

## World Cup Fever, Nationalism, and the Ambiguous Alliance of Nation-States and Transnational Corporations

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Transnational corporations (TNCs) and nation-states, while often opposed in their interests, have in relation to international sporting events engaged in a tenuous alliance, each hoping to exploit the tremendous emotion and enthusiasm inspired by events such as the 2006 World Cup. However, passions of such intensity are difficult to predict or control, and because such spectacles involve competition between *rival* groups – in this case *national* groups – the emotions involved are frequently connected to a sense of intense *national pride*, of affinity to an ‘imagined community’ that may or may not be coterminous with the contemporary nation-state encompassing it. Nationalism is not a homogenous phenomenon but rather arises in strikingly different manifestations, with divergent motivations and consequences. Thus, while nation-states and TNCs may have much to gain from encouraging such spectacles, they also potentially have much to lose, as the significations attributed to such events are never entirely under their control, and the consequences that may ensue from them are as likely to undermine their interests as aid them.

It is a peculiar function of the modern world that, even in these times of (relative, alleged) globalization, international sport is elevated to the status of ‘pseudo-war’ in terms of its ability to foster feverish devotion to communal identities. The FIFA World Cup, as the preeminent competition of the world’s most played and watched sport, is, along with the Olympics, the prototypical embodiment of this situation. Seeking to capitalize on the tremendous emotion inspired by these international spectacles, nation-states and transnational corporations (TNCs) have engaged in a tenuous, ambiguous alliance that exacerbates the immense quasi-political tensions surrounding such events. In doing so, however, nation-states and TNCs are fostering a phenomenon whose behaviour is difficult to predict or contain. As Sugden and Tomlinson (2003) argue, “[people] congregate around football [...] to make strong public declarations of who they are, what groups they identify with, what they stand for and who and what they stand against” (175), and while stoking the fires of communal sentiment may be profitable in the short-term, the long-term political consequences may be as likely to harm the interests of nation-states and TNCs as aid them. Nationalism is not a homogenous phenomenon but rather arises in strikingly different manifestations under different contexts, with divergent motivations and consequences, and premised upon different conceptions as to the nature of the ‘nation’ being referred to.

In both material and ideological terms, nation-states and TNCs operate upon a common demographic: namely, ‘average people;’ the ‘majority;’ the ‘community.’ It has frequently been suggested, particularly by globalization theorists, that the rising influence of TNCs and global communication has produced a whole-scale decline in national and local sympathies, reducing the nation-state to a “spent force” (Hargreaves 2002, 36). However, while politically the nation-state as a source of strength and authority may indeed be in decline, ideologically ‘nationalism’ has maintained an “enduring relevance [...] as a source of identity and differentiation” (Silk, Andrews and Cole 2005, 4), thanks in no small part to competitive spectacles such as the World Cup, which uphold the nation as a site of allegiance and identification. The commonly-perceived struggle facing international football’s governing body, FIFA – of “balancing its global ideals with the fact that international football per se tends to stimulate and promote parochial forms of nationalism” (Sugden and Tomlinson 2003, 178) – is in fact shared by corporations, as they conspire to benefit from having their products and names associated with nationalist spectacles without inspiring the sort of political nationalism that tends to oppose itself to TNCs’ agenda of market deregulation.

On the other end of the dynamic, nation-states face a Faustian dilemma over corporate sponsorship for their teams, which promises a possible payout in terms of the financial, ideological and political spoils of iconic victories, but comes at the expense of losing control over the construction of their own national images. As Silk, Andrews and Cole (2005) argue, when nation-states become dependent upon corporate sponsorship (sport-related or otherwise), “the locus of control in influencing the manner in which the nation and national identity are represented becomes exteriorized through, and internalized within, the promotional strategies of transnational corporations” (7). Moreover, inciting nationalist sentiment may just be a double-edged sword, for the nation-state is “not always coterminous with the nation” (Bairner 2001, 2) of popular conception and devotion. Ethnic nationalism, a form of community delineated along racial or ‘cultural’ fault-lines, is “as likely to pose a threat to the existing political order as to provide the basis for its maintenance” (Bairner 2001, 18), which accounts for the evident racial and ethnic tensions not only between but within nations competing in the World Cup.

