Three lions ate my shirt

Mark Perryman

Beyond the din of the vuvuzelas what was the impact of World Cup 2010?

> Nelson Mandela, Desmond Tutu, Table Mountain, Zola Budd, Ladysmith Black Mambazo, er, Kevin Pietersen, wildebeest, Ernie Els, Jacob Zuma, giraffes, Charlize Theron, springboks, Jody Scheckter and that girl runner who looks like a bloke … GET DE BEERS IN
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> *Sun*, 10 September 2009

From the moment that Wayne Rooney put the fifth and final goal past the opposition keeper to complete England's 5-1 defeat of Croatia - and to clinch World Cup qualification - the banter about South Africa began. Within days the *Sun*'s shopping list of clichés had been joined by murkier tales of spiralling murder and armed robbery rates, uncompleted stadia, the risk of catching AIDs, and the grinding poverty that would leave the local population resentful at best and vengeful at worst. This was a land where those of us who wear the three lions on our chest might just catch a glimpse of the threesome in the real world. But the wildlife, the landscape, the culture and history - as well as the not insignificant fact that South Africa had recently successfully hosted the cricket world cup, rugby world cup and the 2009 British Lions tour - earned scarcely a mention.

Steve Bloomfield was one of the few journalists to go against this flow of bad-news stories, and to try to unpick why they were being written:

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> Like so much coverage of South Africa, stereotypes can easily take over. Wars and humanitarian crises get far more exposure than stories about economic growth, technological advances and stability. The West's view of Africa is still seen through the prism of tragedy, meaning the story of Africa's first World Cup is read with a certain amount of cynicism. How could a continent that can't feed itself, is ruled by despots and always at war host one of the world's largest events?[1]

When the South African neo-nazi Eugene Terre'Blanche was murdered, the *Daily Star* front page screamed out 'WORLD CUP FANS FACE BLOODBATH - RACE WAR DECLARED IN SOUTH AFRICA'. The group Terre'Blanche had led, the Afrikaner Resistance Movement (AWB), is a particularly nasty but very tiny outfit, and the idea that they could seriously threaten an event on the scale of a World Cup, or that the South African government would allow them to do so, was a sensationalist fantasy. It was bit like giving mass coverage to a threat by the racist streetfighters of the English Defence League to wage 'war' on Muslim athletes at the London Olympics - and the Iranian press then proclaiming it was no longer safe for their team and its supporters to attend.

The fans who followed England to South Africa were in the main experienced away travellers. We'd visited Belarus, the Ukraine and Kazakhstan in the course of the 2010 qualifying campaign. Belarus remains Europe's last communist dictatorship; Dnipropetrovsk, where the game against the Ukraine was played, usually receives only a handful of tourists from England a year; and Kazakhstan had previously only meant anything to most of us thanks to its make-believe ambassador Borat. These are places fans visit with a mixture of eager excitement and careful caution. Unmarked taxis, visiting parts of town you know nothing about, being offered late night drinks from mysterious ladies for no obvious reason - these are the kinds of episodes we are used to being warned against. So why should South Africa be so different for us?

A month or so before we flew out I invited a panel of South Africans to address a fans' World Cup travel forum. What fears should we have about crime, state infrastructure and personal safety? And inevitably the issue of the AWB threats came up. Audrey Brown, a South African journalist currently working for the BBC World Service, took a look around our crowd of mainly white faces. 'I don't think any of

you are going to be victims of a white supremacist race war, are you?' Immediately, we couldn't for the life of us think why we, and the media, had taken the threats seriously in the first place.

As well as all the popular misconceptions about darkest Africa, fans had to contend with the more familiar problems of FIFA's corporate vision, in which fans have only a walk-on part at a World Cup. For FIFA there was not much question of any celebration of South African heritage and culture: it was more about persuading us to travel to the other side of the world to drink Budweiser, eat Big Macs and watch Lady Ga-Ga on the big screen, while staying within the officially sanctioned Fan Parks and ring of steel zones around the stadia. Philosophy Football organised a send-off party to challenge this approach. At our party we drank South African beer, ate South African food and immersed ourselves in a night of South African music, comedy and dance. This was a only a small gesture against the homogenising blandness of FIFA culture, but it nevertheless chimed in with millions more in South Africa, who joined together to 'Fick Fufa', as the locals rather wonderfully put it.

