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Football and National Identity in Europe

Alexander Brand and Arne Niemann

1. Football, Politics and Identity

That football and politics often intermingle is a truism. Everybody knows anecdotes about "football wars", "enduring rivalries" and "symbolic victories" on the pitch which gain their importance only when interpreted within the larger politico-cultural background. Just think of Germany's post-war restoration of self-confidence in 1954 (the "Miracle of Bern") or Poland's "victorious draw" against the Soviet Union in the second round of the 1982 World Cup, which was taken to resemble a symbolic revenge for the introduction of martial law in Poland in 1981 ordered by the Soviet leadership.[1] And who can forget that it was the riots at the occasion of a football match between (Croat) Dinamo Zagreb and (Serb) Red Star Belgrade in 1990 which set off a dynamic that culminated in the collapse of Yugoslavia? On the other hand, the increasingly multiethnic composition of clubs as well as national teams has given rise to ideas of more inclusive, less xenophobic societies throughout Europe. The Swiss may have just voted, by a small margin, to take measures to curb immigration; yet today's highly successful Swiss national team – it has lined up no less than 18 players with migrant origins since 2012[2] – nicely illustrates that football can act as a catalyst for change, and for the better! What all these examples have in common is that they refer to the dimension of "identity", i.e., self-understandings of people about their characteristic traits vis-à-vis others. Hence, football matches and football as a cultural practice can be said to constitute a site in which identities surface and are eventually transformed – and all this with political implications.

To *define* the term "identity" satisfactorily would necessitate a series of books, and still it is safe to assume that the resulting definition would be partial, selective and disputable. Some authors even question the very use of the term "identity". Brubaker and Cooper for instance argue that in order to come up with a term amenable to social

[1] Dmowski, Sewerin (2013). "Football Sites of Memory in Eastern Bloc 1945-1991", Presentation at the FREE Conference, Stuttgart 2013.

[2] Sonntag, Albrecht (2014). "Populist Own Goals", Blog entry, 25 February. Available at: http://www.free-project.eu/Blog/post/populist-own-goals-1781.htm, accessed: 11 April 2014.

science, the term "identity" should be replaced by more specific concepts.[3] The first substitute they use is "identification" with the advantage that it invites social scientists to specify the social actors who *do* the identifying. The second identity-substitute they offer is "self-understanding", on the grounds that this alternative explicitly recognizes the *subjective* nature of identity. The third alternative is "commonality" which is to merely denote similarities within social groups, promoting "a feeling of belonging together". Based on this, our understanding of identity in the context of football is inspired by the notion of group identities proposed by Eder.[4] Following from that, identities are collectively held self-understandings which are grounded in frames or narrative constructions delineating the boundaries of a network of actors. Consequently, identities are about "us versus them" phenomena, normal/foreign, acceptable/unacceptable actions, ideas and lifestyles, about "membership" and the stories upon which it is founded, emotional attachment and delineations from "others" in a situation of group plurality. As such, identities do not only enable and legitimise certain actions and policies. They may serve as a key resource for political actors, a resource that is to be nurtured in order to be exploited for political gains. Following from that, identities are sites of strategic importance (aptly described by the notion of "identity management"), as they are at the same time fluid, indeterminate, subject to manifold influences and relatively flexible outcomes of a host of social and cultural acts.[5]

Identity research by political scientists in Europe – research on national identities across Europe as well as forays into a "European identity" – has so far tended to restrict itself to analysing phenomena with an eye to strictly political issues. In doing so, it has explored rather *traditional* political issues such as: political convictions and shared political values as foundations of common identities, the identity potential of institutions and political symbols, and the eventual convergence of news agendas and political coverage throughout Europe. What is largely missing so far in political science is a focus on everyday activities that is lifeworldly and seemingly non-political dimensions of (national and European) identity formation. This is all the more lamentable since the potential of sport in particular for identification processes has already been established conceptually.

2. Football and National Identities

In the context of football, the issue of "national identity" usually arises in four different ways: alongside matches of national teams, regarding specific national styles of play, at

[3] Brubaker, Rogers and Frederick Cooper (2000). "Beyond 'Identity'", in *Theory and Society* 29: 1-47, pp. 6-20.

[4] Eder, Klaus (2009). "A Theory of Collective Identity. Making Sense of the Debate on a 'European Identity'", *European Journal of Social Theory* 12: 1-21.

[5] van Zoonen, Lisbet (2013). "From Identity to Identification: Fixating the Fragmented Self", *Media, Culture and Society* 35: 44-51, p. 44.

the level of club competition, particularly if a club is regarded as an "ambassador" of a quasi-nation, and finally, in the wake of mega events such as World Cups or European Championships.

