

Football as a Reflection of Modern Society's Conflicts and a Way of Creating Societal Ties in Enduring Enmity Context¹

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Abstract

This paper proposal, which emanates from a PhD research finished by the author in 2013, is attempting to present a comparative study of different realities in the world to conclude that football's success resides in its ability to create and recreate national belongings and that it is capable to lead to the broadening of national understanding between confronted ethnic groups or countries. That is to say, that football serves on the one hand to reflect mimetic conflicts between countries; however, on the other hand it serves to reconcile fragmented societies around a common sense of belonging. Which is apparently a football incongruity; actually it is a reflection of the inherent conflict and contradictions of modern societies. In fact, firstly the sport event is used in this study as a research object to conclude its importance in order to develop inner understanding between different confronted groups in the world. Secondly, it is considered, as well, as a scientific tool to analyze current human organizations and the complex societal ties which are generated there. A comparative methodology comprising different realities allows the researcher to obtain a scientific knowledge about the scope of the football phenomenon concerning nation building and reconciling processes.

Key Words: Football, mimetic conflict, wars, rapprochement

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1. Introduction

Despite being a sign of the existence of conflicts in modern societies, on the contrary, the football event can develop also as a medium to ensure social understanding between diverse social groups. This worldwide globalized phenomenon reflects the complexity and the contradictions of the current modern way of life. As the French anthropologist Christian Bromberger assesses, the football match brings together the fundamental values of our societies being one of the deepest symbolic representation of our time (Bromberger, 1995: 377). Thus, the rivalries and power struggles between different groups are displayed in the sport ground. Football stadiums have been the bastion of diversity and popular expression all over the world, even more so under dictatorships. This occurred in Korea, under Japanese domination, in Austria under Adolf Hitler and the Nazis rule, in Spain during Franco's rule, and more recently in Algeria, Tunisia or even in China. For instance, football grandstands are the opportunity of last resort for political and social expression where it is usually never freely permitted anywhere else (Njororai, 2009: 872). In a way, dictatorships have usually tried to avoid the diversity and have been keen to show a peacefully united country. With this goal in mind, they have often taken the profits of the football phenomenon and victories of national sides and clubs. This is the so-called opium of soccer (Brohm and Perelman, 2006). This approach, deeply assumes that football is merely manipulative tool in the hands of the governments.

Obviously, social understanding and a peaceful situation is supposed to be more profound than the exertion of manipulation which is so often promoted by governments throughout the sport phenomenon in order to conceal the diversity and the distinct belongings of a country. This real rapprochement process though is mainly what has occurred worldwide, South Africa and the rugby fixtures of the post apartheid era being the most well-known representative example of that. Nelson Mandela devised a national reconciliation by unifying his people during Rugby World Cup held in South Africa and clearly won by its representative national side. Rugby and the South African team which had been until then the symbol of the white elite domination were cheered on by the black majority as well and this national unity thus helped to avoid the risk of a civil war (Carlin, 2008)

Nor is this the only sport, nor is it the only example of this phenomenon in Africa. Football has become one of the most important tools in countries such as Sierra Leone, Liberia or even in Rwanda and all over Africa; creating national common sentiments where the enduring boundaries between ethnic groups had lead them to extremely bloody wars (Jarvie, 2006: 187). In fact, football is able to recreate the feeling of national belonging, which surpasses the deep-rooted rivalries and tensions. Football is used in the same trend to improve the relations and understanding between countries like Japan and South Korea thanks to the joint organization of the 2002 World Cup, or with the efforts being made in Israel in the same manner between Jews and Arabs. This being so, Peter Hough (2008: 129) argues that it is reasonable to maintain that international football is a vehicle that fosters violent nationalism expressions. Nevertheless, he agrees, on the contrary, with the statements made by Lars Gustafsson, who nominated football for the 2010 Nobel Peace Price and with the thesis of the FIFA's president Joseph Blatter. Both made a strong case for portraying football as a unifying and peacemaking medium. Indeed, they contended that the contribution made by the sport for reconciling States and nations serve as a balance for its more negative sides involving violence and riots in the stadium stands.

