

Socrates, Corinthians, and Democracy

by Matthew Shirts

Before I am charged with unfair labeling, let me make clear that I am talking not about ancient Greece but 20th-century Brazil. The Corinthians under discussion rarely, if ever, travel by boat, and this particular Sócrates, while given to philosophizing, is a popular soccer player.

"Corinthian Democracy," to come directly to the point, refers to a political movement conceived by team administrators and soccer players in an attempt to alter the management/labor relations of the "Corinthians," a club in São Paulo, Brazil's great southern industrial city. The movement seized headlines for the first time in 1982, on the eve of elections for the club presidency. It did so because of the soccer stars involved and also because of certain resemblances between the club's internal politics and the larger Brazilian political arena.

Two tickets, "Order and Truth" and "Corinthian Democracy," competed for the presidency of the Corinthians, an office that one of its former holders described as the "third most important position in the country, after the governorship of São Paulo and the presidency of the Republic."

The significance of the contest was clear from the start. "Corinthian Democracy," the incumbent faction, was in harmony with the movement of political liberalization—*abertura*—that had recently begun to assert itself in Brazil. It stood for new forms of team administration involving players, administrators, and even fans. "Order and Truth" stood for the old sys-

tem of oligarchical control, with power concentrated in the hands of a few entrenched administrators. Its candidate was the soccer *caudillo* and former club president, Vicente Matheus. The soccer magazine *Placar* aptly described the contest as a battle between "liberalization and heavy handedness, efficiency and paternalism, new times and old methods . . ."

Corinthians was in principle governed by club members: They elected a body of counselors, who in turn selected the administrators. But the resulting regime was less democratic than it sounds. The positions were usually given to wealthy businessmen who had made hefty contributions to the club. Once in power, these *cartolas*, or "top hats," tended to stay in power—and not for altruistic reasons. The *cartolas* used their positions of influence to forge alliances with leaders in the military, the judicial system, and the government. Laudo Natel, to cite one example, skillfully made his way from the presidency of the São Paulo Futebol Club to the governorship of São Paulo.

It is clear, then, that much was at stake in the 1982 club elections, and the opposing sides knew it. Paying for television and radio ads, T-shirts, caps, and musical groups, they together ran up a campaign bill of about (U.S.) \$500,000. Several team players openly announced their support for the Democracy ticket. They backed Waldemar Pires for president and sociologist Adílson Monteiro Avles (one of the theoreticians of the movement) for director.

Sócrates, a lanky, bearded medical doctor, captain of Brazil's 1982 World Cup team, and the Corinthians's star player, issued a stern ultimatum: He would retire from soccer if "Order and Truth" won.

Corinthian fans could soon breathe easily. Democracy won. And the victory had consequences well beyond the soccer stadium. Corinthians suddenly appeared in the forefront of national politics alongside unions, opposition parties, and other independent organizations that, since the late 1970s, had been working for political liberalization. Even two years after the club election, the *corintianos* were actively participating in the campaign for free national elections.

How did a club election come to mean so much to the political life of a big, sprawling, heterogeneous society?

The answer, of course, lies in the significance of soccer to the Brazilian people. As numerous scholars have observed, the game is not only the premier sport in Brazil; it is, unlike other sports (with the possible exception of *capoeira*, a mixture of fight and dance), a vital part of the pervasive popular culture that emerged in Brazilian cities around the turn of the century. Indeed, *futebol* is as important an element as carnival, Afro-Brazilian religions, popular music, and Catholicism.

A statement made by Sócrates in February 1983 gives some idea of what Corinthian Democracy was all about: "I'm struggling for freedom, for respect, for ample and unrestricted discussions, for a professional democratization . . . and all of this as a soccer player, preserving the lucid and pleasurable nature of this activity."

Sócrates's vision of the nature and possibilities of Brazilian soccer may sound like a student slogan from Paris, 1968. But it is less an intellectual's manifesto than the expression of a popular attitude—playful, spontaneous, free-wheeling, and democratic. Originating among Brazilian

workers, this attitude also includes a healthy dose of contempt for coercive labor—and for those who profit from it.

"The sphere of labor," writes Gilberto Vasconcellos, "projects itself over Brazilian popular music as a powerful *inverted image*; the systematic and radical negation of values elevated into a positive light by work became the preferred poetic theme of our popular composers in the twenties and thirties—one of the richest and most notable periods in Brazilian popular music." Popular composers celebrated the figure of the *malandro*, a bohemian rascal of folklore who, with *savoir faire*, moves between the spheres of "order" and "disorder" in Brazilian society, taking advantage of the breaches in both: "Mommy I don't want/Mommy I don't want/ to work from sun up to sun down./I want to be a singer on the radio/a soccer player . . ."