At the level of *national team competition*, the classic formula is that national teams are said to inspire "passionate nationalism" because "an international football match involving *our* team intrudes into our daily routines, reminding us *with whom we stand* with regard to our fellow nationals and *whom we stand against* in the international sphere."[6] Such a conception indicates that it is relevant national "others" through which a national identity is activated and attains meaning at all. Social comparison hence leads to feelings and articulations of rivalry. Without doubt, however, such a dynamic is mostly event-driven, i.e., specific identity conceptions flare up in the run-up to a match and calm down later on, only to be activated again eventually when national teams meet anew. A case in point here is the ritual of England-Germany matches, which regularly bring up an essentialized English national identity conception in the UK press: notorious references to historic military victories ("Let's Blitz Fritz", "Achtung Surrender" or "Let Battle Commence") are invoked in order to outbalance the rather meagre track record of the English national team when playing against Germany.[7] More muted are such identity-relevant articulations of "us versus them" in the case of Spain versus Portugal, although one can easily detect traces of problematic neighbourly relations, historical rivalries and cultural differences in the discourse accompanying such "derbies". That it is often football-related developments (victories or dramatic losses) combined with complicated historical-political legacies which drive such identity-mongering is demonstrated by the case of Germany versus the Netherlands. Bitterness and hatred from the Dutch towards the Germans in the wake of World War II, the 1974 World Cup win by Germany beating the fancied Dutch in the final, the 1988 European Championship defeat of Germany through a last-minute goal and the infamous brawl between two players in the 1990 World Cup match[8] have added up to a situation of rivalry between the two neighbours which is almost exclusively turning violent during football matches. And, of course, it is about delineating "us" versus "them" (the "Mofs", Germans according to a Dutch cuss, and the "Cheese heads", a German invective for their Dutch neighbours). Most empirical studies, however, tend to conclude that such emotional

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[6] Sugden, John and Alan Tomlinson (1998). "Power and Resistance in the Governance of World Football. Theorizing FIFA's Transnational Impact", in *Journal of Sport and Social Issues* 22: 299-316, p. 304; emphases added.

[7] Vincent, John, Edward (Ted) M. Kian, Paul Pedersen, Aaron Kuntz and John S. Hill (2010). "England Expects: English Newspapers' Narratives about the English Football Team in the 2006 World Cup", in *International Review for the Sociology of Sport* 45: 199-223.

[8] *goal.com* (2012). "The Ten Most Intense International Football Rivalries". Available at: http://www.goal.com/en-ng/news/4072/euro-2012/2012/06/26/3201141/portugal-v-spain-the-10-most-intense-international-football, accessed: 11 April 2014.

upsurges are temporary phenomena which mellow after matches and tournaments; sustained aggressive nationalism is hardly an outcome of such identity work.[9] As Lechner succinctly puts it: "beyond the game, soccer does little to cement collective [national] identity."[10]

Interestingly, there seems to be one exception to this rule though. When "nations" are still in the process of formation, football may provide moments of identity galvanization. The most recent example in Europe for this is Kosovo, which was finally allowed to play an official friendly against Haiti in March 2014. Although FIFA rules forbade flying the Kosovo flag (the singing of the national anthem and jerseys with the "national emblem" were banned as well), 17,000 enthusiastic spectators flocked to the stadium in Mitrovica with self-styled flags.[11] Their "Kosova! Kosova!" shouts indicated that for *them*, the match was about more than football; it was about articulating a collective self-understanding, a will to political independence and recognition.

A second manifestation of the football/national identity-nexus is the idea of specific "football cultures" and "styles of play" which are said to be meaningful beyond the game. Talk about supposedly "German virtues" – an almost obsessive will to work, run and win on the pitch and in normal life – is common as are characterizations of "passionate" South Europeans (Italy and Spain) or creative but ultimately losing Frenchmen. This conscious use and creative projection of stereotypical images is relevant for the identity-question, in particular if such clichés are accepted and carried on by those who are the objects of stereotyping. As Crolley and Hand demonstrate, again we see a blending of an alleged essence of national football styles and specific general traits ascribed to people.[12] According to their analyses, if there is a fit between stereotypes and preferred match strategies or philosophies (individualist versus collectivist, defending versus aggressively striking, working hard versus playing elegantly), such attributions may even become subject to political instrumentalization and marketization. Think of how the tradition of "lionheart spirit" and "fair play" finally culminated in the (English) Football Association's branding strategy of "lion symbolism" in the wake of the EURO 1996. Such identity-work, however, might lead to very different reactions abroad and among competitors on the field: While there was widespread admiration of the "English fighting spirit" in France in the mid-1990s, the Spanish

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[9] Mutz, Michael (2013). "Patrioten für drei Wochen. Nationale Identifikation und die Fußballeuropameisterschaft 2012", in *Berliner Journal für Soziologie* 22: 517-538; von Scheve, Christian, Manuela Beyer, Sven Ismer, Marta Kozłowska and Carmen Morawetz (2014). "Emotional Entrainment, National Symbols, and Identification: A Naturalistic Study around the Men's Football World Cup", in *Current Sociology* 62: 3-23.

