

The Nation's Game: Football and Nationalism in Spain

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ABSTRACT- Football is the most popular sport in Spain. It reflects important aspects of society, so its study has considerable relevance for sociologists, anthropologists, historians, political theorists, and other scholars. Along these pages I want to focus on some political aspects involved in football. Particularly, I am going to highlight the connections between soccer and nationalism, trying to provide an explanation of those relations. To illustrate my point, the Spanish case will be useful, because national matters are one of the main political concerns within the country. Moreover, Spanish football provides good examples of how nationalism and sport are intertwined.

The paper is arranged in four parts. Each of them corresponds to one thesis which tries to develop more carefully my central view: the football field is particularly prone to national exhibitions, and they are uncritically accepted even by those people who do not call themselves nationalist, like most Spaniards.

KEY WORDS- Football, nationalism, Spain

1.

My first thesis has an empirical nature and it can be enunciated as follows: nationalism is widely rejected in Spain. Most Spaniards deny their nationalist affiliation, opting for alternative sources of political identity.¹

Several reasons explain this spurning. First, the study of nationalism has been neglected, hence the lack of a serious scholarly debate on the matter.² In Spain the absence of a reliable nationalist theory contrasts with the political and social importance attached to the territorial model. As a result journalists and discussants on TV programmes create national identity, while self-styled scholars just sum up and gloss over those ideas born in the media. In this sense, an academic contemptuous attitude or, in MacCormick's words, *odium philosophicum* towards nationalism might seem less surprising:³ the nation's ideology suffers from a 'philosophical poverty and even incoherence.'⁴

Second, nationalism is regarded as responsible for terrible crimes such as the Yugoslavian ethnic cleansing or ETA's terrorist attacks.⁵ The nation's ideology is seen as a problem, and any government devotes considerable efforts and resources to combat it.

Third, as nationalism is philosophically inconsistent and morally despicable, most citizens and politicians in Spain say they are not nationalist, but constitutionalist. Moreover, the term nationalist specifically refers to the peripheral nations which lack a state.⁶ According to Billig,

Separatists are often to be found in the outer regions of states; the extremists lurk on the margins of political life in established democracies, usually shunned by the sensible politicians of the centre.⁷

This opposition between constitutionalists and nationalists relies on the distinction between cultural and political nations, which requires further explanation.

Modernist theoreticians of nationalism hold that every nation is produced, created or invented by its own nationalism, so nations are 'imagined communities' that only differ from the 'style in which they are imagined.'⁸ As a consequence, the type of nation –ethnic/cultural or civic/political– will be known after analysing the nationalist discourse: the nationalist speech gives the clue (performative nationalism). In this sense, I will talk of an *ethnic nation* when the objective paradigm of community building is used, relegating the group member's freedom to a second place: the political power is organised on the basis of already existing ties, such as a common language, religion or history. Quite the opposite, a *civic nation* will be the one which highlights its members' will in order to belong to it.

However, in Spain this dichotomy has been interpreted in a quite different fashion in order to support the Spanish national unity. During the constitutional debates in 1978 it was necessary to organise the coexistence of several nations within the same territory. While some parliamentarians were in favour of conferring equal rights to all nations, searching for a kind of federalist formula for the state, the majority of the House wanted to privilege the Spanish nation (the hegemonic one), either suppressing any reference to the nations on the periphery, or recognising them just as cultural entities. The last option was finally adopted in the text, where the term 'nation' was allocated to Spain, being coined the word 'nationalities' to refer to stateless nations.

The theoretical foundation of this model was elaborated by distorting Meinecke's *Cosmopolitanism and the National State*. To depict the emergence of nationalist movements in Europe during the XIX and the early XX centuries, Meinecke talked of political and cultural nations. Where a state already existed, the political nation provided *ex post* the cohesion its members required, while if the cultural community was previous, the political power would be later organised on the basis of those objective ties which bind the people regardless of individual will (language, ethnicity, geography, religion, history...). But the final aim is the nation-

state in both cases.⁹ Spanish interpreters of Meinecke, however, under the influence of Hegelian distinction between ‘people’ and ‘nation’, read that a political nation had a state, while a cultural nation neither possessed a state nor was able to ever achieve it. Thus peripheral nations were denied self-determination rights. Whether they are called ‘nations’ or ‘nationalities’, their nature is cultural. As it has been previously pointed out, cultural and political categories make sense when they are referred to the nationalist speech, but not to the state machinery: so it is inadmissible to use the state absence or presence as the key delimiting factor.

