

Why Sportswashing Works: Fetishistic Disavowal and the Politics of Enjoyment [abstract only]

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Why Sportswashing Works: Fetishistic Disavowal and the Politics of Enjoyment

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Prevailing explanations into the study of sportswashing have foregrounded its ties to political economy and soft power. Where sportswashing has been defined as a reactive mode of reputation management, much of its significance lies in investment-based strategies that embed political actors within the affective rhythms of football fandom. Consequently, what has not been considered is the contradiction this relies upon. That is, despite widespread public awareness of the political stakes of sportswashing, its efficacy persists. With this in mind, and by drawing from Lacanian psychoanalysis, this presentation argues that sportswashing operates as a psychic practice that exploits the libidinal structures through which our sporting investments are organised. Central to this account is the Lacanian divided subject, whose unconscious desires and fantasies generate forms of attachment that exceed rational judgement. It is in light of this that the presentation contends that sportswashing functions through a fetishistic disavowal. This details the subject’s simultaneous knowing and not knowing, which is stabilised by the club and its attendant rituals (i.e., the fetish object). Such disavowal does not erase knowledge of political harm but renders it psychically manageable, enabling continued enjoyment (*jouissance*) through contradiction. The concluding claim is that psychoanalysis can expose the limits of frameworks which assume that our knowledge can simply translate into ethical action. By situating sportswashing within the dynamics of desire, fantasy, and enjoyment, psychoanalysis illuminates why contradiction is not an obstacle to fandom but it’s very condition. This perspective not only reframes the political stakes of sportswashing but also expands upon the capacity of critical scholarship to analyse how subjects remain affectively bound to structures of inequality, even when they recognise them as such.

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