportive relationship between FIFA's organizational structure and the (contested) membership of international society emerged.

The consequences of these early membership decisions are still visible today. The current FIFA (2018) statutes (Section 11, Paragraph 1) stipulate that 'only one association shall be recognised as a member association in each country'[106]

[101]There are limits to the legal equality of member associations considering the privileged role of the four British associations within IFAB to determine the laws of the game.

[102]FIFA 1908, 3.

[103]Frommhagen 2011; Wheeler 1978.

[104]Nevertheless, alternatives to FIFA continue to emerge. For example since 2013, the Confederation of Independent Football Associations has organized the World Football Cup with teams from 'nations, de-facto nations, regions, minority peoples and sports isolated territories' (CONIFA 2017).

[105]For example, when the English Amateur Football Association was not admitted to FIFA, the Union des Sociétés Françaises de Sports Athlétiques (USFSA), the French founding member of FIFA, left FIFA, as it wanted to continue its relationship with the Amateur Football Association. The remaining FIFA members in turn faced the problem of having to sever their relations with USFSA.

[106]See FIFA 2018.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1752971920000676 Published online by Cambridge University Press

and mention the British case as an anomaly (Section 11, Paragraph 5). Moreover, they point out that FIFA membership requires membership in one of the six regional confederations. The 'one association per country logic' is consequently reinforced at the level of regional confederations who also only accept one association per country – see for example the Union of European Football Associations (UEFA) statutes Article 5(1), or the Confederation of African Football (CAF) statutes Article 4(4).[107]

While FIFA statutes define a country as 'an independent state recognized by the international community' (Definition 6), CAF statutes do not define the term.[108] UEFA statutes link membership even more directly to the UN system, as member associations have to be based 'in a country which is recognised as an independent state by the majority of members of the United Nations' (Article 5(1)).[109] Finally, FIFA statutes stipulate that an 'association in a region which has not yet gained independence may, with the authorisation of the member association in the country on which it is dependent, also apply for admission to FIFA' (Section 11, Paragraph 6).[110] This acknowledges that membership in international society is not static and recognizes the importance of decolonization processes. But it simultaneously gives a veto to existing national associations. At present, there are only a few UN members who are not affiliated with FIFA and/or one of its regional associations (e.g. Palau, Monaco, and Vatican City).[111]

Since the member associations are also responsible for organizing football at the national level, it is common practice that national leagues are almost exclusively organized along territorial boundaries. This reproduces and naturalizes territoriality, nationality, and sovereignty in the every-day experience (of citizens). There are only a few examples in which football leagues include teams from other states and do not follow a strict national logic.[112] Such cases are readily recognized as anomalies, as the national logic underlying the organization of football is upheld even where language barriers are low and organizational barriers or efficiency criteria cannot explain the existence of small national leagues.[113]

Additionally, national Cups (e.g. the FA Cup in England) integrate national leagues with clubs of varying strength, while excluding from competition clubs from

[107]See UEFA 2018 and CAF 2017.

[108]See FIFA 2018.

[109]See UEFA 2018. UEFA statutes mention the British associations, the Faroe Islands, and Gibraltar as exceptions from membership criteria (Article 69(1)).

[110]See FIFA 2018.

[111]Membership questions are not always clear cut or non-political. For example not all associations who are members of regional confederations are also FIFA members (12 associations) and there are associations who are FIFA members, but not UN members (20 associations). The latter are carefully negotiated exemptions from membership criteria and practices. They include the ones mentioned before (the four British associations, the Faroe Islands, and Gibraltar) as well as Hong Kong, Macau, Chinese Taipei (Taiwan), the British Virgin Islands, the US Virgin Islands, Puerto Rico, and Palestine.

[112]For example, the AS Monaco in the French Ligue 1, the FC Vaduz (Liechtenstein) in the Swiss Raiffeisen Super League. Foreign teams compete in the Singapore Premier League, for example the DPMM FC from Brunei. More prominently, clubs from both the USA and Canada compete in Major League Soccer in North America.

