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Exploring European Sporting Identities: History, Theory, Methodology

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Sport, Representation and Evolving Identities in Europe

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CULTURAL IDENTITY STUDIES

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Introduction

Exploring European Sporting Identities: History, Theory, Methodology

In his groundbreaking investigation of the emergence of the world sports system, *Global Games* (2001), the Dutch historian and sociologist Maarten Van Bottenburg charted the evolution of modern sport from its origins in locally varied pastimes to the international standardization that renders possible today's mega-competitions, such as the football World Cup and the Olympic Games. The point of departure for this sports-based transformation of the world was Europe, which was primarily responsible for the development, codification and then exportation of these new corporeal practices, simultaneously transforming itself and its inhabitants. As Van Bottenburg notes:

In European societies everyday life was conducted at the local or regional level well into the nineteenth century. [...]

In the latter half of the nineteenth century geographical and social relations were quickly transformed, partly through the advent of new transportation and communications networks. [...] All this had the effect of bridging cultural differences. Variations between regional costumes became blurred, standard languages came to predominate over dialects, national feast days demoted local festivities to the status of folklore, and nationally standardized sports became more important than local recreational activities. Without these processes of integration and increases in scale it would have been impossible for sportsmen and sportswomen from different regions (let alone countries) to compete with any regularity or for competitions to be organized and coordinated with set rules at the national and eventually international level.¹

1 M. Van Bottenburg, *Global Games* (trans. B. Jackson; Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2001), pp.3–4.

Thus regarded, the development of modern sport may legitimately be considered as a precursor of the processes of administrative integration and, within important limits, cultural homogenization that characterized the project of European construction in the wake of the Second World War, and which has been significantly extended since the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the final collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. Yet, paradoxically, a central theme of the present volume is the remarkable extent to which local, regional and national variations continue to exist, and even to predominate, in European sport, where they show no sign of ceasing to elicit meanings for individuals and communities which our contributors reveal to be both historically determined and contextually specific.

The point of departure for this survey of 'the state of play' in European sport is the sheer scale and ubiquity of this characteristically social (both associative and societal) phenomenon. For sport annually mobilizes millions of people across Europe: as practitioners in a wide variety of competitive, educational, recreational and, increasingly, health-related contexts; and as spectators, whether physically present or, more typically, following events via the mass media. In so doing, sporting practices and representations contribute significantly to the social construction of identities, through the elaboration of discourses and networks of power relations that, together, both shape and serve to legitimize highly distinctive processes of socialization. These mechanisms may be regarded negatively, for instance, by Marxist, Foucauldian and feminist critics respectively, as alienating, disciplinary and/or patriarchal.² They may also be interpreted more positively, as permitting self-expression and even self-actualization of various kinds, in a tradition of linking the playing of games to the education of the young that stretches at least as far back as the Roman concept of *mens sana in corpore sano* (a healthy mind in a healthy body). However, perhaps most persuasively, sport may be understood as combining both positive and negative features, depending on the specific situations in which it is practised, watched, listened to, read about or otherwise consumed, and thus on the variety of individual and collective experiences to which

2 P. Markula and R. Pringle, *Foucault, Sport and Exercise: Power, Knowledge and Transforming the Self* (London: Routledge, 2006), pp.98–103.

it may give rise. This is the consciously broad approach that underpins this collaborative investigation of sporting Europe and Europeans.