2. Materials and methods

The article seeks to underlay the football event's complementary character that involves being the reflection of an existent conflict, as well a medium of the peace-making efforts in countries hit by long-term confrontations and wars. The methodology employed for examining this contemporary reality ought to be the analysis of a range of cases related to the importance of football in nation building and reconciling, taking into account distinct and distant cases from one another. The historical perspective would be at the forefront; however, the dimension of football does demand an interdisciplinary approach. The empirical studies such as the peace initiatives undertaken in African countries through the sport are confronted to realities as the so called football war between El Salvador and Honduras in 1969 and the riots previous to the war in the football fixtures in the former Yugoslavia. Moreover, the incidents that occurred between Turkish and Swiss players and managers in the international match previous to the 2006 World Cup in Germany are a recent example of the nationalistic riots that take place around the sport. Furthermore, hooliganism has been, and continues to be, an expression of football's broader current social issues for which the sporting event would not be accountable for but instead the signal.

The so-often quoted definition of George Orwell about sport being a "war minus the shooting" is a part of his broader analysis which takes the sport's domain as an atmosphere that fosters the aggressive nationalistic expressions (Orwell, 1970). It is diametrically opposed from the United Nations' approach to sport. The organization promotes it to improve education, development and peace achievements in the world by the United Nations' Office on Sport for Development and Peace (UNOSDP). A complete complementary view is required in order to take into account the contradictory reality of the sport. The success of football resides in its capacity for representing collective identities (Bromberger, 1998: 59, Rojo Labaien, 2013). The mimetic confrontation (Elias and Dunning, 1989: 58) of two teams which symbolically represent the opposition between "we" and "they" offers a favorable environment to construct and regenerate collective and national belongings. Football responded during the 20th century to the individualization process occurred in the world (Eisenberg, 2006: 23). The society is no longer based on direct personal relationships, but on indirect ones, that required some kind of unifying element. As Anthony Smith states, (1991: 16-17) "by the use of symbols such as the flag, the anthem, the uniform, monuments or events, members are exalted by their sense of common identity and belonging." Football by the way of the mass medias' participation accomplishes this aim as long as it facilitates regular events of national unity and celebration. Furthermore, it provides a platform for the exposition of the other symbols mentioned above.

Thus, this article has two guiding hypotheses. First, that football is a space reflecting both related conflict and peacemaking efforts. Second, its success can be explained by the ability to symbolize collective identities. As to what concerns the construction of individual identities, collectives' needs also to differentiate themselves from others in order to claim their own self as a group. Football allows that, and so as to strengthen the group identity and to achieve the pride of belonging, it reproduces a dispute or a conflict that is able to eventually enhance deeper enmities or hostilities through representative teams. Nevertheless, due to the fact that it encourages collective belonging in an identity contest against others, in this manner, it promotes to overcome the differences that exist inside each group. For this reason, football becomes a medium that helps to foster a national understanding within a deep-rooted contention atmosphere. In addition, the competition provides also a gathering point for the

interaction among different group identities. The African states are the clearest example of this rapprochement phenomenon.

3. Findings

Many researchers (Mills 2009: 1201; Axboe Nielsen, 2010: 90; Foer, 2004: 24) contend that a football match was the detonator of the war in the former Yugoslavia and its consequent disintegration, the one Dynamo Zagreb and Red Star of Belgrade started to play on the 13th of May 1990 but that were unable to finish due to the incidents which took place between the groups of supporters of both sides and that included eventually the players and the Police of Yugoslavia. This was the signal that informed both Croatians and Serbians that they would no longer be able to share the same state and the same association. Indeed, the fans of both groups would fight against each other only a few months later during the total war that was unleashed from the football field and which eventually led to the war zone. In the words of Srdjan Vrcan and Drazen Lalic, “there is no doubt that a movement from the terraces to trenches occurred in Croatia and Serbia (Vrcan and Lalic, 1999: 176). This fact should serve to corroborate the fact that football fosters the nationalistic passions to the point of leading to war. In fact, this scenario evolves to take this path, despite this the researcher faces a more complex picture. ‘The war minus shooting’ analysis is even closer to the axe of this study.

