

Yes, Let's Boycott the World Cup

The 2022 World Cup is about to start. We have all heard about the problems in Qatar. The stadiums had to be built from scratch in the desert. To this end, many immigrant workers have been exploited and thousands even died (see [here](#) and [here](#)).

In light of that, what should I now do? Is it morally problematic to watch the games, Yes or No?

Well, it's not like I exploit anyone in retrospect. Just because I watch a game, it's not as though some worker suffers as a result. Nor am I using workers in some way in order to enjoy a great tournament. The wrong has already been done. And it wasn't me who committed it.

Still, to many of us, watching doesn't *feel* right. Is there something correct about this feeling, or is it just misguided?

*(Preview: Our feeling is correct. I will say that even when it's difficult to explain what's problematic about watching, *refusing to do so* can still be shown to have a certain value. My boycott might not stop any injustices, but it may still express my solidarity with the victims.)*

The explanation might be sought in various directions. Perhaps I shouldn't stand in a certain relation to the wrongdoers (i.e. the companies in Qatar responsible for the injustices, or the FIFA that made this all possible). Or perhaps I should stand in a certain relation to the victims. Or to other fans. Or to myself.

Let's start with myself. I might think: I should boycott the games because that allows me to avoid my discomfort about watching. It may be true that I can avoid it. But it doesn't explain why I should feel any discomfort in the first place.

I might also think: I should complain about all that went wrong because that allows me to vent my frustration about it. But, why skip the games, too?

Even if I don't exploit anyone, I might just be a horrible person if I enjoy the games while others have suffered for them. The games have a tainted history. But, many other things have morally dubious origins too. My family name. The dishes I eat. The wealth I possess. Does that make me a horrible person?

One might say, "I don't want to have dirty hands! I don't want to have anything to do with the exploitation!" But all this just tries to locate the explanation at the wrong place. If a boycott has value, it should not only lie in what it can do for *me*.

Can boycotts affect the wrongdoers? Perhaps I want to punish them for what they did. I might want to harm their reputation. Unfortunately, skipping the games won't cause any such harm. The companies in Qatar couldn't care less about me. Of course, they don't like all the criticism they currently get (as the Emir of Qatar expressed). But my turning off the television, in itself, doesn't offer such criticism, and our question is if there's any point to *that*.

Alternatively, I might not want to give them my money. But so long as I don't buy a ticket and travel to Qatar, I won't do that. I'm merely sitting at home, following the match for free.

(But, you might think, my country already paid for me. Arguably, they pay a fixed amount of money for the whole population. Even if they would pay per viewer, my not watching is not going to make a difference for more than a euro, and therefore won't form any serious sanction for Qatar or the FIFA.)

But, you might continue, might my watching the games not lead to more exploitation in the future? Well, not by *me*. But what about this. Even if I don't exploit anyone, by watching the game I'm overlooking the wrongdoing that enabled the World Cup, and because I'm looking away, more human rights may well be violated in the future (for example, to make more such tournaments possible).

It's not that I'm asking for more exploitation. (Contrast other consumer choices: if people buy cheap clothing, then, in a way, they (together) incentivize more production, and related exploitation in the supply chain. If fans watch the World Cup, they're not incentivizing more exploitation, at least not in the same way. First, the exploitation is not essential to the tournament (as the Cup is not always held in countries that have no stadiums and use cheap workers to build them), while it does connect more directly to the fast fashion industry. Second, we can watch the World Cup for free anyway, so we don't incentivize the FIFA to organize in the cheapest way possible.)

It's also not that I help anyone violate more human rights. That, for example, I would inform future organizers where more cheap, vulnerable workers can be found. It's also not that I applaud from the sidelines. But, indeed, I'm also not doing anything to prevent it! I just let it happen.

If this is the thought, then we would have reason to donate money to human rights organizations (or do further things to protect human rights), but not to skip a game. Skipping a game will prevent nothing.

Still, there's a sense in which watching would make me *somehow* involved in all the problems.

Indeed, future organizers might think "Qatar got away with it, so I might do so too". Even so, they are not referring to *me* when they say this. They are thinking about the FIFA, who's organizing the tournament, and perhaps the countries that join. They might also need a bunch of fans, i.e. to fill the stadiums and show them on camera, to the rest of the world. (Qatar invited, and indeed are paying for, 50 Dutch fans for just this purpose.) But, overall, they don't need you or me, some fan watching at home.

