

THE ART OF DISTRACTION



The Three Fs and the Art of Distraction

My old Portuguese friends often say, “Os três F’s.”

It is a saying that still carries weight.

A certain force.

In Portuguese, os três F’s stand for Fado, Futebol e Fátima.

On the surface, these words sound almost charming. Each represents an important part of Portuguese life.

Three things that many people recognise immediately. Music, sport and faith. Emotion, passion and devotion.

Such sayings often survive because they contain more than one meaning. The three Fs are not just a cultural postcard. They are also a political warning.

The phrase is usually associated with Portugal during the long dictatorship led by Salazar. The idea is simple enough. Give people feeling, give them football, give them faith, and perhaps they will ask fewer difficult questions.

Together they helped create a world in which people could feel deeply, gather collectively and belong strongly, without necessarily becoming politically active.

That is the uncomfortable truth: distraction can be used as a political weapon. It was then, and in different forms it still can be today.

Fado can be beautiful. It holds something deeply Portuguese, not because it explains everything, but because it allows feeling to remain unresolved.

Football, at its best, gives people joy. It gives strangers something to talk about in cafés, at work, in families and in the street. A goal can lift a country. A player can become a symbol. As I write, Portugal is beginning its 2026 World Cup campaign, and Lisbon feels strangely quiet. There is a calm, nervous excitement about what the next few weeks may bring.

Fátima has given meaning and comfort to millions. For many people, pilgrimage is prayer, gratitude, fear, hope and faith.

So this is exactly why the three Fs matter.

The most powerful distractions are rarely empty. They work because they are full of emotion. They satisfy real human needs. They make people feel part of something.

And when people feel full enough, they may be less inclined to ask why life is so uneven.

This is not only a Portuguese story.

I am sure that every country has its own version of the three Fs. Whatever that may be, it keeps people watching. Keeps them cheering. Keeps them afraid. Keeps them nostalgic. Keeps them divided, and keeps them busy.

Politics often understands human attention better than we would like to admit.

A population does not need to be silenced if it can be distracted, entertained and emotionally occupied.

Perhaps the three Fs were not a written strategy. Perhaps they were never a formal plan.

Sometimes a phrase survives because it captures what policy papers do not. It catches a mood. It names a pattern. It turns complicated history into something ordinary people can remember.

Fado, football and Fátima remain visible in Portugal today, but their meaning has softened.

Fado is celebrated as cultural heritage. Football continues to be one of Portugal's strongest shared languages. Fátima remains one of the great centres of Catholic pilgrimage.

Yet the warning still has value.

Whenever politicians encourage us to feel more than we think, cheer more than we question, or belong more than we examine, we should pay attention.

Culture can enrich us.

Sport can unite us.

Faith can sustain us.

But all three can also be used to keep people looking in the wrong direction.

Perhaps that is why os três F's still matters.

Not because it explains Portugal.

It does not.

But because it reminds us that public attention is precious. And that when people are kept occupied and sated, power often has an easier time doing what it wants.

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