Teams and nations

Forty-eight hours before South Africa took on Mexico in the World Cup's opening match, the Johannesburg suburb of Sandton hosted a gathering called 'United We Stand', which featured an open-top bus parade by the South African team. Such a parade usually takes place after a team has lifted a trophy, not before they've even kicked their first ball. But in South Africa they do things differently. The organisers had expected a crowd of 50,000, but in the end around 185,000 turned out. In the midst of all this is I met up with England fan Dave Thompson (who had been to our party) and his partner Yazz:

> We thought we'd drive but gave up with the huge traffic jams so we walked. For miles around it was one amazing party. We got caught up in these parties of school children, but it wasn't just kids, it seemed like everybody had taken the day off. All wearing a yellow Bafana Bafana shirt. First time we heard the vuvuzelas too. We finally reached where the team bus was supposed to be passing by, surrounded by the most incredible atmosphere. Blacks, whites and those still called

> in South Africa 'coloureds'. In our England shirts plenty of the locals wanted to chat with us, the people were so friendly, full of anticipation and excitement.

And the team bus? 'It finally passed by three hours late. But who cares, all that mattered to the people around us was that the World Cup is coming to their country, and they still couldn't quite believe it.'

Jo'burg DJ General S'bu had also been at our party, filling the dance floor with his selection of sounds. After leaving Sandton I caught up with him on his home turf, a café in the neighbouring suburb Melville. The General described to me what joining us to play at our party represented: 'The pleasure of the World Cup is its moment of common humanity'. I asked him how this connected to the intense national pride I'd just witnessed in Sandton, where people were succumbing to Bafana Bafana fever in their tens of thousands. The General admitted an uneasiness: 'The flag of the ANC, yes, that's a symbol of resistance. But a national flag, that's something I'm more uneasy with - including my own. These are symbols of exclusion, they are parochial, part of an ordering of our emotions into a hierarchy of loyalties.' So far, so familiar. For years I've been having this kind of argument with leftists in England, whenever I've championed what I call a 'soft patriotism', a divorcing of pride from the prejudice it has too often dragged along in its wake. But in South Africa there is another dimension to the argument that shouldn't be lightly dismissed. South Africa has been forced to craft a new identity from the legacy of Apartheid, a regime which only came to an end some sixteen years before. The General had a neat way of summing up how this process is represented by the rainbow nation's pennant - which would be draped, waved and worn the length and breadth of the country in the coming weeks. 'Our flag? It's a compromise, a cut and paste job'. For The General and many of his generation who grew up before apartheid crumbled, the symbols of resistance and rebellion still inspire a loyalty that their new flag has yet to attract.

Issues of identity and exclusive national pride were also raised in other ways by South Africa's hosting of the cup. 2010 was of course celebrated as Africa's first hosting of the World Cup, but another first scarcely earned a mention: this was also the first World Cup to be held in a former outpost of the British Empire. OK there was USA '94, but their independence had been fought for and won way back in 1776 (and in any case England didn't qualify for the USA tournament so it doesn't count for much in my book.) Though there is no empire left nowadays, *Times* columnist Simon Barnes

suggests that for the English football acts as a kind of surrogate:

> Football is the last empire. In every other walk of life, we have reluctantly come to the conclusion that we no longer rule the world. Football is the one area in which the supremacy of our nation and our culture is taken for granted. In every other sport, in every other aspect of life, we are prepared to admit the superiority of others. But in football we still, quite seriously, expect to win everything.[2]

Of course as Simon goes on to point out, this superiority complex isn't based on any achievement, or indeed much ability on the pitch, but our overblown expectations do on occasion contribute to a continuing sense of English self importance. This is aided and abetted by the extraordinary interest in the England team around the world - not because we've actually won anything in 44 years but because of the global televised popularity of the English Premiership.