Such insistence on describing peripheral nations with cultural attributes and nation-states with political features is intended to legitimise state nationalism. Thereby, Spain would not only beat Catalonia or the Basque Country thanks to its greater brute force, but to its stronger moral standards as well: Spanish patriotism¹⁰ would mean compliance with the values of democracy and human rights enshrined in the Constitution, while Catalan or Basque nationalism, which disapproves certain articles of the Constitution, would amount to totalitarianism and ethnic essentialism. I agree with the correspondence between political communities and democratic principles only under the premises of performative nationalism. A state can be antidemocratic, so its sole existence does not guarantee a civic idea of nation. Similarly, a stateless nation is able to stress the people’s will in order to belong to it, matching the subjective paradigm of nation-building.

2.

My second thesis is aimed to denounce a popular misconception which has been successfully instilled in people’s minds by the Spanish intelligentsia: this fallacy consists in denying Spanish nationalism and calling its advocates *constitutionalists*. On the contrary, I argue that Spanish nationalism does exist, and it is even more powerful than its competitors.¹¹

The second article of the Constitution says,

The Constitution is based on the indissoluble unity of the Spanish Nation, the common and indivisible homeland of all Spaniards; it recognises and guarantees the right to self-government of the nationalities and regions of which it is composed and the solidarity among them all.

After reading this section three things must be concluded. First, the Spanish Constitution is nationalist. Constitutionalism serves to disguise Spanish nationalism, so constitutionalists are nationalists who devote their affection to Spain. Under this new perspective, constitutionalists cannot reject nationalism *in limine*, on pain of self-contradiction. Second, Spain is a cultural nation whose objective element of cohesion is history. The second article states that there is a

reality prior to the Constitution which is, at the same time, its foundation: the Spanish nation. Third, the right of self-determination is forbidden to any people, but the Spanish one, an additional argument to conclude the ethnic nature of Spanish nationalism.

The seeming weakness of Spanish nationalism which several scholars reveal is explained by turning to Billig's banal nationalism. Billig has applied the term *banal nationalism* to 'the ideological habits which enable the established nations' – those which own their own state – 'of the West to be reproduced.'¹² In this sense, nation-states are 'indicated, or *flagged*, in the lives of its citizenry' every day;¹³ yet their nationalism becomes overlooked, because nationalist ideology is seen 'as the property of others, not of *us*.'¹⁴ In Billig's words, 'the citizenry are daily reminded of their national place in a world of nations,'¹⁵ but this reminder or *flagging* takes place so often that it is a 'familiar part of the social environment.'¹⁶ it operates 'mindlessly, rather than mindfully.'¹⁷

In my opinion, state nationalism enjoys excellent health as its everyday representation shows. Only an expert eye is able to notice Spanish national reproductions because their constant presence renders them unnoticed and, in any case, innocuous.¹⁸ As Billig has indicated, in established nations 'the community and its place are not so much imagined' – in Anderson's sense – 'but their absence becomes unimaginable.'¹⁹ Moreover, 'if all the unwaved flags which decorate the familiar environment were to be removed, they would suddenly be noticed.'²⁰

Moving slightly on, I would add that state nationalism remains unnoticed while its hegemony is beyond question. However, whether any aspiring nation endangers its superiority, banal nationalism will become *hot*, showing its teeth and fighting to maintain its line.²¹

Additionally, in Spain regional teams cannot play in official competitions, unlike in the United Kingdom, so they are not able either to defeat Spain – imagine the reactions after a Basque victory over the Spanish squad – or to win prestigious contests – regional teams are only allowed to take part in friendly matches –. The government's stand is that the only accredited representative of the country is the Spanish squad. Furthermore, playing in the Spanish team is compulsory for any sportsman or sportswoman who is summoned by the national coach, as the article 47.1 of the Law of Sport lays down.²²

3.