[113]Suggestions for multinational leagues (e.g. an ASEAN Super League, or the fusion of the leagues of Belgium and the Netherlands) have been made in the past.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1752971920000676 Published online by Cambridge University Press

abroad. In these contests, integration follows a national logic and not one of comparable capabilities on the pitch. The national character of leagues and competitions is not only the result of FIFA rules and practices. In many countries 'the nation-state contributes significantly to football's national regulation and growth, for example through financial support, infrastructural investments, and provision of security at fixtures and tournaments'.[114]

The fundamental role of 'the national' (and the link between nationalism as a collective identity and the state) is not undermined by competitions above the national level for which teams qualify. Here regionalism, akin to regionalism in international society, is reproduced visibly (e.g. UEFA Europa League, UEFA Champions League, Copa Libertadores, or CAF Champions League), while national quotas play an important role. Above the regional level, respective regional champions now meet in the FIFA Club World Cup. In a fundamental sense, football contributes to the development of national identities which are specifically linked to territorially demarcated sovereign states, while reproducing regionalism.[115]

While it is national teams that participate in the World Cup, a regional logic plays an important role during the qualification phase as well. National associations participate in regional qualifications that determine who participates in the finals. Regional quotas secure diversity and ensure truly global games. But this form of global representation had to be fought for and can be seen as part of the larger struggle for decolonization. After FIFA's emergence in Europe, associations from the largely decolonized Americas joined quickly, whereas most associations from Asia and Africa followed much later.[116] Joining FIFA became an important symbol for possessing political independence like other members of the UN system. This development parallels Wight's observation that admission to the Greek system of states took the form of admission to Pan-Hellenic games.[117]

In principle, FIFA admission provided equal membership and voting rights. In practice, some inherited privileges of the early FIFA members remained. These led, for example, to open conflict in the context of the qualifications to the 1966 World Cup. The issue concerned FIFA's requirement that African teams enter a 'play-off […] against nations in Asia to secure one place'.[118] This induced CAF to boycott the World Cup and led FIFA to revise the rules for the qualifications to the 1970 World Cup in which CAF received its own place. These unfair and excluding qualification practices demonstrate, however, that equal regional representation can be undermined by historical privileges and meritocratic notions of team strength. Partly as a consequence of increasing pressure for equal geographic representation, the total number of teams admitted to the finals has steadily increased. But in 2018, UEFA still held 14 out of 32 seats, whereas CAF held five. At the same time, it has to be noted that due to expanding membership, European associations can no longer control FIFA decisions.

[114]Giulianotti and Robertson 2012, 222, referring to Giulianotti 1994.

[115]On football and identity, see Tomlinson and Young 2006; Goig 2007; Podoler 2007; Gibbons 2014.

[116]There are exceptions to this general trend as the first non-European association to join was the South African Football Association (1910).

[117]Wight 1977, 86.

[118]Cleland 2015, 43.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1752971920000676 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Football's infrastructure and the prolonged qualification phase underscore that world sport events are not one-shot games. During the years between World Cups more than '800 qualification matches are played across every continent'.[119] As such, the World Cup is an ongoing event. But the World Cup finals remain the festive culmination of the quadrennial global football cycle and we will turn to this tournament phase now.

### *The World Cup finals*

The World Cup finals are global secular festivals that are difficult to overlook. Millions of tickets are sold and billions of people around the globe watch the finals matches, be it privately at home, with friends in bars, or at designated parties. Moreover, cities all around the world install massive screens to accommodate the endless array of spectators.

The 2014 World Cup in Brazil, according to FIFA statistics, reached about 3.2 billion viewers, with the final alone drawing roughly 1 billion spectators.[120] The 2018 World Cup in Russia attracted even more, with about 3.572 billion viewers. The final, in this case, being watched by about 1.12 billion people. Overall, 3.032 million tickets were issued for the World Cup in Russia.[121] While these numbers refer to the men's World Cup that has long been perceived as the quintessential football format, the women's World Cup has also gained increasing and widespread attention.[122] The finals are truly mass-mobilizing and draw an enormous amount of attention and passionate engagement.