I might think: I should boycott because we should unite. As fans, we should *all* skip the games and make a collective statement "NEVER AGAIN". That would be great. Future organizers would think twice, to avoid risking a tournament without visitors. Even so, my turning off the television is not going to make that happen.

The same goes for the victims. Me turning off the television is not going to help them. They don't know I'm not watching. And even if they could know, would they care? Of course, they might care if I do other things. If I would send them (or their

families) money. Or lobby for a compensation fund. But again, we're not looking for reasons to help them, but for reasons to skip the games.

All in all, I don't think we should ask about what I could achieve by turning off the television. Watching the games has no relevant bad effects, and not watching has no relevant good effects. Instead, we may ask about what my conduct can *express*.

By watching, do I implicitly say to the victims "I don't care about your exploitation" or "I value my own pleasure more than your pain"?

Jake Wojtowicz, who started the discussion "[Should we boycott the 2022 World Cup?](#)" on this blog, seems to suggest just that: "It's not like we kill people by watching. Rather, the worry is that we somehow condone this: we will watch, players will play and try to win, despite what happened. The deaths were, to us, worth it for there to be a World Cup for us to enjoy."

Expressing this – "they shouldn't have died, but now that it happened, let's forget about it" or even "the deaths were totally worth it" – would surely be problematic. That is, I should not express this, regardless of whether any of the victims will ever know about it.

But I'm not sure I would express this, even implicitly. Surely there are selected fans who think things like "Come on, it's no big deal, let me just enjoy the games". But I don't. I've read the stories. I do think it's a big deal. I'd be happy to give up the tournament if, by doing so, I could make all the harms undone. I sincerely think the exploitation wasn't worth it. And I do not want to white-wash anything and forget about it. If I'd watch, I'd watch with this thought in mind.

Now what? Can we watch the World Cup, Yes or No?

I think not. Here's the idea. What matters, essentially, is not so much that I avoid such objectionable messages, but rather that I share positive ones (yes). That is, let's not just look at what *watching* may express, but at what *refusing to do so* may express.

By refusing to watch, I make a positive statement that I care. That I acknowledge the injustices that happened to the victims. I protest on their behalf. Express my solidarity with the victims. Deny myself the games for their sake. It's a way of saying "I STAND WITH YOU."

It's not that victims know I do this. Or feel better as a result. It's that I actually stand with the victims. It matters if people stand with you when injustices happen to you. This matters regardless of whether you're aware they do. And it matters even if it's just a small group (and most others still enjoy the games). My statement of solidarity would count *even if* I were the only one to express it.

It also matters that I protest openly, and share my concerns with others. That I just not turn off the television silently, but in front of my friends.

Of course, I could also say "I stand with you" – say, write such pieces – while still watching the games. Yet, my statement is stronger if I also put it into action. Actually boycotting the games – saying to my friends that I won't watch the matches with them because of what happened – voices a particularly strong

message. I do want to see the games. I love the tournament. It's one of the greatest events on Earth. And yet I skip it. Hence: I'm serious about it.

(If you don't like soccer, or skip the tournament for unrelated reasons, it does not follow that you make that statement.)

Moreover, if I now boycott the games, but later on don't act in the face of related human rights violations, people might consider me a hypocrite. "You say you care about these things, but still purchased that nice sweater! What about all the exploitation in the supply chain!" That I'm willing to run this risk (i.e. that others judge me) only enforces my statement.

My boycott gains meaning because others know what I am doing. What if I watch all by myself at home? What if I don't tell anyone (and close the curtains)? Might that still be fine?

Recall: the idea is not that watching expresses something, but rather that refusing to do so does. By refusing to watch, even with no one around, you might still tell *yourself* that you stand up for what happened. You make a statement to yourself. Of course, you may also do this only mentally, while still watching the game. But, again, your statement is stronger if you also put it into action, and actually deny yourself the games.

What if people think that I don't really stand up for the victims, but rather signal I'm an elitist? "Look at him, being sophisticated about something that helps no one."

For sure, all this is not to say that you shouldn't help stop injustices *when you can*. It's just that if there's nothing you can achieve, you can still express your solidarity with the victims.

Also, all this is not to distract from other, more pressing issues. What's the responsibility of companies and countries that do business with Qatar (that is, many European countries)? I can see that, *for them*, going to Qatar might well be better than a mere boycott (as human rights organizations point out). Actually talking to people, connecting with them, and sharing one's concerns has a higher chance of improving things.

For us, fans at home, the situation is totally different. Boycotting does not only feel right. It's the right thing to do.

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