My third thesis states that mass sport, particularly football,²³ constitutes a field especially prone to nationalist expressions. In MacClancy's words, 'sports (...) help to define moral and political community.'²⁴ 'The ability of sport to assist in the creation of a sense of identity (...) occurs' not less 'at the level of the nation-state'²⁵ than in the case of aspiring nations.

In the soccer sphere, teams represent the imagined community; they are a symbol of the nation. This is obvious when talking of the national team –Spanish squad embodies Spain, while the Catalan squad epitomises Catalonia–, but also occurs with private clubs: as a general basis, Basque teams represent the Basque nation, Fútbol Club Barcelona stands for Catalonia and Real Madrid symbolises Spanish people.

Here are a few examples which prove my point. Athletic Club of Bilbao's history is intimately linked to Basque nationalism, as the policy of *la cantera* (the youth academy) shows.²⁶ Many players, managers, presidents and supporters of the team have taken part actively in campaigns in favour of Basque independence from the times of the II Republic (1931-1936) until the present. One of the most politically conscious footballers was the goal-keeper José Ángel Iribar. In September 1975, less than two months before Franco's death, he and his fellow members of the Athletic wore black armbands during the game which followed the execution of two members of ETA and three members of FRAP (a Marxist revolutionary organization). Then, in 1976, he refused to play the significant 50th match for the Spanish squad, though having been invited to, and that gesture won him boos in away meets outside the Basque country. Recently, Athletic footballers, some of them as well-known as Joseba Etxeberria or Julen Guerrero, have supported several campaigns in favour of Basque national teams.

From its foundation, Fútbol Club Barcelona has been the Catalan team, conflicting with two Spanish-national sides: Real Club Deportivo Español,²⁷ based in Barcelona, and Real Madrid. Despite the different economic policy,²⁸ footballers and management of Barça have equally supported Catalan nationalism countless times. During the dictatorship, the club promoted Catalan folklore and culture,²⁹ offering what Nicolau Casaus has called 'passive resistance against a totalitarian regime.'³⁰ In Manuel Vázquez Montalbán's opinion, 'Fútbol Club Barcelona played the role of the army which Catalonia never possessed.'³¹ In the Transition, politics became often intermingled with football: the two presidents of the Catalan regional government, Josep Tarradellas and Jordi Pujol, were often seen in the Camp Nou;³² nationalist political meetings were held in the Palau Blaugrana;³³ and the president of the team, Agustí Montal, called for the restoration of both the Autonomous Statute, which had been passed in 1932 during the Republic, and the Generalitat of Catalonia (the Catalan government) in one of the annual meetings of the club. In 2005, players and management of Barça³⁴ supported a publicity campaign for Catalan national teams which was run by the Plataforma Pro Seleccions Esportives de Catalunya.

Real Madrid, for its part, has traditionally embodied the Spanish nation. Nobody could have explained it better, but Raimundo Saporta, a prominent member of the club's management for more than 30 years:

Real Madrid is and has been apolitical. It has always had so much influence because of its working for the State. At the time of its foundation in 1902, Real Madrid obeyed Alfonso XIII; in 1931, the Republic, in 1939, General Franco; and nowadays, it obeys His Majesty Juan Carlos. It is a disciplined club which loyally adheres to the governing institution of the nation.³⁵

I only disagree with his depiction of that behaviour as non-political: loyalty to power represents a political attitude. Franco, supporter of Real Madrid himself,³⁶ exploited its good results to improve Spain's perception abroad.³⁷ With the then president's acquiescence, the legendary Santiago Bernabéu, the team became an unofficial ambassador of the regime. It can be arguable whether Real Madrid was prouder of improving the image either of Spain³⁸ or of Francoism (as Shaw³⁹ and MacClancy⁴⁰ seem to suggest), but in fact the team fulfilled both functions. The main reason why Real Madrid became the regime's representative was its sporting achievements, far more significant than the Spanish squad's accomplishments, and also than those of Barcelona and Athletic. Then, the side could be used as a national weapon against both internal and external *enemies*.