To the dark poverty of lower-class life, the urban underclasses brought the joy and sensuality of dance, the irreverence of carnival, and the ambivalent, sometimes tragic life of the *malandro*. And soccer, although a game of the urban elite in turn-of-the-century Brazil, quickly became incorporated in this opposition culture. By 1933, the year the game was professionalized in Brazil, everything about it, from style of play to deportment of fans, had changed. The overall aesthetic had gone from gentlemanly and controlled to spontaneous and carnivalesque.

On the field, for instance, the change gave rise to a new sort of player—acrobatic, elastic, full of unexpected moves, elegant, and individualistic. Players such as Leonidas in the thirties and forties, Garrincha in the fifties and sixties, and Pelé in the fifties, sixties, and seventies exemplified the acrobatic "happy" style. Such players made the game into a celebration of fun and irreverence. Pelé lightly kicking the ball over a defender's head and running past him to receive it himself; Garrincha, his team ahead 3-0, dribbling

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past three opponents, obliging the goalie to make a leap and fall flat on his face, then waiting for the enemy fullback to arrive in order to dribble around him and only then tapping the ball into the goal—this was the popular Brazilian style. Covering the World Cup in 1982 for *The New Yorker*, Alastair Reid observed that “Brazil’s whole play seemed more instinct than design, and it was clear the Brazilians relished playing the game—an impression that came all too rarely in the Mundial.”

The Corinthian Democracy movement heartily embraced the style of the popular Brazilian soccer tradition, emphasizing the playful aspect of the game as well as the players’ right to control their own lives. It did away with the pre-game “confinement,” brought beer into the locker room, and made it a matter of policy that what players did on their own time was their own and not the club’s business. Rejecting the moralism of earlier generations of soccer stars, Sócrates and Casagrande, for example, gave interviews in bars, revealed their taste for a *cervejinha* or two, and ex-

plained that they really enjoyed smoking cigarettes.

Apart from its own inherent interest, however, the novelty of Corinthian Democracy reanimates an old scholarly controversy about the place of soccer in Brazilian society. On one side are those scholars who attack the soccer mania as an opiate of the people. The intense interest generated by the game, and the equally intense popular identification with the various clubs, only succeed, they say, in keeping the attention of the masses turned from more serious matters, above all their economic and political plight. On the other side are the scholars who exalt the game: They say that it strengthens the cultural bonds that hold the nation together.

Corinthian Democracy, on the surface at least, challenges both points of view. It does so because even though it unified people (fans, players, and administrators), it unified them in a democratic movement defiant of the authoritarian, even dictatorial, order of the Brazilian



Sócrates (left), shown here in a 1986 practice scrimmage, displays the exuberant Brazilian style that has brought his country three World Cup soccer championships.

state. But was Corinthian Democracy merely the exception that proves the rule? History provides some clues to the answer.

The government's response to Brazil's World Cup championship in 1970 shows that soccer can indeed be used as a form of social manipulation. General Emilio Médici's government (1969-74), the most repressive in the history of the dictatorship that was installed in 1964, went to great lengths to reap the political benefits of the national team's victory. Médici declared a national holiday, received the team in Brasília, and rewarded each player with the equivalent of (U.S.) \$18,500, tax free. Shortly after the victory, he announced, "I identify this victory, achieved in the fraternity of sport, with ascension of faith in our struggle for national development."

The regime used the victory for more than propaganda purposes, however. After 1970, it began to remake the national team in its own image. Captain Claudio Coutinho was given the task of "modernizing" the Brazilian style of play, an effort that bore many similarities with the military efforts to "modernize" the Brazilian economy. Modernization of soccer translated into an emphasis on discipline and obedience at the expense of improvisation, on teamwork rather than individual expression, physical force instead of art, imported technological jargon instead of popular wisdom. Coutinho made a point of turning away players who resisted this dull and authoritarian style, players such as Paulo César Caju, Marinho, Serginho, and others. Coutinho, observed one Brazilian writer, went so far as to define the dribble "our specialty, as 'a waste of time and proof of our weakness.'"

Given the success of Brazilian soccer in the fifties, sixties, and seventies, the government's program seems particularly perverse. After all, by 1970, Brazil had won three of the four previous World Cup crowns and Pelé was internationally recognized as the best player in the history of the game. But the government, clearly uncomfortable with "samba soccer" and its emphasis on improvisation, individual effort, and irreverence, did its level best to reform the game.