Following the war, in the newly independent state named Bosnia-Herzegovina the opposing collective identities struck by the war have been unable to build a unitary country in the territory. Three separated autonomous regions have been created as a signal that the reconciliation process would become a complex task to carry out. However, these three semi-autonomous regions have reached an agreement in order to create a common football competition which would bring together the representative teams of opposed national and religious beliefs or belongings. Obviously, as Christian Bromberger argues, the unification of the federation did not manage to eradicate by itself the antagonisms anchored in many generations in the past (Bromberger, 2005: 38). Even in one single city such as Mostar, for instance, the football matches between the Muslim team Velezh and Zrinjski that represent the Croatian and Catholic community are played in a rather violent atmosphere. Despite their verity, these events promote mutual knowledge between opposing sides as does the Bosnian national team who classified for the first time in its short history for the World Cup of Brazil. Because most of the players of the national side are Muslims the achievement of this team was not cheered nearly as much all over the fragmented country of Bosnia-Herzegovina. Plainly, the feeling of belonging created by the football team’s success does not provide sufficient glue to bind the state together in unity, peace, and stability. Anyway, an external enemy produced by the competition could join together the citizens of the recent plurinational state.

Not far from the Balkans, in the same manner, the positive force of the football phenomenon was used in Cyprus in order to transcend the political division inside the country between the Greek Cypriots in the Republic of Cyprus who emerged after the independence achievement in 1960, and the Turkish Cypriots in the north of the island, in the territory proclaimed as the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus. At the start of the XXI century, FIFA intended to program two matches between the youth teams representing the two parts on both sides of the divided capital of Nicosia. Nevertheless, the political confrontation prevented the football organization from carrying out the peacemaking plans through the football

competition. Later on, the improvement in political relations between the leaders of the two sides permitted the respective football federations to establish negotiations to create a unitary football federation and national team who would include both the Greek Cypriots from the south and the Turkish Cypriots of the north of the Mediterranean island. In spite of the agreement reached by the spoke persons of the football federations towards integration, the final accord has been hindered by political strife in 2009. The symbolic power of sport has proved incapable of overcoming historical and political boundaries (Kartakoullis and Loizou, 2009: 1664). True political power is needed from the population in order to attain unity through the use of football. But, having said that, on the other hand, the efforts made in the context of football have been an opportunity for negotiation and rapprochement in Cyprus.

With respect to South America, the so called War of Football in 1969 between El Salvador and Honduras, in the same vein, is at first glance proof that the sporting event is directly related to the emergence of wars. Notwithstanding, run-up matches for the World Cup of 1970 between the two respective national teams have been the detonator and not the reason of the war that caused 6.000 deaths in 100 hours (Kapuściński, 1992). El Salvador and Honduras were both dominated by the big landowners and the governments took the profit of the patriotic scope of football and the antagonism generated there in order for them to not have to deal with the claims of the majority of small holders farmers. Indeed they fomented discord through football between the two countries to the extent that it burst into open warfare. As a result, it ought to be explained that football was used by politicians as a medium to sustain the established order based on inequalities and on the domination of the big landowners. However, South America has also been a territory of inclusion, reconciliation, and national celebrations as a whole guided by the way of football. In Brazil, the successes attained by the national team made up of mulatto footballers like Pele and Garrincha helped to establish and develop a positive view about racial diversity in the country` (Gordon and Helal, 2001; Natali, 2007). Moreover, the successes of football teams representing such nations are perceived in South America by governments and populations at the same level of the attainment as political independence. This occurred during the qualification of the Costa Rican national team for the Italian World Cup in 1990 or in the same vein concerning the Bolivian national team achievement for the 1994 World Cup held in the United States. Fernando Lugo, Paraguay's former left-wing president declared a national holiday to honour the football national team having managed to qualify for the 2010 World Cup organized by South Africa. Football is able to go across social and political conflicts and create one of the few current opportunities for national celebration.

