

# **The Broken Promises of Neoliberal Soccer: Illusion and Disillusion of the 2022 FIFA World Cup**

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*The 2022 FIFA World Cup in Qatar attracted over 3.4 million spectators and more than a million international visitors. However, the tournament required a colossal investment of 220 billion US dollars for facilities whose future use remains uncertain. It also highlighted the excesses of neoliberal soccer, dominated by financial interests. Since the World Cup was awarded in December 2010, controversies have emerged, particularly regarding the working conditions of migrant workers, which have led to several thousand deaths. There have been widespread denunciations of labor and civil rights violations, and the banning of the “One Love” armband has illustrated FIFA’s censorship. Environmental criticisms were also significant, questioning the event’s claimed carbon neutrality. Extravagant spending on stadium construction and hotel infrastructures, often seen as unnecessary luxury after the tournament, has been highlighted. Qatar has not fulfilled its promises to dismantle and repurpose the stadiums, which remain underused. The 2022 FIFA World Cup exposed the tensions between sporting values and economic realities and underscored the need for a thorough analysis of the long-term impact of mega-sporting events.*

*Keywords: economy of waste, FIFA World Cup, Georges Bataille, neoliberalism, Qatar, soccer*

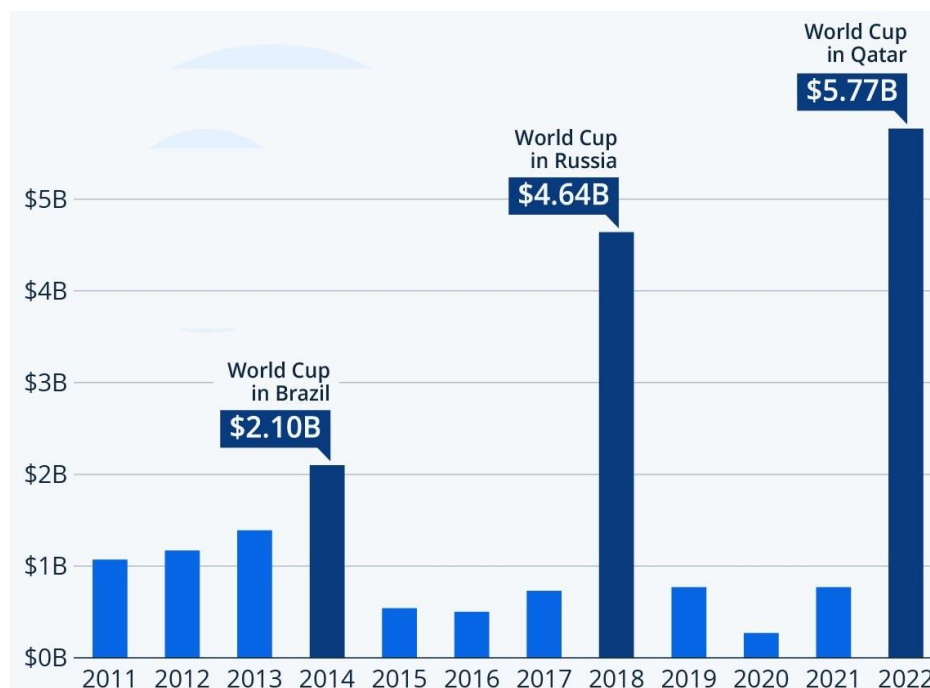
## **INTRODUCTION**

The 2022 FIFA World Cup took place in Qatar from November 20 to December 18, 2022, culminating in an intense final where the Argentine team emerged victorious over the French team. The tournament drew over 3.4 million spectators, with an average stadium occupancy rate (official but contested) of 96.3%. More than a million visitors traveled to Qatar during the month-long event, primarily from Saudi Arabia, India, the United States, the United Kingdom, and Mexico. This attendance figure ranks third highest in FIFA World Cup history, following the United States in 1994 (3.6 million spectators) and Brazil in 2014 (3.5 million spectators). Qatar invested 220 billion US dollars in building various infrastructures, including new roads, public transport, stadiums, and housing. Despite the country’s lack of a soccer culture, its primary goal in hosting the world’s most prestigious sporting event was geopolitical: to establish itself as a key player in global diplomacy and to advance a long-term nation-building strategy (Dubinsky, 2024).