For their part, leftist intellectuals de-

nounced the nationalistic propaganda that surrounded the 1970 World Cup, some even going so far as to root against the Brazilian squad. As one of my Brazilian friends said at the time: "The cheers of the fans drown out the screams of the torture victims." Even from a more moderate perspective, the sociologist Janet Lever observed that soccer during the Médici period facilitated national integration and buttressed the dictatorships.

Finally, however, neither the criticism from the Left nor the reform efforts of the military could kill the game—or, for that matter, alter its underlying popular ethos. And at least one thing that this failure suggests is that popular identification with soccer is a more complex matter than either the "opium of the people" thesis or the "national integration" theory suggest. True, an opinion poll taken in 1970 showed that 90 percent of Brazil's lower classes identified soccer with the nation. But the question remains: What nation?

The creation of national identity in Brazil is, as many scholars have pointed out, a very different business from what national identity means in North American and European nations. The Brazilian anthropologist Roberto Da Matta has argued that the most powerful sources of social identity are not "institutions central to the social order, such as laws, the constitution, the university, the financial order, etc.," but rather the various manifestations of popular culture, including carnival, soccer, and popular religiosity. There is, of course, as Da Matta says, a continual effort by Brazilian officialdom to create a social identity that incorporates notions of the civic order, and to some extent it has succeeded. Nevertheless, there remain in Brazil many social identities; and those created by popular culture seldom converge with those created by official institutions.

Seen in this light, then, the Médici government's keen interest in overhauling soccer during the early 1970s was an attempt to merge the separate identities—a moderately successful attempt at best. Seen by the same light, Corinthian Democracy was an effort to keep them as far apart as possible. Indeed, Corinthian Democracy drew on the unofficial, supposedly less serious side of Brazilian culture to for-

mulate a critique of the country's authoritarian regime: the all-too-serious side.

Corinthian Democracy was, to be sure, the offspring of the political liberalization that began in the late 1970s. *Abertura* was in turn the product of a crisis of legitimacy brought on by the collapse of the Brazilian "economic miracle," financial scandal, growing foreign debt, and inflation. Without prosperity, Brazil's military regime had, quite simply, little legitimate claim to leadership. And labor unions, professional organizations, church communities, and other associations were quick to voice their discontent.

In addition to calling for increased political participation, the opposition parties of *abertura* posed a question as yet unresolved: the basis and character of national citizenship. "Who are we?" books and articles by Brazilian authors repeatedly asked.

Corinthian Democracy offered an implicit answer: A country of soccer fans and players. To an extent, of course, this was nothing new. For decades, large segments of Brazilian society had found a collective identity in soccer and the way it was played in the country. The specific contribution of Corinthian Democracy, however, was to legitimate what had been unofficial, taking advantage of the carnivalesque atmosphere of club elections to do so.

Corinthian Democracy reached its peak at the April 1984 free-election rally in São Paulo. The rally was held just a few days before the scheduled Congressional vote on the constitutional amendment to re-establish free elections in the nation. Sócrates, speaking before some 500,000 people, pledged that, if the amendment passed, he would refuse a million-dollar offer to play in Italy and stay in Brazil to participate in the rebuilding of democracy. His gesture was criticized as demagogic, but it was absolutely consistent with the spirit of Corinthian Democracy.

As things turned out, the free-election

amendment did not pass. Sócrates went on to play in Florence, where he spent part of his time auditing political science classes. Casagrande, another symbol of Corinthian Democracy, was lent to the São Paulo Futebol Club. He watched the Corinthians lose to Santos in the final game of the São Paulo championship in 1984; the television cameras picked him out in the stands, crying amidst the crowd.

Corinthian Democracy seemed to fade into the background after the defeat of the free-elections campaign, but in fact it had a lasting effect on sports and politics in São Paulo and in Brazil. The example of the Corinthians inspired other teams throughout the country to participate in the free-election campaign. And even though their combined efforts failed to win the day, they did help to alter the political climate in Brazil. This change would lead, in 1985, to the end of the military regime and the restoration of civilian government.

As a byproduct, Corinthian Democracy forced intellectuals who had been skeptical of the game's influence to look at it in a different way. Far from functioning as a mere opiate, *futebol* had invaded politics, the traditional terrain of elites. Doing so, it revealed an autonomy in relation to political life that had been denied or overlooked by scholars. If Corinthian Democracy helped unify people around the game of soccer, it did so in ways contrary to the desires of the top hats and generals.

Social analysts who ignore the specific content of popular culture by reducing it to a mere prop of economic and political arrangements make a serious mistake. Corinthian Democracy was able to use the subversive, populist spirit of Brazilian soccer to criticize the dominant political order precisely because its adherents did not make the same error.

And also because Sócrates, Casagrande, Wladimir & Co. played great soccer.