[10] Lechner, Frank (2007). "Imagined Communities in the Global Game: Soccer and the Development of Dutch National Identity", in *Global Networks* 7: 193-229, here: 225.

[11] Ehrmann, Johannes (2014). "Kosova! Kampion!", in *11Freunde*, April: 76-82.

[12] Crolley, Liz and David Hand (2006). *Football and European Identity. Historical Narratives through the Press*, London: Routledge, chap. 2.

press mostly mocked the nostalgic references to old-fashioned values and past glory.[13] Here, this specifically constructed notion of "Englishness" in the football arena was seen as antiquated and autumnal. Sometimes such identity-management also fits the purpose of turning a defeat into a victory of sorts. Again, Crolley and Hand point to how the French press commented on the 1982 World Cup semi-final defeat of France by Germany. The most prominent theme there was that "French romanticism had triumphed in defeat" and that Germany had won "because we [the French] were better", i.e., playing more elegantly, creatively, spectacularly.[14] The Germans only dominated physically and through their machine-like efficiency. Clearly, this resembles a merger of supposedly national characteristics with expectations of a proper style of play as well as wilful constructions of how a nation is best represented to the outside world.

At the level of club competition, national identity dynamics are rarer. Although there are cases of national rivalries read into club competition, the, even by historical standards, fairly multinational composition of internationally competing club squads often mutes identity-related outbursts of national sentiment. As Taylor reminds us, this is hardly only a feature of today's globalized players' markets. Bari FC fielded Swiss, German, Austrian, French, Spanish, British and Italian players when it was founded in 1908, and the Naples team at the beginning of the century included Belgians, Maltese and Norwegians next to German and Swiss players.[15] More generally, there has often been a relatively high level of foreign players in some European leagues even before the Bosman ruling of the European Court of Justice in 1995 (e.g., in England, the Netherlands, France and Austria).

For this reason, dynamics of national identity are rather to be found in cases where specific European clubs have emerged as a substitute for "sub-national", regional, or secessionist teams. Within such regions, which at least from time to time toy with the idea of becoming (more) autonomous from a central state, football clubs and their actions may become focal points of identification for such aspirations. This is obvious with regard to Catalonia and the Basque country in Spain, and FC Barcelona and Athletic Bilbao, respectively. Although there is a Catalan *Selección*, i.e., a quasi-national team which has already played some friendlies, FC Barcelona has undoubtedly attained the status of an institution to represent Catalonia to the outside world.[16] Visible signs of this are not only the abandonment of the once-enforced Spanish club title – CF – and the return of the Catalan stripes in the club's emblem after 1974, at the end of Franco's dictatorship, banners at Camp Nou reading "We are not Spain" during international friendlies are not uncommon, and the collective shouting of "Independencia!" at 17:14

[13] Ibid., pp. 36-37.

[14] Ibid., p. 52.

[15] Taylor, Matthew (2006). "Global Players? Football, Migration and Globalization, c. 1930-2000", in *Historical Social Research* 31: 7-30, p. 14.

[16] Crolley and Hand, op. cit., p. 125.

of the match clock – a reference to the regionally important date of 1714 – is by now a well-established ritual. To some degree, albeit muted, the club officials themselves promulgate the specific image of Barça as "more than a club". Such identity work, however, finds its limits when commercial interests are at stake. Hence, when Barça fans demanded that a defender reject an invitation to play for the Spanish national team in 2006, PR officials at Barça tried to suppress this story as much as possible for fear of losing nationwide sponsors.[17] Concerning Basque identity politics, it may be the case that several clubs compete for the role of a "national" ambassador.[18] However, Athletic Bilbao fosters such an indigenous identity by particular means: it has, by and large, only Basque players on their books. Such a policy is certainly identity politics at the extreme. It strives for a perfect fit between the club, the regional/local fan base and those that represent it on the field. In terms of its outcomes, sport economist Szymanski has labelled this the "Bilbao effect": "If all of football clubs were like this – based *around tight knit communities* which cared only about preserving their *local identity* – then most of the commercial and financial problems in football would disappear" (emphases added).[19] Be that as it may, in terms of the identity component, however, one can clearly see that in this case political and cultural ideas (language, community, national autonomy) and "us versus them"-dynamics (Basque, not Spanish, not international) coalesce in a football club's policy.