Perhaps the main characteristic of the history of Spanish football is the confrontation between Real Madrid and Fútbol Club Barcelona. This clash involves sports, nationalist and political aspects, which sometimes interweave. Particular significance acquired the signing of Alfredo Di Stefano, who having been drafted by Barcelona, finally played for Real Madrid owing to a FIFA's decision –under the influence of the Spanish representative in this organisation–. Supporters of Barcelona interpreted this measure as a governmental attack against their club's success because Di Stefano substantially contributed to the glory of Real Madrid, and consequently their feeling of being punished by a hostile nation grew.

Nowadays, the identification between Real Madrid and Spain still continues. In this sense, numerous Spanish flags –even pre-constitutional ones– can be seen whenever the team celebrates its victories at the Cibeles Fountain.

4.

My last thesis is intended to highlight that national symbols are not regarded as aggressive or menacing at the football ground, even by those people who reject their nationalist affiliation.⁴¹ Quite the opposite, nationalist expressions go unnoticed inside the stadium and sometimes they can be deemed a sign of civic-mindedness. Supposing a Spanish citizen does not wish Spain to win the World Cup, most of his fellow nationals will feel offended; furthermore, their rage will be increased if the *anti-Spanish* person decides to support any other squad, particularly the one which eliminates Spain. Such reaction is totally irrational and

not founded on sports criteria: the Spanish team has recently started to win trophies, but the passion for *la Roja* (the Red) is very old. In fact, football fans are supposed to be good at suffering, which is considered a positive value, because unconditional supporting implies being with the team not just in health, but also in sickness.

Devotion to the nation does not stop at the level of the national squad, but reaches even further. In Spain whenever a particular club plays an international competition⁴² against a foreign team, supporting the *Spanish* is expected, even when the representative of this country is the eternal rival in the Spanish League. For instance, if Real Madrid had played the final of the Champions League against Chelsea, fans of Barcelona should have wished good luck to Madrid's supporters or, at least, they should not have supported Chelsea publicly; and the other way round.

But why is nationalism not repelled in the sports arena, and acquires a different meaning? In my opinion, three reasons can explain it. The first one is related to the concept of banal nationalism. Football is one of those fields where the national flag is waved daily without arousing the slightest suspicion. In fact, citizens' uncritical acceptance of sports nationalism lies in its usualness.⁴³

The second reason has to do with the role played by football as a safety valve of group tension. As Elias has pointed out, socialisation process implies self-controlling one's impulses, and that repression subjects the individual to great emotional stress.⁴⁴ In order to survive, society itself provides certain mechanisms to help people to release tension caused by overexerting in controlling their passions: one example is sport. In this sense, institutionalised football matches are means of relieving community's tension. On the one hand, football enables rivalry to be *peacefully* solved through the recreation of a symbolic battle: spectators are sure that both players and fans will escaped unhurt from the competition. On the other hand, in soccer games the participants can experience similar tensions to real life,⁴⁵ but with no risk. Such certainty in the harmlessness of the sports spectacle is essential to guarantee that spiritual peace and liberating catharsis will be brought after the victory, avoiding feelings of guilt with the opponent's defeat.

From my point of view, reasons one and two can explain why in Franco's era nationalist expressions on the football pitch were tolerated, although they were severely banned and punished outside the stadium: fans spoke Catalan, Basque or Galician, and waved outlawed flags.⁴⁶ According to Shaw, the authorities tolerated those national exhibitions on the understanding that a controlled relief of *deviated* nationalist passions was necessary⁴⁷ (reason two). However, I think that the regime chose the sports arena and not another public place because national demonstrations seem innocuous when they are associated to sport (reason one).