So perhaps I shouldn't have been so surprised what the England 'end' looked like at our first game (versus the USA). As I looked around I had never seen such a multicultural crowd of fans. There were hundreds of black faces, and lots of Asian ones too, including a group of lads wearing their 'South African Muslims welcome the World Cup' baseball caps. It was at this point of course that I realised that these were locals who tonight were here to support my team. (And there was no problem with this with our fans: after all, as Robert Green's hapless goalkeeping would shortly reveal, we were going to need all the support we could get.) I found myself sitting next to a young Asian guy, so I thanked him for his countrymen's support. Mrinal looked at me blankly before proudly explaining that he wasn't from South Africa, he was from Calcutta! So how had he ended up supporting England? 'World Cup 2002, Beckham's penalty against Argentina. Everything about that goal drew me to football, and to becoming an England fan.' Not such an easy ambition where Mrinal was growing up: almost all Bengali fans - who are unusual in India for taking their football seriously - back Brazil in the World Cup. For Mrinal it was Beckham that had been original appeal. 'Of course I'd heard what a great player he was at Man Utd but it was when I saw him in an England shirt that I felt I wanted to be part of this.' And four years later Mrinal had come to England to study for his A-levels, where his term started just after England's first match at the new Wembley Stadium, ironically versus Brazil. 'It was a dream come true. I went to the game and when

I was there I picked up a membership form for the England Supporters Club. I joined the next day.' Over the next two years he didn't miss a home game, including the misery of the Euro 2008 qualifying campaign. 'November 2007, the defeat to Croatia, that was the low point. But the experience also taught me how much my football, your England, had come to matter to me too.' Mrinal grew up in Calcutta, finished his schooling in London, goes to University in New York and has travelled to South Africa to support my, and now his, England (although he does remind me, 'Of course if we were playing cricket there'd be no such choice').

The worldwide appeal of our domestic game can inspire the kind of imperial mentality that Simon Barnes describes. But globalisation is very often a two-way process, and it also affects our own sense of belonging. When England failed to qualify for Euro 2008 the *Sun* - in the search for sales - still published a special pullout guide to the tournament. It was headlined 'England's Finest - Who Said We Won't Be There!', and carried a montage of English Premiership stars from Portugal, France, Germany, Holland and most of the other teams. In its own way, this can be seen as part of the blurring of the boundaries of a 'hard' nationalism that is founded exclusively on keeping out those it has decided don't belong.

Of course a key element in any brand of nationalism - whether the hardened version or the softer, inclusive kind I prefer - will always be race. Shortly before the World Cup Gary Younge wrote about what supporting the team means for a new generation of black England fans. 'Supporting England is a no-brainer because English football looks more or less like the England they inhabit.'[3] And he added a poignant political afterthought: 'Unlike boardrooms or the government, it is one in which they have seen that they have a reasonable chance of succeeding.' Racism can never be separated from the power which constructs it. And South Africa's recent history is a constant reminder of this.

The team a nation puts on a pitch will often tell us a lot about the country they come from. The 1966 World Cup Final remains English football's fondest moment, but 1966 was anything but glorious for South African football, which was banned from the tournament when they entered an all-white team, selected under Apartheid's rules of racial segregation. It was inconceivable that a black player could play in the same team as a white one, let alone represent his country. For entirely different reasons the victorious England team was exclusively white too. The changes that have produced today's multicultural team and supporters have been less

painfully achieved than the bigger changes in South Africa, but have nevertheless been momentous for all of us.

Remembrance

The Cup took place a remarkably short time after the country's first free and democratic elections - which were held just sixteen years ago. Who could have imagined as we danced and protested two decades ago that such rapid change was remotely possible? And the long struggle against apartheid is something we were reminded of when a group of England fans met up with some school students from Lilydale Primary School in Soweto. The children we were meeting remember the struggle only too well. Decked out in their Bafana Bafana colours, they couldn't wait for their team's game that evening, but they were taking time out to teach us a little of what the Soweto Uprising of 1976 still meant to them. When I'd described to the British Council's Cape Town Director the kind of 'fan-friendly' activities which England fans organise on many away trips she smiled knowingly before insisting:

> Sounds good, but please don't just turn up on a bus, all kitted out in your shirts, dish out your gifts and drive off again. We are too used to that in South Africa. We want to be able to give too, for this to be a two-way exchange, for you to receive and learn about us, rather than you turning up to tell us about your team and country.