In contrast to previous FIFA World Cups, which were held in countries with pre-existing facilities, the 2022 tournament necessitated enormous investments with uncertain future use. For perhaps the first time, observers could clearly see the triumph of neoliberal soccer, driven by financial interests (Kennedy & Kennedy, 2016; Latta, 2023). Despite the positive values of soccer promoted by heads of state, private TV channels, sports marketing agencies, sporting goods manufacturers, and sponsors, the FIFA World Cup has increasingly become a highly profitable media-commercial event for multiple stakeholders (Chadwick *et*

al., 2022). In 2022 alone, FIFA generated around 5.8 billion US dollars in revenue, primarily from the commercialization of TV rights (see Figure 1). It is no exaggeration to claim that FIFA is one of the most profitable non-profit organizations in the world.

**FIGURE 1**  
**FIFA'S ANNUAL REVENUE BETWEEN 2011 AND 2022**



Source: FIFA (2023).

Like culture, soccer is, in Mauss's (1925/2022) terms, a "total social fact." As Leber (2012) underlines, sport has a *socializing function*, and soccer is no exception. Not only does it affect all sectors of social life, but it also contains all the concrete and symbolic characteristics of the society that produces it: positive characteristics (the solidarity of the amateur world, the joy of children when they chase a ball), but also neoliberal excesses (the excesses of financialization, the health excesses associated with doping, in particular). Through a process of trickle-down into the social body, notably via the media, neoliberalism has developed its hold on soccer, and a FIFA World Cup ends up being as much the dream of top managers as of workers and those excluded from the economic system. Ultimately, neoliberal soccer is built on societal broken promises, and the 2022 FIFA World Cup showed many of its facets.

This original position paper, which reflects on one form of neoliberal soccer, namely the organization of FIFA World Cups every four years, is structured as follows. Firstly, we review the controversies surrounding the 2022 FIFA World Cup in Qatar, focusing on the ethical and environmental issues raised by several NGOs. Secondly, we will analyze the economy of waste associated with this event; the massive investments made to build the necessary facilities, and the question of their future usefulness will be discussed with reference to the work of Georges Bataille, and we will explore their social and symbolic implications. Thirdly, we will look at the future of the infrastructure, based on FIFA and Qatar's promises to reuse the stadiums, and the reality of their current use in the perspective of a "headlong rush" based on future mega-sports events, despite the environmental cost involved.

## A LOOK BACK AT A SUCCESSION OF CONTROVERSIES

From the moment the 2022 FIFA World Cup was awarded to Qatar in December 2010—under circumstances that remain opaque—until the tournament concluded at the end of 2022, controversies have continued to surface (Paché, 2022). Amnesty International quickly denounced the working conditions at the massive stadium construction sites, reporting several thousand deaths among migrant workers. Amnesty’s investigation revealed violations of labor laws, including excessively long working hours, neglect of rest days, arbitrary disciplinary actions, and poor living conditions. Following a complaint by the NGO Sherpa, a subsidiary of the French group Vinci was investigated for its construction site conditions in Qatar (Anonymous, 2022). However, no legal action was taken, and the case was soon forgotten. Figure 2 highlights three key figures that illustrate the controversies surrounding human resources management related to the 2022 FIFA World Cup, based on reliable sources.

**FIGURE 2**  
**HUMAN RESOURCES MANAGEMENT CONTROVERSIES**

<i>Key data</i>	<i>Fact</i>	<i>Source</i>
<b>6,500</b>	Number of migrant workers from India, Pakistan, Nepal, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka who died in connection with the 2022 FIFA World Cup from 2010 to 2021.	The Guardian
<b>50</b>	Number of foreign workers who died in 2022 FIFA World Cup related incidents in 2021 alone.	International Labor Organization
<b>14-18</b>	Hours worked per day by many migrant workers in Qatar as part of the construction of stadiums for the 2022 FIFA World Cup.	Amnesty International

