

Editorial:

Under the Lens: South Africa and the FIFA Soccer World Cup 2010'

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This edition intentionally called for a critique of the 2010 World Cup event, as well as FIFA's politics and the mark this moment would leave on the South African terrain. However, far from being simply a passage to enunciate the obvious shortcomings of the entire operation, this edition evolved so as to offer insights into how the event could be considered, within the socio-economic real as well as within discourses around Africa and South Africa. Such an edition responds therefore to South Africa's role as the 2010 host nation and the core issues that the event brought to the public domain.

The atmosphere around the World Cup event in South Africa was fevered. On a structural level, the event called for huge developments in urban infrastructure, transport and tourism and promised great returns. The country and world awaited the arrival of some of the greatest names in sport into Africa, and citizens held their breaths in anticipation of an extended period of mid year celebration. There was most definitely a feeling of pride here, and South Africans seem to be united in a way unseen these past fifteen years. This moment in some ways appeared to signify a chance for the country and continent to project a positive and powerful public image to the rest of the world.

However, as the time of the games neared, critics began to question the real sustainable effects of the event and the development it would bring, criticising the quick fix clean up strategies of the state and local government as well as the nation building narratives used to generate support for mass state expenditure in relatively superficial areas. Strong debates circulated around how the event would actually affect this country and its citizens. Dissidents questioned the ability of the state and FIFA to alleviate the plight of the masses, something it claimed it could or would do. Indeed, for many in the country, the World Cup

exposed the double standards of government, who still continue to ignore massive class inequalities and have yet to funnel much needed funds and attention into key sectors like education and health, even after the World Cup. Some complex questions came to light during the preceding weeks: what would be the real benefits of the FIFA World Cup, and what would happen once it is over? Could South Africa really use this opportunity to shift global perceptions about Africa and African cultures and societies? Or, would we stand the risk of entrenching many of the stereotypes that persist in the global public imagination?

The debate became increasingly polemical when outside media scrutinised South Africa's capability to host the World Cup. Factors that seemed to test our credibility as a host nation included our lack of certain supposed "world class" infrastructural resources (such as 'first world' transport systems), high levels of crime and general political instability. The global recession also contributed towards some of the questions confronting South Africa as it endeavoured to prove its worth in winning the World Cup bid for 2010. These apprehensions of failure created an atmosphere where a number of the country's critics became vocal in their defence of the games and South Africa's capacity to host them well. The skepticism about the upcoming event was seen to be drawing from and reinforcing many of the troublesome narratives around how Africa is economically and politically unfit for competing on the world stage. Critical attitudes from the global frontier generated a reaction in the local public domain. It became more than just South Africa's World Cup being defended: now it was Africa itself, the sign and the symbol, and everything it epitomised.

Into the fray came renowned critics, Achille Mbembe, head of the Institute for Social and Economic Research at The University of the Witwatersrand, whose essay, ' Soccer World Cup: where is the Moral Argument? (2010) evoked these complexities and incited *postamble* to tailor an issue around the World Cup. For Mbembe, there was tremendous potential in the World Cup to help recreate the 'sign' of Africa: if executed successfully, Africa would display a capacity to work to international standards, to act cohesively and with confidence, which in

turn could challenge the pervading negative perceptions about Africa and its peoples. The overriding importance of the World Cup, for Mbembe, was not its economic potential but its symbolic significance as a moment in African history that event could act towards remedying Africa's tainted reputation as the eternally 'intractable... otherworldly [and] mute.'¹ In this essays he suggests that,

...if we cannot win on the soccer field and if our victory won't be economic and financial, then we better start thinking hard about changing the very terms of what it means to win at all...Our victory can only be a cultural and moral victory. We will win the 2010 Soccer World Cup if we organize it in such a way that it powerfully contributes to changing the terms of Africa's recognition in the world.²

However, *postamble* asks, is this enough to actually reshape the way Africa is perceived throughout the rest of the world? While Mbembe's observations are astute and powerful, in order to achieve a sustainable and meaningful re-imagining of Africa through the World Cup, certain glaring discrepancies, briefly outlined above, would have had to be ignored—which unless one deliberately turned a blind eye, is an impossible feat. Ironically perhaps, South African state bodies, FIFA and their cronies, in their haste to meet the expectations of the international community, bulldozed their way towards the finish line and incited strong objections to the hopeful projections of what the games could bring. And, the rationalisation of mass expenditure of state money despite continuing to ignore the basic needs of the masses, FIFA's "iron fist" engagement with this country and the manner in which South Africa was responding to the regulations and obligatory changes expected in order to host the event "successfully" exposed some of the deeply problematic aspects of the World Cup presence in the country. One should also not ignore the fact that FIFA and the World Cup are, at the core, neo-liberal, commercialised western outfits: the very elements which have continued to relegate Africa to its place on the margins of the 'modern' world. Even though powerful metaphors of the African renaissance and the rainbow nation were deployed to boost morale and create a sense of national cohesion, these narratives became inseparable from the problematic rhetoric of the World Cup and its apologists. While many South

Africans may have tapped easily into these narratives, we at *postamble* see the event as signalling a crisis, where the serious flaws that we have witnessed in this postapartheid moment have been ignored in the scramble leading up to the event, and within these narratives themselves.

Now that the event has passed, although many are still giddy from the tourism boom and grand flash of the World Cup moment, one wonders just how much of a real difference this event has made in (South) Africa. For a country and continent that is sorely in need of economic and political stability, poverty alleviation and sustainable solutions to centuries of difficulty, the question is, has the FIFA World Cup actually contributed in a positive way to the hard and real issues? Mbembe may be right: by showing the world that (South) Africa can successfully host a mega event such as this, the 'sign' of Africa can in fact begin to become reconfigured. However, it is more realistic to propose that the country and continent remains untouched in a lasting way. In South Africa, the Rand may be stronger, investment higher and we may still be basking in relatively smug glory over the successful execution of the event. Yet, South Africa, with its deepening levels of inequality, corruption and political uncertainty needs increasingly more sustainable solutions if it would forge its way powerfully into the future— solutions that do not depend on the fragile and now dated rainbow nation rhetoric, nor on the condescending nod of the international spectator.

This edition of *postamble* offers a selection of younger critical academic voices that attempt to grapple with these questions. All the writers here negotiate some of the more persistent and nagging issues around the 2010 FIFA Soccer World Cup, at times evoking the more obvious contentious issues outlined briefly here, yet still presenting nuanced ways one can understand how this event permeated South Africa's socio-political, physical and cultural space. These are not merely dry academic pieces, but perceptive essays, often emotive and impassioned. We are therefore pleased to publish this issue as a reactionary and considered collection of written work on the mega event and its relationship to the real and metaphorical space of Africa.

Notes

¹ Mbembe, Achille; Nuttall, Sarah. 'Writing the World from an African Metropolis' in *Public Culture*, 2004, Vol. 16 Issue 3, p347-371: p.35

² Mbembe, '2010 Soccer World Cup: Where Is the Moral Argument?' Published online (31/10, 2006) in *Africultures, Cultures Africaines*: www.africultures.com. Accessed 8 April 2010.