Learning was exactly what we were doing gathered in front of Soweto's Hector Pieterson statue. 'Hector Pieterson was shot on this corner, he fell and was carried by one of his schoolmates,' one of the students told us. Hector was shot dead, fifteen others too, protesting for the right to study. 'I have a family member who was shot dead that day. The white cops came here, shooting and killing the children.' To hear these children retell that history was almost impossibly moving. '1994 was the year of freedom. That was when South Africa became free. So we say as children born after 1994 we were born free.' They shout that last sentence in unison, cheer and laugh. In response I found myself choking back the tears as I read out the squad names that, under Apartheid, Fabio Capello would have had to cross off his team sheet for England's game the following day. 'No David James. No Ashley Cole and Glenn Johnson. No Ledley King. No Aaron Lennon or Shaun Wright-Philips. No

Emile Heskey, Jermaine Defoe. Nothing to do with injuries, loss of form or tactics, just the colour of their skin.' We've come to South Africa to enjoy ourselves, but having a good time doesn't have to mean forgetfulness. And I'll never forget the morning the World Cup opened, when the children of Soweto taught some of us what their history means to them, and should mean to us.

The history of South Africa was unavoidable as fans criss-crossed the country following England from match to match. On the road to Cape Town we had a lunchtime stop in a place in the middle of nowhere called 'Britstown'. A couple of days was spent in Kimberley, once the site of a famous Anglo-Boer War siege, and further down the road we stayed in Matjiesfontein in the Karoo. This was a remote spot, with a railway station and a hotel - the Lord Milner. Named for the British leader at the time of the Boer wars, the hotel was built in the late nineteenth century by the Scot James Logan, and is rich today in Empire Kitsch.

In Cape Town we visited a more recent site, one which during the 1980s entered the popular lexicon as part of what South Africa had come to mean to the outside world - Robben Island. This was a place many fans would want to visit ahead of our next game, versus Algeria, and of course the incarceration of so many people in this hateful place is of great historical significance and worthy of remembrance. But it is also connected to the football we've travelled to South Africa to watch. Few could fail to make this link after meeting Chuck Korr, co-author of the book *More Than Just a Game*.[4] This is the extraordinary tale of the football association, Makana FA, which the inmates of Robben Island formed during their imprisonment - complete with league and cup competitions, relegation and promotion, referees' committee and all the other paraphernalia our game demands.

As soon as I had finished reading the book I contacted Chuck with an idea. Chuck listened, but he was also slightly bemused. 'I was both inspired and puzzled. I was so pleased that you England fans had understood what the story was all about. But I was puzzled what you might do with it. I didn't really know where you were coming from.' Over the next few months Chuck got to know us better, and the plan unfolded. With the Makana FA story as our focus, we would fill a ferry with a hundred fans the day before the Algeria game; we would visit Robben Island with some of those involved with football in the prison, and on the pitch that they had built after years of opposition from the prison regime, we would present them with the honorary Makana FA kits which we had specially designed for them. As the

boat left the dock Chuck was able to look around and see the motley crew of fans we had assembled to pack out the ferry to capacity, from all different backgrounds and inclinations, yet all very proud to be making our bit of history. Joining us were former prisoners Lionel Davis and Sedick Isaacs. As Lionel patiently recounted for us what life had been like on the island, there was no danger that the story of him and his mates playing football would somehow transform the oppressive prison regime into some kind of penal holiday camp. As we listened in respectful silence none of us would make that gross error. They had to campaign for years, and face opposition and disappointment over and over again, for something that we would take for granted. The right to kick a football, organise a team, wear their colours, mark out a pitch. For Chuck this is what is so special about the Makana story, and on that day he saw for himself how it helped us as fans to make the connections. 'The fans I spoke to crossing over, they told me how much they were looking forward to being on the island. But these weren't any ordinary tourists. They were fans, to them football really matters. They'd come to South Africa for the football, and they understood why this sport mattered so much to those locked up by the Apartheid government too.' Chuck described why it mattered. 'Playing football became a way of persevering, to keep their dignity, preserving the ideals for which they'd been locked up.' At the end of the trip we presented Lionel and Sedick with their shirts. We'd designed an FA crest for Makana too, and underneath, where 'England vs Algeria' and the match date would be embroidered on the shirts of Rooney and the team the following night, we had sewn 'Football vs Apartheid, 1969-1990'.