In the same way we have been explaining, concerning Asia, the antagonism remaining in Israel lends itself to being an appropriate space relating to the social impact of sport in peacemaking initiatives. Namely, the process aimed at enhancing mutual understanding between Jews and Arabs in Israel through the way of football competitions. For instance, FIFA has been attempting to employ football as a reconciliation tool. Joao Havelange, the former president of the international organization had declared that his dream was to arrange a match in New York between the national sides of Israel and Palestine with the aim of supporting the peace efforts. In the words of Tamir Sorek (2003: 446) the football league competition in Israel remains a suitable context for the integration of Arabs as it produces mutual knowledge there. As a matter of fact, football has resulted unable by itself to resolve such a long standing conflict. Indeed, football stands continue to reflect the antagonism existing between the two sides. An example of this is the fans shouting messages as "Death to the Arabs" (Ben-Porat, 2008). In addition, more specific initiatives in order to make greater

strides towards peace have not completely accomplished their mission. For instance, the project named F4P originally from the United Kingdom initially achieved some crucial steps setting up basic football coaching camps for Jewish and Arab children. Finally, it came to an end in 2006 when the violence peaked in the region.

Going forward, from the Middle East to the Far East, the context of the competitive sport teaches us about the contradictory influence carried out by football. The joint organization of the 2002 World Cup in Japan and South Korea, on the one hand, is proof of its impact in regard to developing a policy of rapprochement. Wolfram Manzenreiter argues that the football event became a symbol of their improving relationships through mutual understanding (Manzenreiter, 2008: 420). The first international mega event held in Asia which was also the first joint organization of a World Cup, accomplished the aim of reconciling Japan and South Korea. Not only had this event helped improve the relationships of the two former enemies, but also the ones between North and South Korea in the same vein. Udo Merkel states that after the organization of sport mega events such as the Olympic Games in Seoul in 1988 and the World Cup in 2002, South Korea targeted to reconcile with the North Korean state as well (Merkel, 2008: 303). Exhibition matches have subsequently taken place between the teams of the two parties surrounded by Korean unity flags waved by thousands of supporters (Podoler, 2008:13). On the other hand, the final of the Asian Cup between the national representative teams of Japan and China held in Beijing in 2004 became the context of anger demonstrations against Japan by the Chinese football fans to the point of off-setting diplomatic issues between the two countries (Manzenreiter, 2008: 423). The Japanese occupation of China in the XX century and the murders happened during the Second World War by the Japanese empire were still alive in the memory of thousands of Chinese. Besides that, the control of the Senkaku Islands is a current contentious issue between Japan and China. At that time in 2004 a football match fostered and brought to light the enmity which is still underlying among the two societies. As a result, Asia in the same way results as an indicator regarding the contradictory and complementary use in addition to the impact of the patriotic characteristic of football.

In any case, Africa turns out to be the clearest proof concerning the peacemaking usefulness of the football event. The recent states of Africa have been forced with the difficult cohabitation of many different and opposed ethnic groups in their territory, which had been arbitrarily fixed by the European colonizers. In the words of Paul Richards (1997: 155-156) football is an effective means of developing cooperation, due to its social impact, simplicity, and cheap characteristics. Therefore, he defends that the example of Sierra Leone contradicts the view that football is responsible for violent riots or wars: "First there was violence, and then there was soccer. Perhaps soccer is one of the basic ways in which conditions of radical desocialization can be reversed" (Ibid.). Indeed, children who had been forced to fight in the war at the beginning of their lives, began to use football as the means to integration following the war era. The case of Liberia follows the same pattern which is by no ways uncommon throughout the African continent. When George Weah was awarded the Golden Ball in 1995 that recognizes the best player of each season, assigned a peacemaking function to football. He declared that he will show to the confronted army groups in the country that there was another way to fight in favour of the country (cfr. Boniface, 2002: 54-55). The politicians understood that in order to improve community relations by means of football they ought to involve the people outside the capital Monrovia. In fact, the sport had the capacity to distance the young people from the war. After having played the matches and having achieved social acceptance with others, they tended to refuse the calls to go to war. Gary Armstrong

highlights the fact that while at the beginning of the XX century the sport was a means to prepare young people to go to war; the sport is used on the contrary actually to promote reconciliation and avoid a bloody conflict. Nevertheless, as Armstrong explains, although football is able to address political and ethnic hostilities for a while, the case of Liberia shows that it is unable to unite all the opposed groups existing in the country on its own for a long term (Armstrong, 2002: 490). More of the passion generated by the football game across the country among Muslims and Christians, rich and poor and men and women is needed.

