

FIFA Corruption

You know someone is unsavory if Vladimir Putin defends him. Thank goodness Sepp Blatter, the recently reelected president of FIFA, has finally resigned. Or so it seems at the moment. On a scale of values, running a corrupt soccer cartel and stacking it with family and friends surely is not the worst crime of all. What he represents is not evil, as such, so much as our zeitgeist. Making money one way or another is the be-all and end-all of human activity. It is the deity of our times.

We have known for 30 years that FIFA was a corrupt, nepotistic, self-perpetuating oligarchy, where the leadership always makes sure the odds are weighted in its favor. It is like a casino. The machines are all guaranteed in advance to ensure the owners rake in a massive profit. The punters are naïve enough to believe they can win by being indulged with relatively modest gains. Their minds are dulled by the pheromones and oxytocin stimulated through sex, alcohol, drugs, and freebies.

The formula has been the same for thousands of years. Olympic games, Roman circuses, chariot races, gladiators, Persian orgies, crusades and almost all modern sports. They all offer entertainment for the masses, controlled by the oligarchies, based on bribery and corruption. But no one seems to care, so long everyone is having a good time, and the money rolls in, and the necessary kickbacks are provided. I used to be such a fan of soccer and other sports. I am now totally disillusioned. I couldn't care less. Physical fitness is good and healthy. Following overpaid louts with tattoos is just demoralizing. Whoever pays more gets the best.

If money is the deity, its theology is to win at all costs. In sport you use performance enhancing drugs and therapies. You try to evade controls. You come up with new ways of disguising what you are doing. You tamper with equipment. You bribe judges and referees. You tinker with administrative structures so that your opponents are outvoted. You place your friends and cronies in significant positions all laced with benefits and kickbacks. Your family is inserted into existing posts or given consultancies. You grant favored contracts on the understanding that somewhere a bank account you are connected to receives special payments. You cultivate donors, and kiss their behinds. You find scapegoats to blame when things go wrong, and you ensure that whoever succeeds you will protect you and your ill-gotten gains.

Political dynasties, fixers, lobbyists, convicted criminals who return to positions of power. All because money can sanitize, and if you are brazen enough to deny, you might even hang in there. The Clintons typify the disease in politics. They rake in huge lecture fees, donations to their charities and foundations. Are you going to tell me it is only out of the goodness of the hearts of the donors? Tell me on what basis Chelsea Clinton commands fees of \$75,000 a talk. But then what about the Kennedy family and Bush and almost any successful politician you can mention? And all those family members succeeding each other in public and private companies. Very few of them make a success of it.

Precisely because it corrupts, money can also make people stink. Although it may not always happen, sometimes the law actually does facilitate prosecution and through this brings about some degree of change.

Democratic systems are dysfunctional and corrupt, but in less venal and all-embracing ways than dictatorships. Organizations like the United Nations are democratic but corrupt. They care not a jot for honesty, objectivity, truth. Yet for all that is wrong with them, democratic systems are still the preferable form of government precisely because they are the only ones that have shown how to throw out one group of governors and politicians for another.

Change is creative. It can heal. Stasis is disastrous. Constitutions and laws are safeguards. That is why the Magna Carta that King John signed in 1215 is still revered to this day. It insisted the king was not above the law. The Bible and the Talmud had said so much earlier, but as they were Jewish no one wanted to pay much attention. Successful societies have always been the most flexible and adaptive. They have also been the ones with visionaries and with strong institutions of law and justice. It is why I believe it good that there is such a battle in Israel between right and left. Both sides need to be challenged.

In free societies individual prosecutors, district attorneys, commissions, committees, investigators, even journalists can and have affected public policy, and on occasion pursued the corrupt and the felonious. But to do this requires moral clarity and courage. Fortunately there have been a few gutsy people in public office. Attorney General Loretta Lynch joins the honor roll of such. I hope she now turns her attention to American sports bodies and the Olympics.

Consider: It has been just 300 years since societies began to challenge the old divine right of kings and autocracies. Previously only conquest brought about change. Slowly over this time of intended and unintended progress, political parties have risen and fallen. Whigs and liberals have disappeared. Conservatives and socialists have, like chameleons, changed beyond recognition. In the US, Southern Democrats were once racists. Within parties the divisions are as extreme as those without. Monopolies have come, and monopolies have gone. Wherever you look there are disagreements, nuances, and variation, some greater some smaller. Nothing is static, although it often feels like it is. Change is happening, but not in isolation and not always in the same direction.

Just look at how dramatically Judaism has changed over time from a Biblical system based on the sanctuary to adaptation in exile, the Talmudic dialectic and then a structured legal system. We have absorbed different streams—rational, Kabbalistic, Chasidic, nationalist, and enlightened. There can be change that preserves continuity and change that does not. That is why currently Judaism as a religion is in a state of crisis, because it lacks creative leadership at one extreme and loyalty to tradition at the other.

The lack of moral visionaries undermines religions as much as politics. The Torah and the prophets proclaimed for thousands of years that justice and

righteousness must struggle to overcome bribery, corruption, and vested interests that are poison to the human soil and inevitably lead to decline and fall, however long it may take. In the end, FIFA had to change or be brought down. And if Clinton is as wise as she is reputed to be, unless she is addicted, she too will learn the lesson.