Source: The author

While labor laws were frequently violated during the construction of stadiums and other facilities, civil rights were also compromised. Although LGBTQI+ individuals were not overtly discriminated against during the 2022 FIFA World Cup (on the condition of extreme discretion), homosexuality remains illegal in Qatar, and proselytizing is prohibited. As Pratama & Jannah (2024) explain, this stems from a desire to protect religious values derived from Islamic law in Qatar. FIFA, under significant pressure, banned captains from wearing the “One Love” rainbow armband—an emblem of solidarity against discrimination, particularly toward LGBTQI+ people—on pain of sporting sanctions. The only visible protest this censorship came from the German team during their first match against Japan, where players covered their mouths in the official pre-match photo to symbolize the imposed silence on discrimination (Ingle & Steinberg, 2022).

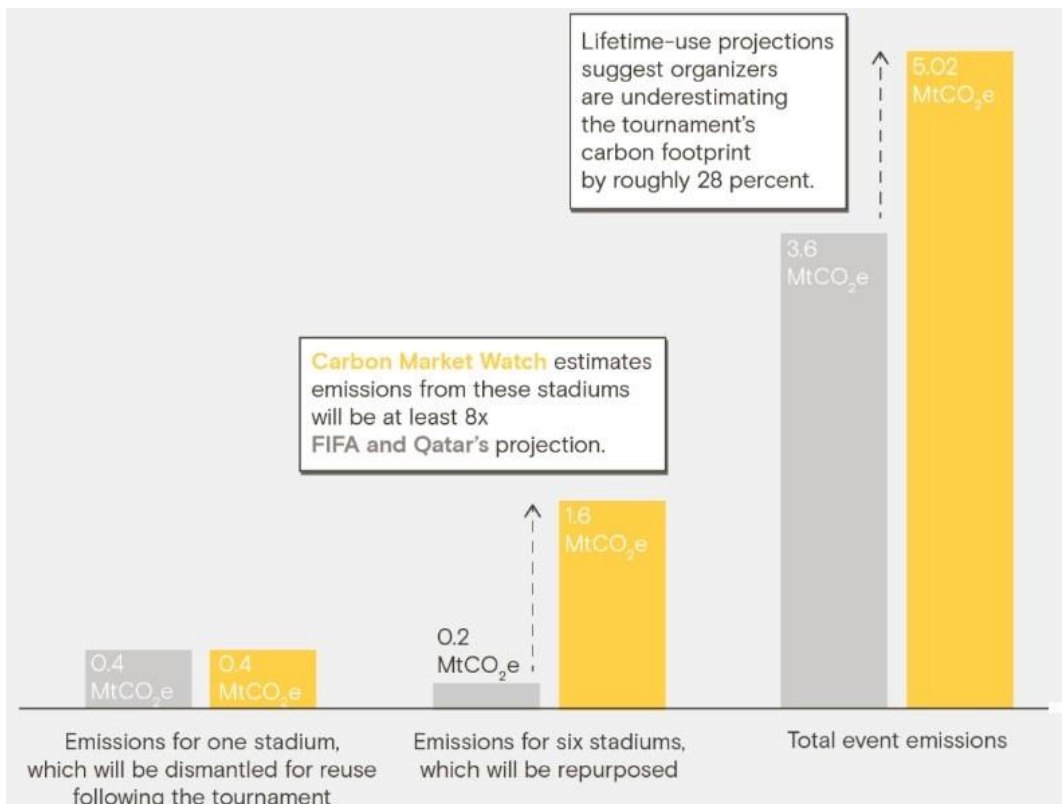
Environmental issues were arguably the most contentious aspect of the World Cup, despite Qatar’s attempts to “green” the event, such as its tree nursery project (Spanos *et al.*, 2022). Organizing an open-air sporting event in a region known for its extreme temperatures epitomizes the excesses of neoliberal “ideological globalization.” The tournament’s rescheduling to November-December, instead of the traditional June-July, necessitated air-conditioning systems for both players and spectators. Consequently, FIFA and Qatar emphasized their efforts to achieve “carbon-neutral” stadiums, presenting carbon offsetting as an ideal ecological solution through carbon credit purchasing mechanisms.