Not only are these competitions organized as matches between national football associations, national symbols are omnipresent. Individuals self-identify with these to highly unusual degrees by, for example, wearing national emblems, waving flags, decorating cars, painting faces, or singing the national anthem while marching through the streets. Especially the fans who travel to the host cities invest their time and money – in order to support their teams and often to represent their nations. The fact that we are not puzzled by this synchronized global behavior speaks to the naturalization of the nationalization of world sport events and the link between national identity and sovereign territorial statehood.

It is precisely through world sport events that this link is enacted and established. These events simultaneously take place at multiple levels creating recursive structures which provide for positive self-identification[123] and a sense of 'we / us' to be experienced emotionally. Recursive structures make it possible that nations watch and perceive themselves. For example, TV spectators in nationally decorated rooms witness spectators in national jerseys in the stadium while both representations of the nation follow the national team compete. Moreover, the team members refer back to the nation at home and in the stadium in various ways, for example in interviews. The fact that the broadcasting rights are commonly sold for national markets additionally contributes to the national framing of this global event. At

[119]Giulianotti and Robertson 2012, 217.
[120]FIFA 2015.
[121]FIFA 2019a, 48, 58.
[122]Women's World Cup 2019.
[123]See Elias and Scotson 1994.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1752971920000676 Published online by Cambridge University Press

base, the finals tend to temporarily homogenize the nation state, because they allow the signification of a natural unitary quality that is reflected in 'the one national team' supported by its fans. Centrally, this applies not only to one's own nation. Rather, everyone witnesses *that others stand for nations too*. These nations are displayed as being mutually exclusive (territorially defined), but of the same kind (sovereign and legally equal) and comparable.

Most importantly, this ludic and festive event not only reinforces the 'naturalness' of the sovereign territorial nation state, but also that states compete with each other at the global level on the basis of shared values and common rules. In Bull's terminology, such an event embodies the primary goals of international society as well as the rules of coexistence. Moreover, it reaffirms that competition can be carried out in a manner that does not escalate into conflict. It is also in this sense that we see a direct link between world sport events and the reproduction of international society (as sovereign territorial nation states managing conflict and cooperation on the basis of shared goals, rules, and institutions).

Importantly, however, the shared values that are communicated in the context of the World Cup also go beyond those that are typically associated with international society. This brings us back to an issue that was discussed above, namely to what extent the rights of individuals also play a role and whether they challenge the constitutional idea of world order as an international order. While there are various ways in which values and norms are communicated in the context of the World Cup finals (e.g. banners against racism), the FIFA statutes and documents can help to address these questions.

The values and norms outlined in the FIFA statutes and documents[124] can be understood as argumentative resources of normative world society. They are formulated in universalist terms and underscore unity in diversity. As such, the tendency to homogenize and naturalize the sovereign territorial nation state is accompanied by a seemingly countervailing force. Beyond agreement on the formal rules of football and a notion of shared sportsmanship (fair play), world sport events draw on semantics of globality, unity (one world), common humanity (anti-discrimination and anti-racism), and even sustainability.[125] Sections 3, 4, and 5 of the statutes refer explicitly to human rights, non-discrimination, equality, and the promotion of friendly relations. Section 4 for example states that

> Discrimination of any kind against a country, private person or group of people on account of race, skin color, ethnic, national or social origin, gender, disability, language, religion, political opinion or any other opinion, wealth, birth or any other status, sexual orientation or any other reason is strictly prohibited and punishable by suspension or expulsion.[126]

This shows that football not only enacts practices linked to sovereignty, territoriality, and nationalism. It also draws on specific notions of cosmopolitanism. As

[124]FIFA 2018, 2019b.

[125]FIFA 2019b.

