

Book Review: Paolo Sollier, *Kicks, Spits & Headers: The Autobiographical Reflections of an Accidental Footballer*. (Preface by Sandro Mezzadra. Translated by Steven Colatrella. Edited by Stephen Shukaitis). Colchester/New York/Port Watson: Minor Compositions. 2022. ISBN: 978-1-57027-393-3 (Paperback). 176 Pages. \$23.

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Freethinkers are those who are willing to use their minds without prejudice and without fearing to understand things that clash with their own customs, privileges, or beliefs. This state of mind is not common, but it is essential for right thinking.

- Leo Tolstoy -

Paolo Sollier was an Italian professional football player in the 1970s who was celebrated by some and reviled by others for his unflinching Marxist views. His book, *Kicks, Spits, & Headers: The Autobiographical Reflections of an Accidental Footballer*, was originally published in 1976 and is now available in English for the first time through the joint efforts of *Autonomea* and *Minor Compositions*. In this volume, Sollier presents his reflections in a series of vignettes about the world as he experienced it as an accidental footballer. That is, as someone who drifted into (rather than eagerly pursued a career in) professional football. Even though they are presented in scattered vignettes, these reflections articulate coherent viewpoints on football, politics, and the intersection of the two during a turbulent period in post-World War II Italian history.

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Many of the reflections included in this volume address Sollier's day-to-day experiences as an accidental footballer and reluctant leftist icon: paying particular attention to his interactions with teammates, opponents, coaches, owners, fans, and the media. Collectively these accounts depict a world that Sollier can neither wholly embrace nor entirely reject: a world characterized by exhilaration and boredom; solidarity and estrangement; cooperation and exploitation; adulation and vilification. As they wend their way through this work, these reflections offer candid glimpses into the life of a professional football player and the mind of a thoughtful twentysomething athlete who is struggling to come to terms with his polarizing celebrity. Thus, this volume will be of interest to some readers for its autobiographical revelations.

This volume also includes multiple reflections that speak to Italian professional football as a collective experience. In these entries, Sollier recognizes that while his sport has the potential to facilitate meaningful interaction between citizens, in practice it seems more likely to contribute to the reproduction of a hierarchical social order; distract people from the reality of their bleak existences; and provoke violent outbursts of the anger those existences produce. Given his political leanings, it is no surprise that Sollier attributes these outcomes to the class dynamics of mid-twentieth century capitalism. That he does this so fluidly is something of a surprise, however, considering his age and circumstances. Hence, this volume will be of interest to some readers for its adept parsing of Italian professional football as a cultural phenomenon.

Sollier's reflections similarly focus a critical eye on the world of Italian professional football as a commercial enterprise. In doing so, he paints a picture of an alienated world in which the players have little concern for one another off the pitch; the players' union has little concern for anyone who is not among its relatively privileged membership; and the owners have little concern for anything other than their bank accounts. These thematically linked entries also offer suggestions regarding how Italian professional football might be revolutionized: suggestions that I am sure were as anathema to players as they were to owners. The characterizations presented in these reflections strike me as germane to the world of professional sports today despite there having been noticeable (though measured) social and political progress in this world since Sollier's work first appeared. Likewise, the revolutionary agenda they proffer strikes me as still relevant to most contemporary professional sports and properly incendiary to boot.

Consequently, this volume will be of interest to some readers for its seemingly timeless treatment of corporate sports.

A final topic addressed in these reflections for the purposes of this review is the political landscape of 1970s Italy. As an engaged Marxist and professional football player, Sollier encountered numerous political ideologies and their supporters over the course of his travels (whether he wanted to or not in the case of fascists, unfortunately). His recollections of those encounters deftly portray a society awash in clamoring worldviews and include a host of astute comments on this ideological battlefield and its combatants. Therefore, this volume will be of interest to some readers for its political discernments.

As the foregoing suggests, *Kicks, Spits, & Headers: The Autobiographical Reflections of an Accidental Footballer* will likely be of interest to a wide range of readers on the strength of Sollier's reflections alone. That said, it should be noted that the experience of exploring these reflections is further enriched by their intelligent packaging.