As we can see, then, there is no straight-forward dynamic between nationalism, nation-states and TNCs: rather, nation-states and TNCs make appeals to nationalism haphazardly on the perception of potential gain, and may do so either in opposition to or complicity with each other. Despite their relative hegemonic authority, in appealing to ‘national sentiments’ neither TNCs nor nation-states can guarantee their own desired consequences, as the agency (or just unpredictability) of individuals and groups is liable to inflect and complicate the resulting spectacle. Postcolonial theorist Arjun Appadurai posits that the characteristic feature of the

contemporary world “is the tension between cultural homogenization and cultural heterogenization” (as cited in Bairner 2001, 8), a view Robert Robertson elaborates on by suggesting that it “is not a question of either homogenization or heterogenization, but rather of the ways in which both of these two tendencies have become features of life” (as cited in Bairner 2001, 10). This dynamic – which manifests in complex, convoluted ways so that it is rarely clear precisely who stands in which camp – will be useful in seeking to understand the divergent interests and social, ethnic, economic, and ideological conflicts that find public expression during the World Cup.

A few preliminary remarks are in order. Since nationalism is at least implicitly associated with the state, and likewise the state is more directly influenced by the will and self-image of the ‘people’ it governs, the stakes of appealing to nationalism may of course be greater for nation-states than for TNCs. However, as the numerous corporate bankruptcies of the last six years have demonstrated, corporations, while monolithic, are nonetheless fragile enterprises: an unpredicted resurgence of nationalist political will and solidarity in one of their regions of operation is just the sort of incident upon which TNCs can and have been skewered. And since a) in Africa, football played a pivotal role in national independence movements against colonial regimes, and continues to act as a forum for communal solidarity and political protest, as will be demonstrated below; and b) economic globalization is, in many ways, merely a renewed form of colonial imperialism in which TNCs increasingly act directly as agents of imperial control in ‘developing’ nations, I will argue that the rising influence of African clubs and players in international football could potentially become a rallying point around which African populations assert their solidarity in resistance, specifically, to TNCs’ imperialist agendas.

By contrast, in Europe, where corporate predominance has generally been acceded to and incorporated into the prevailing social mythology, football fuelled nationalism poses little threat to TNCs. However, since unlike in Africa, where football is connected to national consciousness, European football is at least as if not more deeply inscribed with *local* and *ethnic* sympathies, it has increasingly become a forum through which two disparate visions of European nationhood compete for dominance: one vision multiethnic, cosmopolitan and transnational, and the other committed to ‘turning back the clock’ to a mythological time when the ‘nation’ supposedly embodied local, cultural and racial idealized traditions. As a spectacle football thus has immense significance to the future of European nation-states.

It might at first glance seem bizarre, if not backward, that sport of any kind should carry such symbolic and mythological relevance in peoples’ conceptions of nationhood. However, since, as Benedict Anderson famously asserted, the nation is in the first place merely an “imagined community” whose political significance

derives from the mythological value ascribed to it, football is as valid a means as any for the expression of nationhood. As Krauss (2003) suggests, the “nation as an ‘imagined community’ is in need of such ritualized performances [...] in order to become real, in order to become encoded in bodies, and thus to bring forth national bodies” (200). Thus football can be more than just a passive vehicle for the expression of fixed signification, because as Krauss (2003) himself suggests (echoing Roland Barthes (1972)), rituals do not merely *express* community identity but also *construct* and define community and the significations accorded it. It is because of its ability to shape and propagate particular conceptions of nationhood that football possesses such political and ideological significance within so many societies.

Of course, in Africa the postcolonial nation is, in relation to tribal and communal sympathies, so obviously an artificial relic of colonialism that its significance, and the significance of international sport, is less mythological than overtly political. In the Barthesian sense (1972), myths are created by the ruling classes as a means of control a naturalized justification of privilege, whereas the poor and downtrodden relate to the ‘world’ in a political manner that reflects their direct, productive relationship to ‘things’ or phenomena. Since Africa predominantly represents the poorest and most downtrodden members of the global world order, it is not surprising then that the significance placed on football there is often explicitly political in reference to persistent political, economic and ‘racial’ injustices.