[126]FIFA 2018, 7. On John Ruggie's contribution to the drafting process of FIFA's Human Rights policy, see FIFA 2016.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1752971920000676 Published online by Cambridge University Press

discussed above, these have been associated with world society and have the potential to conflict with pluralist notions of international society. It is in this sense rather than simply because non-state actors play a key role in the organization of world sport events, that specific institutions of international society might be challenged.

But importantly, the values articulated by FIFA are not presented as an actual challenge to the status quo. There are two reasons for this. First, human rights and cosmopolitan values are discussed in very general terms. They are operationalized as vague membership criteria, and they are situated in the broader context of ensuring rule-governed competition (which could be differentiated from discrimination, that suggests a permanent hierarchy that is not based on merit). Human rights violations by national authorities are consequently not necessarily seen as a hindrance to participating in the World Cup.[127] In other words, world sport events (re)enact international society, rather than performing alternative forms of global organization – that would be more in line with notions of integrated world society.

The second reason why these argumentative resources of normative world society do not challenge the status quo, is linked to their (allegedly) non-political nature and that they are articulated by a private actor. Sport leaders continuously underscore their non-political agenda and appeal to statespersons and football players to not mix sports and politics. FIFA statutes highlight that 'FIFA remains neutral in matters of politics and religion' but that exceptions 'may be made with regard to matters affected by FIFA's statutory objectives' (Section 4(2)).[128] *FIFA Stadium Safety and Security Regulations*[129] state that the 'promotion or announcement of political or religious messages or any other political or religious actions, inside or in the immediate vicinity of the stadium, by any means, is strictly prohibited before, during and after matches' (Article, 60(1)).

This does obviously not imply that World Cups (or other football events) are *actually* non-political. Quite to the contrary. Take the much-discussed early example of the second World Cup in 1934 which was used by Mussolini to present his fascist regime. More recently, we have seen highly politicized debates concerning the World Cups in South Africa, Brazil, Russia, and the upcoming one in Qatar. 'The stadium has [indeed] always been political'.[130] This becomes immediately visible in the boundary drawing processes that determine whether actions by players or spectators are deemed political or not. In other words, while football is highly political indeed, its transformative potential is radically circumscribed and limited to unpredicted events that unfold in terms of the rules of the game – on and off the pitch. Most centrally, the cosmopolitan values articulated by FIFA are not understood as being in conflict with the values accepted by the members of international society. Quite to the contrary, these values are deemed to be unpolitical because they represent the broadly shared and accepted values of states. As such, the values

[127]However, at times these norms and values have been enforced in the past. In particular, the South African association was expelled for discriminatory policies in 1976.

[128]FIFA 2018.

[129]FIFA 2012.

[130]Guschwan 2016, 388.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1752971920000676 Published online by Cambridge University Press

expressed by FIFA are all about the existing and not about an alternative world order.

While the World Cups are status quo oriented in the sense outlined above, they also stabilize world order as international order in a temporal sense. The iterated nature of the World Cups, not only leads to a continuous process of organizing the next events, but also projects international society into the future, by generating and normalizing the expectation that the World Cup will take place again. As such, the master primary institution of sites and festivals can be argued to symbolically stabilize international society through creating continuity and normalizing expectations about the future. It does so by allowing for the ludic renegotiation of positions, since future World Cups will provide participants with the opportunity to improve on their results in a new round of rule-governed competition. The World Cup thereby stabilizes international order through providing opportunities for change and development within circumscribed rules. In doing so, it performs a legitimate vision of the world.[131]

As such, international football can be understood as a stage on which diverse actors perform the segmentation of the global in terms of sovereign territorial nation states competing on the basis of shared values and rules. This specific arrangement is made emotionally experienceable as the natural order of things.