That being said, the emphasis should be placed on the influence of football for the further purpose of understanding within societies. Concerning Ivory Coast, football and national side is considered by politicians and medias as a tool to assure the common future of the country. In the words of Andreas Mehler, football is the only thing that unites the citizens of Ivory Coast (Mehler, 2008: 99-100). Furthermore, in Rwanda, only a decade after the war between the Hutu and Tutsi ethnic groups who caused 800.000 deaths – most of them, members of the Tutsi Ethnic group killed by the Hutus – thousands of people from both groups celebrated in July 2003 the victory obtained against the national team of Uganda (Jarvie, 2006: 187). On the other hand, in Angola, in the context of the 2010 African World Cup, the bus that was transporting the football team of Congo was attacked by unidentified gunmen while they were riding across the region of Kabinda. As a result, there were two deaths and six more were injured. The militants of Kabinda who had been fighting the Angolan Army claiming for the independence of the region took responsibility for the attack. They argued that they had put the organization on notice to prevent the matches from being played in the territory of Kabinda. Whichever the case, the attackers benefited from the international influence of football to make their claims heard worldwide. This is certainly a proof that this sport is an indicator of the currents conflicts existing in the world. But this is not a barrier to conclude the importance of football in peacemaking efforts as it is to bring to the surface the need for understanding. In any case I agree with John Sugden (2010) when he warns about the complexity of improving social relationships through sports, and that the participation of key actors of any field of the society is needed in order to make small steps toward progress.

4. Conclusions

This article has sought to analyse the football phenomenon in its entirety and from a comparative approach involving different and specific cases all over the world. Therefore it has attempted to have been able of reflecting the apparent contradictions of the football phenomenon concerning its different functions depending on the context and the usage made from it. Football is a synonym of conflict on the one hand, as it tends to confront two sides representing two collectives or nations against the other. Therefore certainly violent incidents can be a direct effect of the conflict. However, on the other hand, this study has attempted to capture in a realistic way, and based on the historical facts, the reconciliation further steps that are possible to produce through the way of the football competition and its involving patriotic scope. Having said that, the article concludes that in order to attain better societal understanding between the opposed groups, willingness is required on the part of the majority of the concerned society. The differences which are perceived between the cases of Korea and Cyprus are an example of the above. As Nicos L. Kartakoullis and Christina Loizou state, while North and South Korea are parts of the same long standing nation, the Greek Cypriots and the Turkish Cypriots moreover originate from the Greek and the Turkish nations respectively. As a result, Koreans are more likely to overcome their dispute by the means of

the patriotic enthusiasm created in football, than the Cypriots who have never formed a nation (Kartakoullis and Loizou, 2009: 1664). The scope of football is not able to resolve by itself the unstified conflicts. Actually, it is a means of producing better mutual understanding between confronted parties through the way of the mimetic representation.

In the same way, this article culminates by saying that the efforts aimed at achieving a state of peace through the means of football could not be based on covering up the unavoidable conflicts in modern human organizations. As Montesquieu declared in the XVIII century, if you do not hear any noise of conflict inside a state, you can be sure that there is no freedom inside of it (Montesquieu, 2008). Football has been both a representation and reflection of freedom and conflict in the history. The aim of constructing peace by denying the inherent conflict of current societies is opposed to the real object attained by the sport in bloody conflict environments such as Sierra Leone or in very long-rooted antagonism atmospheres like in Korea or South Africa. The comparative character of this article brings to light the importance of football as a socially contradictory object and as a medium to analyse the trend of disparity and contention in the recent history of mankind. Football and sports could become a tool for overcoming the boundaries without concealing them.

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