Finally, issues of national identity are regularly debated in the context of football mega events such as World Cups and European Championships. Hosting such events has at least two implications concerning identity: internally, it is about a collective effort to make the best games ever possible (yes, *we* can). Externally, it is about showcasing a country to the outside world, about reputational gains and managing a country's image internationally (yes, *they* can). Recent examples of such phenomena are abound, be that of France '98 with the French team finally winning the World Cup at home, or Germany's "summer fairy tale" (*Sommermärchen*) in 2006 despite only finishing third. While France's hosting of the World Cup and its win in 1998 is often said to have reasserted an alleged lack in self-confidence (as regards sports as well as politics),[20] the German case of success in 2006 had more to do with what happened alongside the tournament. One need not buy into the self-congratulatory language of the Final Report of the Federal Government which stated that "[e]ven in countries with a traditionally critical view of Germany, old stereotypes have been called into question through the World Cup 2006. Germany and its people are said to be more

[17] Federmair, Klaus (2014). "Eine Stadt sieht gelb-rot", in *ballesterer* (AUT), January: 16-26, p. 23.

[18] Crolley and Hand, op. cit., p. 133.

[19] Szymanski, Stefan (2012). "Manchester United 2 Athletic Bilbao 3: Aurten kopa irabaziko dugu", in *Forbes Online*, 9 March. Available at: http://www.forbes.com/sites/stefanszymanski/2012/03/09/manchester-united-2-athletic-bilbao-3-aurten-kopa-irabaziko-dugu/, accessed: 11 April 2014.

[20] Crolley and Hand, op. cit., p. 63.

relaxed, more friendly and emotional."[21] What such assessments demonstrate, however, is that the image dimension was a decidedly targeted sphere of political action (through football). And survey research seems to be rather unequivocal in telling that, as an identity-management effort, hosting the World Cup has been a success for Germany: buzzwords of "friendly nationalism", "relaxed patriotism" and "normalization" made the headlines, domestically and abroad.

That hosting a football mega event in today's Europe is most often at least to some degree linked to image politics, nation marketing and fostering national self-understandings is underscored by Switzerland's co-hosting of the EURO 2008, too. Despite rather meagre accomplishments in world football (up to 2008), the Swiss bid for co-hosting the games arguably also served the purpose of demonstrating a cosmopolitan outlook and positioning itself as an economically capable and reliable partner of Austria (which had unsuccessfully tried to organize the games before with Hungary and the Czech Republic).[22] However, such identity work is hardly a self-seller; sometimes it is elusive, both internally and externally. The European Championships 2012, for instance, had been co-hosted by Poland and the Ukraine but this effort obviously neither forged a national identity within Ukraine nor did it contribute to polishing its reputation abroad. For Ukraine, hence, the legacy of hosting the EURO 2012 may comprise of infrastructure upgrades[23], but at the level of identities and image politics, this has not turned out to be an appropriate quick-fix.

3. Football and Transnational Identities

Is football a field where only "national identities" (if at all) are articulated, forged and transformed? We think this not to be the case and have proposed to analyze more in-depth whether there are identity-related dynamics transcending societies in Europe.[24] This idea is anchored in the by now uncontroversial phenomenon of the Europeanization

[21] Abschlussbericht der Bundesregierung "Fussball-WM 2006", Berlin: Presse- und Informationsamt, p. 24.

[22] Koller, Christian (2012). "Football Negotiating the Placement of Switzerland within Europe", in Manzenreiter, Wolfram and Georg Spitaler (eds.), *Governance, Citizenship and the New European Football Championships*, London: Routledge, pp. 54-66.

[23] Cienski, Jan and Roman Olearchyk (2012). "Euro 2012 to leave a more valuable legacy", in *Financial Times*, 14 June.