The third reason aimed at the above described identification between established nations and democracy, on the one hand, and stateless nations and

exclusionary ethnicism, on the other. Supporting the Spanish squad constitutes a sign of public-spiritedness, while the opposite is considered provocative or even aggressive: in Castoriadis' words, the imaginary institution of society is at stake.⁴⁸ Due to the enormous importance of sport as a vehicle for worshipping the nation,⁴⁹ in Spain physical education is included in the curriculum from 6 to 17 years old, and most children are also involved in after-school sports activities. Apart from the values inherent in sport,⁵⁰ doing it represents an outstanding social activity, especially for males: boys play football during the break at school and high-school, being excluded from the group if they show no talent for soccer.⁵¹ As Dunning has put forward, sport contributes to project images of desirable masculinity, helping men to feel good as members of the community and to build loyalty to the group, which is regarded as a social virtue.⁵² Most kids who used to play football on the playground will never become professional players, but they will probably remember with nostalgia the good time they had there. The identification with footballers –that is, young athletic attractive men who play skilfully the sport most citizens would like to have excelled at– is pretty easy. Footballers and their fans embody the imagined community, hence the acceptance of nationalism inside the stadium: national symbols look harmless on the pitch, where most of us want to be the player number twelve.⁵³

Conclusions

There are important links between football and nationalism, and the analysis of the Spanish scenario is useful to understand them. First of all, nationalism implies negative values in Spain, being usually associated to Catalans or Basques, not to Spaniards. According to Billig, established nations are daily reproduced, but this *banal nationalism* remains hidden because their triumph renders waving their flag needless. Further, public expressions of state nationalism go unnoticed due to their usualness. Football is one of those fields where the nation is worshipped without arousing suspicion, particularly in the case of nation-states. Citizens are educated to release in the stadium those tensions caused by self-controlling their instincts –a key requirement of social life–, and also to identify with the nation that their admired players represent.

Notes

¹ For example, social democracy, the 15-M movement, environmentalism, feminism, or neoliberalism.

² 'Unlike most other isms, nationalism has never produced its own grand thinkers: no Hobbeses, Tocquevilles, Marxes, or Webers.' [Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities. Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 3rd ed., 2003), 4].

³ Neil MacCormick, 'Of Self-Determination and Other Things,' *Bulletin of the Australian Society of Legal Philosophy* 15 (1990): 18.

⁴ Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 4.

⁵ Paraphrasing the beginning of the *Communist Manifesto*, Moulines says that the spectre of nationalism is haunting chancelleries, parliaments, newspapers, universities, and public opinion all over Europe [Carlos Ulises Moulines, 'Manifiesto nacionalista (o hasta separatista, si me apuran).' *Isegoría* 24 (2001): 25].

⁶ Mainly, Catalonia, the Basque Country, and Galicia.

⁷ Michael Billig, *Banal Nationalism* (London: Sage Publications, 1995), 5.

⁸ Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 6.

⁹ Friedrich Meinecke, *Cosmopolitanism and the National State* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970), 11.

¹⁰ Notice that the term 'nationalism' is avoided when talking of Spain.

¹¹ The opposition between constitutionalists and nationalists is the outcome of the reception of Habermas' constitutional patriotism in Spain, a theory which was 'misused as part of a wide-ranging debate on regional autonomy' [Jan-Werner Müller, *Constitutional Patriotism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), 44]. Habermasian prestige led Spanish nationalists to identify themselves with the Constitution, a norm which embodied the principles of democracy and human rights; consequently, those who confronted any aspect of the norm, such as the national organisation, were regarded as enemies of the Constitution.

¹² Billig, *Banal Nationalism*, 6.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 5.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 8.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 38.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ The flag hanging on a public building, national emblems borne on coins and bank notes, and the organization of broadsheets separating national from international news are some examples of banal nationalism.

¹⁹ Billig, *Banal Nationalism*, 77.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 40-41.

²¹ The angry reaction of the Spanish government to the Republican anthem being played by mistake during the final of the Davis Cup in 2003 represents a good example of it, intimately connected to the topic of this paper. More recently, at the final of the King's Cup of football in 2009, played by Athletic Club of Bilbao and Fútbol Club Barcelona (Barcelona Football Club), both the king and the national anthem were booted; TVE1, the public channel, did not broadcast live during those minutes, apparently by mistake, and the whistling was removed from

the pictures shown at half-time. Such manoeuvre was widely understood as a kind of censorship to protect the monarchy, one of the symbols of the Spanish nation, against a Basque-Catalan nationalist attack. This year the final of the King's Cup took place at Vicente Calderón stadium (Atlético of Madrid's ground) and the two teams were Athletic and Barça again. Considering the likely possibility of a new booing to the prince –the king was not attending owing to health problems– and the anthem, Esperanza Aguirre, the president of the Autonomous Community of Madrid and a loyal advocate of the Spanish nation, had previously suggested playing the match behind closed doors. Finally, her advice was not followed, but TVE1 suppressed the whistling again.