According to Darby (2002) in the colonial era football “represented one of the few meaningful institutions over which Africans could realistically secure ownership ... the emergence of an indigenous infrastructure for African football marked the game out as an ideal medium for challenging the colonial status quo” (26). Thus, as Ossie Stuart argues, “from the post-war period onwards, soccer at different times became an embodiment of the political aspirations of the African people” (as cited in Darby 2002, 23), and because of that legacy football continues to be a forum for political assertions of collective solidarity.

A few historical anecdotes<sup>1</sup> should convey the extent to which football and national independence movements were intimately wed. In Tanzanyika (now Tanzania), sports clubs regularly acted as fronts for “prohibited political gatherings”, to the extent that members of the clubs were often also members of the leading nationalist political party. In Zanzibar, African footballers began boycotting matches with European referees, eventually forming their own independent team, African Sports, which served as “a rallying point for expressions of African nationalism in Zanzibar” (Darby 2002, 28). In Algeria, meanwhile, the Front de Liberation National founded the “Revolutionary Eleven” team, composed primarily of African footballers who returned from playing in France to express their support for

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<sup>1</sup> All examples in this paragraph are taken from Darby (2002).

independence. Upon gaining independence in 1962, many of the players were subsequently rewarded with prominent governmental positions. Ferhat Abbas, a football administrator prior to being appointed President of Algeria's Provisional Government, expressed a seemingly common sentiment among Africans then and now: "They rule us with guns and machines. On a man-to-basis, on the field of football, we can show them who is really superior" (as cited in Darby 2002, 29).

Though every African country fields its own national team, the success of African teams internationally is generally viewed as a symbolic pan-African victory against the former colonial oppressors and the present world order, to the degree that a victory for Senegal over France was praised by the Senegalese President for "defending the honour of Africa" (Jarvie 2003, 539). To the extent that it allows African nations to compete on a hypothetically level playing field (though far from actual in practice, considering the massive differences in budgets and Europe's disproportionate influence within FIFA), football is seen as providing Africa "an opportunity to invert the actual power relationships reigning in the world" (Vidacs 2003, 151) and so symbolically re-establish some measure of the collective pride and honour that the colonial experience had robbed them of. Thus, in contrast to the passionate ethnic nationalism often displayed in Europe, or the happy internationalism espoused by TNCs in advertisements such as Adidas' 2006 advertisement "Jose+10", in which a number of famous football players from different nations magically appear for a pick-up match in an impoverished South American courtyard, African fans typically view football in terms of continental, pan-African pride. While in intracontinental matches Africans may cheer for their respective national or local teams, against other nations, particularly European ones, football becomes a venue for 'representing Africa.'

Because of its popularity both in Africa and abroad, and because it represents one of the few forums through which Africans from impoverished and disempowered backgrounds can gain notoriety – and thus a voice in social discourse – football is an ideal spectacle for the expression of opposition to both African political corruption and the foreign imperial influence that upholds it. This is not to suggest that, if Africa manages to successfully oppose corporate imperialism and turn back the tide of privatization, deregulation, resource exploitation and foreign-backed dictatorships, it will be *because* of opposition expressed by footballers or football crowds. Rather, football merely provides a venue through which the *spectacle* of opposition can be conveyed to African communities and to the industrialized world. According to Perales (2000), "[in] Gramscian terms, the notion of resistance is based on the production of a *counter*hegemony that would break the ideological grip of socially dominant classes" (248). Football (ironically an import from the former colonizing societies) allows for the enactment of such a resistance to the hegemonic discourse of neo-liberal economic globalization. (Indeed, it is precisely

*because* football's heritage is shared with the colonizing cultures that it may now act as a forum for the expression of African pride and solidarity in front of and in opposition to their former colonizers and the neo-colonial globalized world order.)