These mechanisms, originating from the 1997 Kyoto Protocol, involve trading greenhouse gas emission credits, with each credit representing one ton of CO<sub>2</sub> (Hepburn, 2007). Essentially, this system provides a “right to pollute” that can be traded like any other commodity. It allows companies in Kyoto Protocol signatory countries to earn emissions credits by investing in non-signatory countries (often in the Global

South) and facilitates transactions between over-polluting companies and those with surplus credits. FIFA and Qatar utilized these carbon credit mechanisms as an environmental argument (Boycoff, 2022), despite their origins in neoliberal policies.

In February 2021, FIFA estimated the World Cup’s carbon footprint at 3.6 million tons of CO<sub>2</sub>. However, Carbon Market Watch has shown that this estimate overlooks significant sources of CO<sub>2</sub> emissions, resulting in a substantial underestimation (see Figure 3). Emissions from stadium construction and usage are eight times higher. FIFA’s report only considers emissions during the 28 days of the tournament and ignores ongoing stadium maintenance and the 160 daily flights of the 3.4 million fans (one flight every 10 minutes). Even with the underestimated figure of 3.6 million tons of CO<sub>2</sub>, Qatar only purchased 1.5 million carbon credits. This discrepancy highlights that while FIFA adopts neoliberal principles without hesitation, it fails to adhere to them. In June 2023, Switzerland’s advertising regulator ordered FIFA to cease calling the 2022 World Cup “carbon neutral,” labeling the claim as “false and misleading” (McInnes, 2023).

**FIGURE 3**  
**ESTIMATES TAKING LIFETIME USE (IN YELLOW) INTO ACCOUNT DWARF FIFA AND QATAR’S ORIGINAL EMISSIONS PROJECTIONS (IN GREY)**



Source: FIFA (2022) and Carbon Market Watch (2022)

**AN ECONOMY OF WASTE**

The 2022 FIFA World Cup was undoubtedly a remarkable event, both in terms of its scale and the controversies it sparked. The most vehement criticisms centered on the construction of seven new stadiums and the renovation of an eighth. Each stadium was more impressive than the last, featuring grand size, innovative architecture, advanced services, and cutting-edge technology, including sophisticated air-conditioning systems. As illustrated in Figure 4, approximately 220 billion US dollars were spent on these

eight stadiums, which range from 40,000 to 80,000 seats, along with other infrastructure projects necessary to meet FIFA’s high standards (Craig, 2022). This expenditure is 15 to 40 times greater than that of FIFA World Cup tournaments since 1994. In addition to building these stadiums, Qatar faced the challenge of a shortage of accommodation. As a small country—smaller than Montenegro, for example—and with limited tourist appeal, Qatar’s hotel capacity was insufficient for the influx of fans. To address this, massive investments were made in luxury hotels, Bedouin-style tents, and cruise ships. In reference to Bataille’s (1949/1991) concept of an “economy of waste,” this can be seen as an example of extravagant spending and resource allocation.

**FIGURE 4**  
**TOTAL COSTS OF HOSTING FIFA WORLD CUP TOURNAMENT IN BILLION US DOLLARS (INCLUDING SPENDING OF STADIUMS AND OTHER INFRASTRUCTURE PROJECTS)**



Source: Front Office Sports (2022)

In his seminal work, Bataille (1949/1991) introduced the concept of “general economy,” which prioritizes the expenditure, or “consumation,” of wealth over its production. According to this view, human energy resources exceed what is necessary for mere survival. The overabundance of energy from solar radiation, when accumulated by living matter, creates a surplus. When this surplus, enhanced by human labor and technology, cannot be utilized for growth, it results in wasteful expenditure and conspicuous consumption. Bataille (1949/1991) argues that the history of life on Earth reflects this exuberance, characterized by increasingly lavish and costly forms of existence. This analysis seems to be directly applicable to the excessive investments made for a 28-day sporting event like the World Cup.