²² Ley 10/1990 del Deporte.

²³ Football is *el deporte rey* (the king of sports) in Spain.

²⁴ Jeremy MacClancy, 'Sport, Identity and Ethnicity,' in *Sport, Identity and Ethnicity*, ed. Jeremy MacClancy (Oxford: Berg, 1996), 2.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 12.

²⁶ *La cantera* is the rule which states that only Basque players –those born or brought up in any of the seven provinces which Euskalherria, the Basque Country, consists of– can be signed up.

²⁷ Royal Spanish Sports Club –the very name was seen as a provocation by *culé* fans, according to Shaw– [Duncan Shaw, *Fútbol y franquismo* (Madrid: Alianza, 1987), 22].

²⁸ Barça did not commit itself to fostering the youth academy; it rather preferred to spend vast sums on international stars in order to emulate its eternal rival –Real Madrid–.

²⁹ Shaw, *Fútbol y franquismo*, 212.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 214.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 215.

³² Camp Nou is the stadium of Barcelona Football Club.

³³ The Palau Blaugrana is the sports hall where Barça basketball, roller-hockey, handball and indoor-soccer teams play.

³⁴ Such as Oleguer Presas, Hristo Stoitchkov, Óscar García, Joan Laporta, and so on.

³⁵ Paul Preston, 'Prólogo,' in *Fútbol y franquismo*, ed. Duncan Shaw (Madrid: Alianza, 1987), 13.

³⁶ Shaw, *Fútbol y franquismo*, 50.

³⁷ Alex J. Botines, *La gran estafa del fútbol español* (Barcelona: Amaika, 1975), 71.

³⁸ Enrique Gil de la Vega, cited in Shaw, *Fútbol y franquismo*, 58.

³⁹ Shaw, *Fútbol y franquismo*, 59.

⁴⁰ Jeremy MacClancy, 'Nationalism at Play: The Basques of Vizcaya and Athletic Club de Bilbao,' in *Sport, Identity and Ethnicity*, ed. Jeremy MacClancy (Oxford: Berg, 1996), 192.

⁴¹ For example, at international matches Spanish flags are waved and the national anthem is played; supporters of Barcelona carry *senyeres* (the Catalan flag), while fans of Basque clubs bear *ikurriñas* (the Basque flag).

⁴² Such as the UEFA Champions League, the UEFA Europa League, the FIFA Club World Cup.

⁴³ Lucía Payero, 'La nación se la juega: relaciones entre el nacionalismo y el deporte en España,' *Ágora para la educación física y el deporte* 10 (2009).

⁴⁴ Norbert Elias, 'Introducción,' in *Deporte y ocio en el proceso de civilización*, ed. Norbert Elias and Eric Dunning (México D.F.: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1992), 55.

⁴⁵ Feelings of danger, fear, joy, hatred, nervousness, ecstasy, rage, pain or deep sadness.

⁴⁶ *Senyeres, ikurriñas* and *estrelleiras* (the Galician flag of the left-wing parties).

⁴⁷ Shaw, *Fútbol y franquismo*, 183-185.

⁴⁸ Cornelius Castoriadis, *The Imaginary Institution of Society* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1987).

⁴⁹ Payero, 'Nación se la juega,' 110.

⁵⁰ Such as competitiveness, effort, sacrifice, teamwork, obedience, discipline, and fair-play.

⁵¹ Payero, 'Nación se la juega,' 104-105.

⁵² Eric Dunning, 'Lazos sociales y violencia en el deporte,' in *Deporte y ocio en el proceso de civilización*, ed. Norbert Elias and Eric Dunning (México D.F.: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1992).

⁵³ Payero, 'Nación se la juega,' 105.

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