To my knowledge, such opposition has yet to occur in relation to football; but the massive protests enacted in Johannesburg in 2002 outside the World Summit on Sustainable Development suggest that Africans are beginning to mobilize for this purpose in substantial numbers. And while capitalism is notoriously proficient in co-opting and forestalling dissent, I can think of three reasons why such may not be the case in Africa. Firstly, to an even greater degree than in industrialized nations, the financial spoils of TNCs' activities have been shared with only a very small number of African individuals. Secondly, the discourse of absolute individualism that underscores the logic behind laissez-faire economics has not entirely gained the hegemonic force in Africa that it enjoys in European and North American societies. Thirdly, the spectacle of millionaire footballers playing for the national teams of brutally impoverished nations is, one might assume, liable to raise qualms in even the most apolitical spectator, and pangs of conscience in even the most cynical footballer. Thus, with the historic relationship between football and social protest cemented in African popular mythology, and with the rising profile of African footballers at home and abroad, it is entirely possible that we may soon see the sort of symbolic protests akin to those undertaken by African American Olympic athletes in the 1960s and 1970s, with the target of opposition this time being imperialistic economic globalization. (Should this happen, it is another pleasant irony that TNCs, who through their sponsorship, advertisements and media networks are largely responsible for the World Cup's significance and magnitude as a global spectacle, will themselves have afforded the opportunities for such displays.) The 2010 World Cup in South Africa will certainly test this thesis.

In European football, the situation is substantively different. At both the national and club level, football teams represent communities which, after centuries of relative demographic stability, are being dramatically altered by the processes of global communication and (im)migration. Since this process of change has by no means been uncontested or without conflict, football – in light of its enormous popularity – has taken on symbolic and political significance as a means of constructing and *representing* different conceptions of what is or should be the nature of the nation-state and its people. (Eric Hobsbawm suggests one reason at play here is that “[the] imagined community of millions seems more real as a team of eleven named people. The individual [...] becomes a symbol for the nation himself” (as cited in Perales 2000, 249).) Football as spectacle and narrative thus becomes a forum in which opposing visions of nationhood compete. Though this binary opposition is, of course, a gross simplification of dynamic contesting values, for the sake of analysis (and because in real terms this binary *informs* socio-political

discourse), these opposing positions can be expressed as a) civic nationalism, representing the present state of European nation-states in which upwards of twenty percent of the population is of 'foreign', often non-European descent; and b) ethnic nationalism, which seeks a return to the 'ethnic' (racial) homogeneity and mythological values or virtues attributed to each respective nation-state's past.

Of course, as a spectacle football is primarily controlled not by politicians but by the TNCs who influence both the presentation of the event and its subsequent signification in the media. As such, TNCs will favour one representative vision over another based on its potential profitability, not the national interests involved. However, in sport especially (as opposed to many 'high culture' events where script and audience passivity are strictly adhered to) we can never discount the agency of the individuals involved, both as spectators and competitors, any one of whom has the potential to influence the game's signification in unpredictable ways.

Before turning to several contemporary examples of this representational conflict undertaken through football, it is important for us to gain an understanding of the discursive and mythological connections between nationhood, belonging, people and place. According to Gomberg (2000), "[only] as capitalism came to dominate European society did the new ruling bourgeoisie encourage and develop popular consciousness of nationhood as a way of organizing the political loyalty of all classes to its rule" (92). Prior to this, "empires were typically multiethnic and did not attempt to combine our idea of nationality with the state as the locus of political power" (Gomberg 2000, 92). During the colonial and late industrial period (approximately the late 1800s to the end of the 1960s), political and social leaders increasingly drew a connection between the nation-state and supposed exclusive 'racial' (synonymous with 'national') and cultural virtues in order to mobilize the population's support for imperial conquests within Europe and around the world. While the Second World War and the rise of fascism demonstrated the fatal consequences of defining nationhood in those terms, the mythology of ethnic nationalism continues to inform many Europeans' understanding of community and its relation to nationhood. That the demographic and social history of Europe does not, by and large, support this mythology is of little consequence, for as Barthes (1972) quipped, "Myth is a value, truth is no guarantee for it" (123). Moreover, since community can be defined in ever smaller and more precise terms, ethnic nationalism has a tendency to become viciously reductive, as is borne out by the recent civil war in former Yugoslavia, the various nationalist insurgent movements across Europe and the world, and the UN's ever-increasing membership.