The optimization of these resources is secondary to the extravagance of the event, which aimed to project the soft power of an emirate with limited political influence compared to global superpowers such as China, the United States, Russia, and even Europe, amidst a backdrop of significant cultural dynamism in the UAE (Næss, 2023). A cat-and-mouse game ensued between Qatar and Western media to determine the actual number of spectators and, consequently, the extent of the wasteful economy. For instance, during the match between Argentina and Saudi Arabia, the attendance figure was listed as 88,000, despite the Lusail stadium’s capacity of only 80,000 seats, with numerous empty seats visible. Similar discrepancies were noted in other matches, revealing a significant gap between reported and actual attendance. In response

to the controversy, FIFA inexplicably revised its figures, adjusting the capacity of the Al-Bayt stadium from 60,000 to 68,895 seats overnight (Ingle & McInnes, 2022).

More broadly, the capacity of the 2022 FIFA World Cup stadiums increased from 380,000 seats at the start of the tournament to 426,000 seats just three days in—an incredible increase of about 12%. From the perspective of waste, it is inconceivable that Qatar would have considered its extravagance modest, just as it is inconceivable for Dubai’s malls not to compete in opulence with features like ski slopes and Olympic ice rinks (Bennett, 2011). Explanations for the largely empty stands included ticket holders potentially abandoning travel plans and sponsors or federations failing to sell all allocated seats. Regardless, the outcome was a clear example of resource squandering for an event that did not fulfill its attendance promises.

## WHAT TO DO WITH SUMPTUOUS MONUMENTS?

In addition to theorizing an economy of waste, Bataille (1933/2011) offers a critical reflection on the concept of unproductive expenditure, which is exemplified by the uncertain future of the 2022 FIFA World Cup infrastructure. Bataille (1933/2011) defines unproductive expenditure as spending that results in pure loss without any form of compensation. This concept applies both to individual behavior (such as compulsive drunkenness or sexual excess) and collective behavior (such as the San Fermin festival in Pamplona or Oktoberfest in Munich). According to Bataille (1933/2011), economic rationality cannot be based on unproductive expenditure since it does not optimize use-value or generate future economic benefits from an asset. Barghchi *et al.* (2009) note that, traditionally, investments in sports facilities are seen as a means of enhancing citizens’ quality of life. However, FIFA’s association with the creation of lavish stadiums in Qatar—destined to become largely obsolete after the tournament—raises concerns about the wastefulness of such expenditure, particularly when 150 million children worldwide suffer from malnutrition and two billion people lack access to clean drinking water.

FIFA’s greenhouse gas accounting report for the 2022 World Cup, published in June 2021, assured that all stadiums would be dismantled by June 25, 2023. Qatar had promised to diverge from the approach of previous FIFA World Cups—e.g., South Africa 2010, Russia 2018—by repurposing these stadiums. Six of the eight stadiums were to be partially dismantled and converted into schools or malls. However, by July 2024, these promises had not materialized: the stadiums remain intact, and the 2022 FIFA World Cup signage is still visible, as if the tournament had not yet concluded (Bernas, 2024). Qatar justified the delay by citing the Asian Cup, which was held from January 12 to February 10, 2024, following China’s withdrawal. Yet, the stadiums were only filled to an average of 25,000 spectators, highlighting their structural overcapacity. This one-off event does not guarantee future regular use, given the varying interests of public and private stakeholders.

Qatar does have its own local professional soccer league, the Qatar Stars League, which includes 14 teams. Although the league recorded a record attendance in September 2023 for Marco Verratti’s debut with Al-Arabi (28,300 spectators), this was insufficient to fill the Ahmad Bin Ali stadium, which has a capacity of 40,000. Five of the 2022 FIFA World Cup stadiums are used for the Qatar Stars League, averaging just 5,000 spectators per match. In contrast, England’s EFL League One—the third tier of professional soccer—averages 7,000 spectators per match. The remaining three stadiums are either unused or used only occasionally. For example, the Education City stadium (40,000 seats) was utilized for Eid prayers accommodating 35,000 worshippers, while the Lusail stadium (80,000 seats) is considered too specialized for regular use.