To begin with, the experience of exploring these reflections is enriched by the preface that precedes them. In this preface, Sandro Mezzadra provides apt background information on such things as the outsider status shared by Sollier and his team; the political nature of Italian professional football and its venues in the 1970s; and the ways that Italian professional football has changed and not changed since these reflections were first published. Moreover, he manages to communicate this information without stealing any thunder from the work that follows, something that I have found to be lamentably rare in prefaces and introductions.

Similarly, the experience of exploring these reflections is enriched by the notes that follow them. As is typically the case, these notes clarify issues surrounding people, places, and things that might be unfamiliar to some readers. As is less typically the case, these notes are both judiciously chosen and blessedly pithy.

In addition, the experience of exploring these reflections is enriched by the suggestions for further reading that close this volume. This concluding section provides guidance for those interested in acquiring a better sense of the context in which Sollier's reflections were formulated by identifying treatments of post-World War II Italian culture and politics; the many sides of Italian professional football; the city of Perugia (where Sollier played while writing these reflections); and the history of radical politics in football. The works chosen for inclusion in

this section are especially commendable for their focused pertinence to the topics at hand and their easy accessibility.

Finally, the experience of exploring these reflections is enriched by the design of the book itself. To start with, the front cover of this book is quite striking with its tricolor (red, white, and black) image of Sollier flashing a raised fist (something that he was wont to do and a contributing factor to his infamy in some circles) offset by the title and the author's name in what I would characterize as decidedly working-class fonts. Additionally, the internal layout of this book is equally striking with its clean spacing, crisp fonts, and use of a black and white collage of Sollier to divide its four sections. Lastly, the back cover and spine of this sturdy paperback are also visually pleasing in terms of colors, fonts, and layouts – with the grainy photograph of Sollier on the back cover being particularly well-chosen. I mention these artistic qualities because they so greatly enhanced my pleasure in picking up and reading Sollier's reflections.

In sum, I found *Kicks, Spits, & Headers: The Autobiographical Reflections of an Accidental Footballer* to be a pleasant read for its portrayal of Italian professional football in a bygone era; its glimpses into the mind of a twentysomething professional football player struggling with his lightning rod celebrity; its insider critique of Italian professional football as a collective experience and commercial enterprise; its conversant depiction of the Italian political terrain in the mid-1970s; and its intelligent and artistic packaging. That said, there is no getting around the fact that these reflections tend to be cursory expressions of views that are not entirely unique to Sollier. And why shouldn't they be? After all, they are the reflections of a twentysomething football player, not the musings of a learned scholar. Even so, these reflections are worth exploring as thoughtful riffs on the life and times of an accidental footballer and I recommend them as such. However, I more emphatically recommend these reflections for an entirely different reason.

Erich Fromm (Fromm [1941] 1994) noted that the twentieth century saw great strides in the fight for personal freedom, and yet under modern capitalism people seemed to be quite unsettled by the atomization that accompanied such freedom. Specifically, they experienced feelings of loneliness, irrelevance, and helplessness: feelings that caused them to seek refuge from their relatively newfound freedom. The two most important strategies employed for escaping this freedom in his view were "authoritarianism" and "automaton conformity" each of which stifled intellectual inquiry and set the stage for the rise of fascism. Looking

forward, Fromm suggested that the only way out of this intellectual vacuum would be for people to engage in “spontaneous activity” one form of which would no doubt be freethinking as defined by Tolstoy in the quote that opened this review. Unfortunately, it appears that eighty years later folks are still trying to escape their freedom and that genuine freethinking is becoming increasingly rare in our age of soul crushing corporate and social media. This is why I am so taken with *Kicks, Spits, & Headers* and why I so highly recommend it to others. For there is no denying that as a twentysomething Sollier was a genuine freethinker.