Thus, the relationship between community and nationhood is problematic at best; yet despite, or perhaps because of globalization, this relationship continues to inform the terms of many nationalist discourses. Tony Parker suggests that "as boundaries dissolve [...] we become more aware of cultural *difference* and diversity"

(as cited in Amis 2005, 148), to the extent that, Joseph Maguire argues, “[competing] and distinctive cultures are thus involved in an infinitely varied, mutual contest of *sameness* and *difference*” (as cited in Bairner 2001, 12). Civic nationalism, a model which “celebrates citizenship within particular political entities as opposed to membership in supposedly natural human associations” (Bairner 2001, 3), arises from the perceived need to conceptualize a nationhood that is multiethnic and dynamic.

As a competitive sport, football engages in a process of ‘othering’ (Krauss 2003, 197) – the creation of a discourse of ‘us’ versus ‘them’ – which helps to explain why, according to Krauss (2003), nationalists’ “heroes are not great thinkers or theoreticians, but football players” (207), whose profession by its very nature encourages the schematic polarization of peoples likewise sought by nationalists. For ethnic nationalists, however, the recurrent flows of global immigration have severely challenged this dynamic, as evidenced by the 2006 match between Australia and Croatia, in which descendents of Croatian immigrants to Australia could be seen playing for both teams (Berlin 2006). The 2006 World Cup final, in this sense, provided an almost allegorical contest between France, a team credited to varying degrees with presenting a vision of France as multiethnic, multicultural and socially tolerant, and Italy, praised by Italian extra-parliamentary member Mario Borgeghio for being “all-white and all-Christian” (Shields 2006), and derived from a national league widely reviled as one of the most racist in Europe.

Though media sources have been predictably silent (considering the ideological interests of their transnational corporate owners) regarding the implications of this match and its notorious altercation between Zinedine Zidane and Mario Materazzi, the reactions of French and Italian citizens and politicians are telling of both the political import of such matches, and of the representative power national football teams exert upon their countries’ self-definitions. Though Materazzi’s insults were apparently not racial in character, the effect is essentially as if they were, as Zidane’s head-butt has been widely interpreted (especially by non-white populations) as a retaliation against the type of provocation that has particularly beleaguered non-white players on the field. In France, reaction to Zidane’s conduct has largely been characterized by a tone of respect and implicit affirmation of the justness of his response (even if one might disapprove of violence in general). Zidane was publically absolved by the French President among others, and though his machismo attitude has its own problematic implications (unfortunately not to be addressed here), he is still considered the prototypical working-class role model for the new multicultural France. Italian media, by contrast, generally reacted with indignation to Materazzi’s subsequent suspension (declaiming a prejudice against Italy), yet remained largely silent in response to the type of racist jargon – such as Italian Senator Roberto Calderoli’s declaration of a “political victory” over a French team which “in the quest for results, sacrificed its



own identity by selecting blacks, Muslims and communists” (Reuters 2006) – that has shaped perceptions of Italian football abroad. (Responding to Calderoli’s remark, France’s ambassador to Italy retorted that “France is proud of a team whose members are all its sons, whatever their origins or religion” (Reuters 2006).)

Through such remarks it becomes apparent the degree to which football has influenced the tenor of nationalist discourse in these countries. And while it can, of course, be argued that football is not the decisive factor influencing such discrepancies, it is important to note that Jean-Marie Le Pen, the leader of France’s influential far-right, xenophobic National Front Party, has made remarks similar to those of Calderoli, but his comments have been rebuked and marginalized in no small part because of the team’s successes and its willingness to defend multiculturalism and reach across socio-cultural divides. Responding to Le Pen in terms that mirror, yet preceded the French ambassador’s remarks, team member Lilian Thuram declared “When we take to the field, we do so as Frenchmen [...] So *vive la France*, but the true France. Not the France that [Le Pen] wants” (Fifield 2006). He was warmly applauded by the media on hand. Thus, rather than being merely a passive vessel for the expression of ethnic tensions, we see once again that football allows for the active expression of a particular vision of nationhood.