The “974 stadium,” which garnered significant attention for its innovative design and sustainability claims, was intended to be dismantled after the tournament and relocated. However, nearly two years after the World Cup, no decision has been made regarding its relocation. Qatar seems in no rush to fulfill its promises, as the country’s wealth allows it to maintain its sports venues, even with minimal use. Moreover, the environmental impact of these oversized stadiums, which require substantial amounts of water and electricity, has been largely ignored, particularly in Qatar’s arid conditions. In short, Qatar is now embarking on a “headlong rush” to justify the existence of these grandiose monuments in a region ill-suited

for top-level sports. The country is preparing to host the World Rugby Nations Championship every two years from 2026, with around 1.6 billion US dollars offered for the first four editions (Hugues, 2024). Additionally, Qatar aims to host the Asian Games at the end of 2030 and is vying for the 2036 Olympic Games, competing with India and Berlin. Despite the growing environmental costs of such international sporting events, exacerbated by global warming (Cerezo-Esteve *et al.*, 2022), Qatar's commitment to extravagance persists, driven by the illusion of achieving "productive" expenditure within the neoliberal soccer framework.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The 2022 FIFA World Cup in Qatar starkly illustrated the tension between the sport's traditional values and the economic realities of its financialization. The immense investments, environmental costs, and numerous controversies associated with the tournament—lasting just 28 days—highlight the excesses of neoliberalism in sports. The financialization of soccer, characterized by often-empty promises, sharply contrasts with the values of solidarity and fair play that are typically associated with the sport. The manipulation of attendance figures and the inadequacy of post-tournament infrastructures underscore a management approach focused more on image and immediate profitability than on sustainable development. Professional soccer, in this light, serves as a microcosm of a dominant economic system that prioritizes short-term value creation, whether for corporate shareholders or for the "FIFA octopus."

FIFA, headquartered in Zurich, Switzerland, epitomizes this issue. As with many international sporting bodies, FIFA enjoys financial reserves untaxed due to its non-profit status. Its internal operations and governance are often criticized for their opacity, akin to that of tax havens. A decade ago, the NGO Public Eye Awards ranked FIFA among the most unethical corporations, alongside entities like BASF, Syngenta, Bayer, Gap, HSBC, and Gazprom. Since then, FIFA's involvement in corruption, influence peddling, and embezzlement scandals has only tarnished its reputation further (Esposito, 2016). Its flagship product, the FIFA World Cups, ultimately functions as a "showcase" for a neoliberal order beyond the reach of supranational regulation. As Eick (2010:294) succinctly puts it, "FIFA is a nonprofit organization that shapes and is shaped by neoliberalization. Its main business is the marketing of a per se civil society activity, playing football, and transforming it into a profitable commodity. In managing and marketing global football events, it shapes the social meaning of the game as it is shaped by, in particular, the World Cup."

The pressing question now is whether the disillusionment surrounding the 2022 FIFA World Cup will influence future tournaments. The answer appears mixed when considering the upcoming 2030 FIFA World Cup, which will be co-hosted by Spain, Portugal, and Morocco. While Spain and Portugal have substantial sports facilities, Morocco's situation is less developed. Nonetheless, Moroccan authorities plan to build a 115,000-seat stadium near Casablanca, called Grand Stade Hassan II, which will be one of the largest in the world and the largest ever built in Africa (Edwards, 2024). This stadium is expected to feature ultra-modern architectural elements and state-of-the-art technology to ensure spectator comfort and safety, despite Morocco's climatic conditions being only slightly more favorable than Qatar's. Given that around 10% of the Moroccan population lives below the poverty line, one must question whether such an investment is truly necessary or if it merely serves the interests of FIFA executives.

Considering these facts, several research avenues emerge from the 2022 FIFA World Cup experience. First, there is an urgent need to develop innovative and sustainable models for repurposing infrastructure from sporting events to avoid the creation of "sumptuous monuments" without future use. Second, a thorough analysis of the long-term impact of large-scale sporting events on local communities—economic, social, and environmental—is essential. This should be based on comparative studies with other FIFA World Cups or the Olympic Games. Third, drawing from Georges Bataille's work, further exploration of the concepts of the economy of waste and unproductive expenditure could provide robust frameworks for a critical analysis of neoliberal soccer and the broader consequences of financialization on contemporary society.

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