[24] Brand, Alexander and Arne Niemann (2013). "Europeanisation from Below? Football Spectatorship, Mediatisation and European Identity", FREE-Working Paper, March 2013. Available at: http://www.free-project.eu/documents-free/, accessed: 11 April 2014.

of football.[25] Based on the growing influence of the European Union and its institutions, i.e., EU-level decision making and legislation, on the governance of football, as well as the increased attempts by national (sports) actors to go via "the European level", we have analyzed several mechanisms in this regard. These are: the European Court of Justice's (ECJ's) Bosman ruling and its impact on European players' markets; Bosman and its implications for the overhaul of the transfer regime; the issue of broadcasting rights as picked up by the European Commission and various stakeholders; the establishment of the UEFA Champions League as a *de facto* European league of top clubs; and parallel to that, the evolution of new forms of transnational sport lobbying and networking. Through our analyses, we also compiled tentative evidence that the frequent interaction of club officials has, to some degree, "Europeanized" their perspectives. The question, however, is whether such phenomena are restricted to the elite level or whether we can also find an Europeanization of perspectives, ideas, understandings and identities at the mass popular level. Accordingly, increasingly Europeanized players' markets, frequent competition at the European level and its continent-wide broadcasting could have already had some effect on the perceptions of fans and spectators. In that sense, it might not be trivial when German fans cheer Dutch players and accept them as "theirs" or when, as one colleague once remarked, it might be of more relevance for a Liverpool supporter what happens at Barça than what is going on in Stoke. Gradually changing perception patterns might also be indicative of an emerging collective European identity, at least the Europeanization of such identities, anchored in cultural and lifeworldy practices.

For this purpose, we have started to explore two identity-dimensions among European football fans and spectators: "communities of belonging" and "frames of reference". "Communities of belonging" refer to in-group/out-group phenomena, perceptions of "foreignness" and delineations vis-à-vis other groups. Here, one would have to look at fans' reactions to the Europeanization of players' markets (normalization or "foreignness" still as a hot topic?) as well as to the overall level of interaction and networking of fans and spectators across borders. "Frames of reference", in turn, include the attractiveness assigned to different forms of competition (national versus European level), the reasons for such peer orientation (being top or being a national representative) and the eventual normalization of "going Europe"[26], i.e., travelling on the occasion of football matches and experiencing Europe all along that way. Some

[25] Niemann, Arne, Borja García and Wyn Grant (2011). *The Transformation of European Football. Towards a Europeanisation of the National Game*, Manchester: Manchester University Press; Brand, Alexander, Arne Niemann and Georg Spitaler (2013). "The two-track Europeanisation of Football: EU-level Pressures, Transnational Dynamics and their Repercussions within Different National Contexts", in *International Journal of Sports Policy and Politics* 5: 95-112.

[26] Millward, Peter (2006). "'We've all Got the Bug for Euro-aways': What Fans Say about European Football Club Competition", in *International Review for the Sociology of Sport* 41: 357-375.

trends suggest that a gradual transformation of self-understandings and identities towards more Europeanized, less nationally defined ideas is indeed underway. The arrival of and growing acclimatization towards "non-national heroes"[27] is a fact, as are more defensive gestures in fear of "over-foreignization". An interesting phenomenon in this regard is also "foreign fandom", i.e., fandom directed at clubs from other European countries. This is especially true for forms of fandom which are not reducible to migration and diaspora situations. It may be true that the regular fan travel between Ireland, Northern Ireland and Scotland (Celtic versus Rangers) is mostly due to religious affiliations and respective identity-work, and hence not exactly an embodiment of Europeanization. But what about the 8,000 vacant seats at Liverpool's Anfield road when flights across *European* airspace had to be cancelled as a result of volcanic ash clouds?[28] Why is it that FC Barcelona is, according to a 2012 survey of the ISBS Institute for Sports, Business and Society, fancied by 29 per cent of football fans across Europe? Ethnographic research in Britain has also shown that followers of clubs who regularly compete at the European level find more pleasure in a culturally defined notion of "Europeanness".[29] Anecdotal as this might be at the moment, we think it is worth undertaking more efforts to explore whether there is an incremental Europeanization of identities of football fans by default. As Jonathan Hill, ex-head of the EU Office at UEFA, remarked back in 2008: "It would be absurd to suggest that the Champions League is succeeding where the European parliament has often failed, but the fact that millions of Europeans now watch the same games at the same time *must surely count for something*."[30]

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[27] Levermore, Roger and Peter Millward (2007). "'Official' Policies and Informal Transversal Networks: Creating a Sense of Belonging across Europe through Sport?", in *The Sociological Review* 55: 144-164.

[28] Millward, Peter (2011). *The Global Football League: Transnational Networks, Social Movements and Sport in the New Media Age*, Houndsmills: Palgrave, p. 78.

[29] King, Anthony (2000). "Football Fandom and Post-national Identity in New Europe", in *British Journal of Sociology* 51: 419-442.

[30] Hill, Jonathan (2008). "A European Language", in *Prospect Magazine Online*, 29 February. Available at: http://www.prospectmagazine.co.uk/magazine/aeuropeanlanguage/, accessed: 11 April 2014; emphasis added.