The first sign that Sollier was a genuine freethinker is his vehement opposition to doctrine of any kind. One expression of such opposition can be found in Sollier’s reflections on the political landscape of 1970s Italy in which he observes (with reference to the Italian communist party) that: “In the PCI, everything is certain, you have the line and the counter-line, your back and your ass covered, all ready, everything is organized. But your eyes are covered too.” (Sollier 2022:27). Or, even more scathingly, in his later observation that: “In any case the Party never errs, the Party is always right, the Party is far-seeing, the Party is Godlike, and at this point, we have decapitated ourselves.” (Sollier 2022:70). A further expression of this opposition can be found in his reflection on a trip to Amsterdam in which he laments: “Too many second-hand hippies, an atmosphere of people who are world-weary, who know everything, closed up in their certainties.” (Sollier 2022:84). Or in this additional reflection on that lingering counterculture: “These hippies, I understand why they’re covered in flowers. They’re dead.” (Sollier 2022:116). It is clear to me from these reflections (and others that I will leave for the reader to discover) that for Sollier ideological fidelity is akin to death. That is one sure sign of a freethinker in my book.

A second sign that Sollier was a genuine freethinker is the range of entities that his reflections were certain to have rankled. There were the fascists (he was a Marxist who never tired of baiting them). There was the Italian communist party (he was a communist who criticized the PCI for its dogmas and its compromises with bourgeoisie politics). There were the members of the Red Brigades (he boldly referred to them as cartoons). There was the Soviet Union (he took it to task for invading Czechoslovakia). There was Czechoslovakia (he took it to task for deserving to be invaded). There was the feminist movement (he supported it but also suggested that factions of it might be more interested in revenge than liberation). There were his fellow professional football players (he criticized them for being self-absorbed and

apolitical). There were the team owners (he criticized them for their greed). There were the police (he defended them as individuals but condemned them as a group). And of course, there were the hippies (whom, as noted earlier, he depicted as world-weary and dead). While this list is not exhaustive (there are other entities that I will leave for the reader to discover), it should serve to demonstrate that Sollier had no interest in aligning himself with the views of any group, no matter how sympathetic he might have been to its cause. That is another sure sign of a freethinker in my book.

A final sign that Sollier was a genuine freethinker for the purposes of this review is his capacity for self-scrutiny. That is, while Sollier showed little reluctance to critically interrogate the world around him, he was even less reluctant to interrogate himself. In these reflections he does so in terms of his road to becoming an accidental footballer (he characterizes it as earnest but a bit laughable); his privileges as a professional athlete (he is embarrassed by them); his responsibilities as a professional athlete (he feels that he must choose between being political and being complicit); his relationships with family, friends, and others (he is concerned about embarrassing, misjudging, or demeaning them); and his reputation (he recognizes that his views are likely to estrange him from people of every political stripe). These reflections indicate to me that Sollier knowingly chose a life of self-questioning and likely political and social ostracism. That, I would argue, is perhaps the ultimate sign of a freethinker.

I would have been taken by Sollier's reflections at any point in my adult life as they focus on two things that matter a great deal to me: sports and politics. However, I am particularly taken by them at this point in my life because, as a longtime admirer of leftist freethinkers – such as Emma Goldman (Goldman [1924] 2003) and George Orwell (1958) who in turn scorched the Soviet Union for its relentless oppression of Russian citizens and lambasted British socialists for their barely concealed classism – I am extremely disheartened by the state of contemporary intellectual discourse. I do not think that I am mistaken when I suggest that Tolstoy's notion of freethinking is becoming less and less welcome in our society, even in some academic settings. I am certain that I am not mistaken when I observe that when you hear the term freethinking today it will almost certainly be followed by an ignorant and hateful screed. In my view, these two developments are equally despicable. And while *Kicks, Spits & Headers: The Autobiographical Reflections of an Accidental Footballer* is not *My Disillusionment in Russia* or *The Road to Wigan Pier*, it is certainly in their tradition and a

most welcome opportunity to experience some genuine freethinking, and a bit of football as well.

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