A good number of England fans took in this detour across the short stretch of the ocean to Robben Island on route to our game against the Algerians. What we learnt there about the prisoners' battle with the violently racist regime that South Africa once was will stick in our memories, I suspect, a whole lot longer than England's pitifully poor 0-0 draw in Cape Town.

Ten years previously Euro 2000 had been marred by a significant number of English supporters spoiling the party for everybody else with their thuggery. At the time the football fanzine *When Saturday Comes* made a spot-on observation of a more positive development underway at the tournament: 'It now seems there is a distinct travelling fan culture developing which has little to do with the numbing nationalism of England's hooligan and sub-hooligan followers.'[5] No self-respecting England fan would welcome the idea that we're becoming a 'bit Scottish', with our

liking for the trips and never mind the football. Our pride in the team, without the once almost obligatory prejudice, still expects. But that hasn't stopped the significant growth of a fan culture situated around travel developing either. In a world of global corporate sponsors we try to engage with the specificity of the places we visit, and to develop a different kind of internationalism.

After Cape Town came Port Elizabeth and the 1-0 victory England scraped over group rivals Slovenia. Qualification for the knock out stages was secured, and hopes briefly raised. And then dashed in spectacular fashion in Bloemfontein, with a 4-1 thrashing at the hands of the Germans. But then if you're an England fan you have had plenty of time to learn to live with disappointment. Glory hunters? Not bloody likely. The sheer depth of the dismal performances this time round might finally begin to lift the burden of expectation. It will be a long time surely before hopes are raised enough to believe that England are really capable of competing with the best.

But there were many compensations. In a Johannesburg art gallery, an exhibition entitled *Halakasha* (a traditional chant in South Africa when a goal has been scored) carried some words which summed up the sentiment many would carry home. Describing the very particular impact of football, Prishani Naidoo wrote, in the book accompanying the exhibition: 'The field of play it produces stretches far beyond the boundaries of its goal posts and pitches - fields of play that sometimes bring into question the "taken-for-granted", "the natural", the ways in which "we are meant" to be in society.'[6] For many this was the core of our World Cup experience in South Africa, providing us with a different way to consume our football.

But that's us. What was the story for South Africa? Two reports in the *The Star*, Jo'burg's paper, the day after the final, gave a hint of what the country had gained. The South African flag was now the most recognised flag in the world. The crime rate at the tournament had been the lowest in the World Cup's history. Hundreds of thousands of football fans from all over the world, accompanied by the global media, had come to South Africa expecting the worst and were leaving overwhelmingly impressed by the country and its people. No advertising campaign could have ever afforded South Africa the 30-day, 24-hour, worldwide coverage that the World Cup had provided. In a hugely mediated globalised economy South Africa had acquired something of huge financial worth and political significance. Of course it shouldn't take football to achieve this, and we won't know for years to come whether the scale of the investment required will pay for itself. But for that moment as we boarded

our planes, most of us overtaken by Bafana Bafana fever, we knew we'd never be the same again - and quite possibly South Africa won't either.

Mark Perryman organised, in association with the Tourism Enterprise Partnership of South Africa, a fans' coach tour of World Cup 2010, involving close to a hundred people. He is author of *Ingerland: Travels with a Football Nation*, and editor of *Imagined Nation: England after Britain* and *Breaking up Britain: Four Nations after a Union*. He is a part-time Research Fellow in sport and leisure culture at The Chelsea School, University of Brighton, and the co-founder of Philosophy Football.

Notes

1. Steve Bloomfield, 'Football needs to tackle its stereotyping', *Independent*, 6.12.09.

2. Simon Barnes, 'England remain in fantasy football land', *Times*, 7.9.09.

3. Gary Younge, 'How I finally learned to cheer for England', *New Statesman*, 7.6.10.

4. Chuck Korr and Marvin Close, *More Than Just a Game*, Collins 2009.

5. Editorial, 'All or Nothing', in *When Saturday Comes*, August 2000.

6. Prishani Naidoo, 'A Field of Play', in Fiona Rankin-Smith (ed), *Halakaska!* Wits Arts Museum, Johannesburg 2010.