## Conclusion: football's contribution and its responsibility

We have taken an unconventional look at the role which world sport events play. While scholarship traditionally focuses on how these types of events impact individual states politically and economically, we studied the role they play in the complex (re)production of international society. We thereby moved beyond highlighting the role of secondary institutions for the development of primary institutions,[132] or the role which world societal actors play as norm-entrepreneurs.[133] Rather, we argued that they can play a constitutive role in reproducing central primary institutions and international society, which manifests as rule-governed competition on the basis of shared values. Doing so required that we moved from an actor-based approach to a practice-based perspective. We chose to focus on the performativity of actions and the role these play for specific social arrangements. While this opens up the possibility that actors beyond states (both as individuals and as collective actors) can participate in international society in an affirmative manner, this analytic move does not undermine the distinction between first- and second-order societies – but it does problematize their strict ontological separateness.

Our approach led us to conceptualize world sport events as a derivative primary institution embedded in the master primary institution of (secular) sites and festivals. These events naturalize sovereignty, territoriality, and nationality (not only nationalism in the abstract). At the same time, they perform international society in a ludic and festive way that makes international society tangible and emotionally

[131]Linklater 2019, 938
[132]Spandler 2015; Friedner Parratt 2017.
[133]Falkner and Buzan 2019.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1752971920000676 Published online by Cambridge University Press

experienceable. Most importantly, these acts of reproduction, are driven by a secondary institution of political world society that mobilizes billions of people and draws on argumentative resources located at the intersection of normative world society and the legitimacy norms of international society. From a practice-based perspective, international institutions reveal a hybrid character in terms of actor-type participation and it becomes perceivable that world societal actors can even play a focal role therein.

While the concept of 'world' could be performed in ways that challenge the legitimacy of the nation state and international society, the play that is being performed in the context of the World Cups naturalizes the following: first, and anomalies notwithstanding, humanity is segmented into nations that exist as territorially defined sovereign states. Second, humanity organized in this way is characterized by competition that can be rule-governed, and peaceful. In short, the World Cups underscore that a society of states is a natural, feasible, and desirable form of world order. Counterfactually speaking, football does not stage world politics as an epic struggle between capital and labor, as a competition between transnational corporations, as a society of individuals, as a playing field of dynastic families, or as an arena for humans who run the risk of destroying planet earth. ***You can stop reading here!*** ----------

While we focused on football as the largest single-sport event, subsequent work could look into other world sport events such as the Olympic Games. Moreover, we hope that our approach contributes to opening the door for studying the (re)production of other primary institutions and draws attention to the ways in which normative and political world society feed into standards of legitimacy of international society.

But beyond the relevance of our argument for English School theorizing, our shift in perspective raises a set of novel questions that concern the role and responsibility of FIFA. Centrally, it adds another dimension to the importance of addressing FIFA's (corruption) scandals.[134] This issue is traditionally discussed in terms of domestic laws and regulations. But corrupt FIFA practices, can now also be seen as entailing symbolic and reputational costs for international society as a whole. To the extent that FIFA plays a key role for primary institutions of international society and in this sense performs quasi-public diplomacy on behalf of international society, FIFA cannot simply draw on its status as a 'private actor' in order to prevent interference and involvement by state actors or other regulators. Rather, FIFA should be particularly transparent in fulfilling its legal obligations. Viewing FIFA as a key actor in reproducing international society adds a layer of responsibility for FIFA that has so far not been considered.

**Acknowledgement.** We would like to thank the participants of panels at international conferences (ISA in New Orleans and Baltimore; SPSA in Geneva) and of an internal workshop (Klaus Dingwerth's team at the University of St. Gallen), who commented on different draft versions of this paper. Among the many colleagues and friends that read drafts and provided helpful comments, we would like to especially thank Mathias Albert, Ulrich Franke, Klaus Dingwerth, Thomas Müller, and Mara Pillinger. We are grateful to our research assistant Danielle Lopez-Cecetaite for her support, and we would like to thank the anonymous reviewers and the editors for their helpful and thought-provoking comments.

[134]See Kistner 2012; Cleland 2015, 48.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1752971920000676 Published online by Cambridge University Press