Of course, the politics of representation are rarely as straightforward as this. Germany, the host of the 2006 World Cup, provides an excellent example of both the peril and the potential of using sport to define the national community. Adolph Hitler’s appropriation of gymnastics and the Olympics to advance his Aryan mythology is now well known history. More relevant to our concerns, however, is the historical role of German football in both perpetuating ethnic nationalist sentiment and in pointing towards a new conceptualization of German identity similar to that accomplished by France’s team. In German social mythology, West Germany’s surprise victory in the 1954 World Cup – called the ‘Miracle at Berne’ – is retrospectively considered (and was to some degree at the time) the turning point in Germany’s recovery from the Second World War, and the definitive moment in the country’s redefinition as a self-confident though *moderate* nation-state. As Krauss (2003) suggests, post-fascist Germany’s “negative sense of identity was able to transform itself into a positive identity precisely and exclusively in relation to football” (199). This was not, of course, merely a spontaneous expression of popular sentiment; rather, according to Krauss (2003), the signification of the ‘Miracle at Berne’ was hegemonically determined by German public officials in collaboration with the media to fill the need in German society for symbolic reconstruction and rebirth. Post-fascist Germany was undoubtedly in need of positive redefinition; of concern, however, are the consistencies between this new national vision and the former one. German football, particularly at the national level, was dominated before, during and after the Nazi period by a conservative, patriarchal establishment,

the German Football Association (DFB), that insistently promulgated German football as an embodiment of innately 'German ideals': loyalty to the Fatherland, discipline, obedience, work ethic and the gendered segregation of social roles. With the end of the colonial era and the onset of massive global immigration from 'developing' to 'developed' countries, this hegemonic national narrative has throughout the world been into question, though in Germany like most places it also struggles to maintain its hold on the collective imagination. Jarvie (2003) concurs: "many of the traditional things that helped forge a sense of belonging – nation-states with putatively relatively homogenous populations; sports teams with home-grown nationals; well-established local communities; and allegiance to local teams, history, and tradition – are all being challenged" (543). With its mythic identity in crisis, Germany – which since the Second World War has taken pains to guard against public displays of prejudice – began to witness the types of racist, at times overtly neo-fascist displays that plague football terraces across Europe. Thus, in the years approaching its hosting of the World Cup, Germany and its population faced the necessity (fiercely opposed by ethnic nationalists) of redefining what it means to be 'German'. The Germanic National Museum approached this dilemma historiographically, staging an exhibit (timed in correspondence with the World Cup) entitled "What is German?" that "examines the world's image, and the German self-image, of 'Germanness' as it has changed over the years" (Saunders 2006, F3). On the football pitch, a new national coach was brought in whose tactics and attitudes frustrated conservatives in the DFB, but who has been credited by some with enlivening the German team by introducing some of the more fluid offensive tactics associated with South American football. For the first time in Germany's history, two black players were included on the national squad, as well as three other players of Polish and Swiss descent. But much as these reforms reflected positively on German society in the eyes of foreign visitors, during the World Cup officials were deeply concerned that far-right, ethnic nationalists would attempt to inflect the spectacle with their own ideological vision. As journalist Doug Saunders (2006) observed at the time, in light of their own history what "worries the Germans most of all is the symbolism" (F3). (Such an observation could indeed be generalized to speak to the fraught significance of symbolic spectacle for all nationalist constructions.) German public officials were painfully aware of the representative power of sport, and deeply concerned that their society reflect an image of cosmopolitan openness and acceptance. Whether their society actually embodies these values, however, remains questionable, but as the above-cited example of France suggests, under the right circumstances representations can partially *inform* reality, and so help achieve the values they display.

Particularly in relation to sports, nationalism and nationality tend to be viewed in simplistic terms that deny their historical and ideological contingency.

Nationalism is dynamic, complex and convoluted, and only incidentally related to any particular state or institution. The alliance of nation-states and transnational corporations to exploit World-Cup-inspired national sentiment is a charged endeavour, the results of which are unpredictable. As Barthes (1972) argues, “[a] long-continued use of the word *nation* has failed to depoliticize it in depth; the political substratum is there, very near the surface” (138). As spectacle and narrative, World Cup football can be (and has been) inflected with numerous significations even contrary to the desires of the corporations and nation-states under whose agency it is enacted. Through the agency of individuals and groups, football thus becomes a hotly contested forum for the expression of conflicting conceptions of nationhood and belonging.

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