The inherent tensions and even contradictions of modern sport, and particularly its complex existence as a site of both personal liberation and institutional control, are necessarily an integral part of the case studies that follow. Whether the focus is on such conventionally negative manifestations of sport's social resonance as its use as an instrument of totalitarian rule in Fascist Italy (investigated by Paul Dietschy in Chapter 5), or on such apparently positive incarnations as the return of the Olympic Games to their ancient homeland on the occasion of the Athens 2004 Olympiad (discussed by Eleni Theodoraki in Chapter 3), the frequently paradoxical impacts of modern games come regularly to the fore. Moreover, as Patrick Mignon reminds us, in a putatively postmodern age of globalization and instant digital communication, the new individual and collective identities made – and unmade – by ephemeral sporting events require, if anything, an even greater focus on complexity and ambiguity.³

The essays collected here put forward original research into sport in modern and contemporary Europe, with their common aim being to examine its distinctive contribution to the construction of identities. To this end, they focus scholarly attention on sport's social significance, as a set of mass-mediated practices and spectacles giving rise to a complex network of images, symbols and discourses. The individual chapters and the work as a whole seek to explore, and ultimately to explain, the processes of representation and mediation involved in the sporting construction, and subsequent renegotiation, of local, national and, increasingly, global identities. Our study thus offers a survey of key developments in sporting Europe – from the mid-nineteenth century to the present, and from the Atlantic to the Urals – presenting findings by acknowledged international experts and emerging scholars at the level of individuals, communities, regions, nations and Europe as a whole, both in its geographical and political incarnations. The work's focus on representation offers a broadly conceived, and consciously inclusive, approach to issues of 'European-ness' in modern and contemporary sport.

3 P. Mignon, 'Le football investi par les capitaux', *Esprit*, January 1999, pp.121–33; see especially pp.132–3.

The present collaborative study is thus intended to contribute to the ongoing elucidation of the role of sport in the processes of identity construction in contemporary societies. Since the pioneering work of Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger on ‘the invention of tradition’ (1983), and Benedict Anderson on ‘imagined communities’ (1983),⁴ modern games have regularly been identified as a core component in the construction of Europeans’ individual and communal senses of self, particularly at the level of the modern nation-state. Our volume seeks to build on these still solid conceptual foundations, as well as on more recent and more specifically targeted work in this area, such as the important edited volumes by Jeremy MacClancy (*Sport, Identity and Ethnicity*, 1996), and by Adrian Smith and Dilwyn Porter (the latter a contributor to the present volume) (*Sport and National Identity in the Post-War World*, 2004).⁵ As a result of these and related interventions in what has become an expanding field of study, few academic commentators would today doubt sport’s significance as a mode of individual and communal interaction, and, *a fortiori*, of cultural representation. Indeed, a persuasive case can be made for regarding participation, broadly conceived, in mass sporting activities as among the most important modes of perception, both of ourselves and others, available to contemporary societies. Since their emergence and codification in the mid-nineteenth century, modern sports have exerted a powerful influence on both personal and collective self-images, and have thus impacted extensively on local and national politics, and even on the international order itself. At the core of this evolving system of signification, sport’s distinguishing input to the imaginative life and the identity politics of modern European nation-states has been a constant for well over a century.

This book, like the research project on which it is based, is consciously European in orientation and ambition. However, it is no coincidence that the funding which allowed the editors to invite sports specialists from

4 E. Hobsbawm and T. Ranger (eds), *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983); B. Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983).

5 J. MacClancy (ed.), *Sport, Identity and Ethnicity* (Oxford: Berg, 1996); A. Smith and D. Porter (eds), *Sport and National Identity in the Post-War World* (London: Routledge, 2004).

across the continent to gather and debate their findings should have been Irish, nor that the venue for their deliberations should have been a small city on Europe's Atlantic periphery. For, while Ireland may be located on the geographical – and even, perhaps, the economic and political – margins of Europe, there can be no doubting the centrality of the Irish case in any informed analysis of sports-related identity construction. In fact, the pivotal importance of the Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA) in the development of cultural and political nationalism in Ireland – and in the subsequent establishment and consolidation of a distinctively Irish state – can hardly be overstated. Founded in 1884, the GAA celebrated its 125th anniversary in 2009 and is widely hailed not only as the most important sports association right across the still politically divided island, but also as one of its foremost forces of social cohesion (notwithstanding its inevitably contested position in the 'Six Counties' of British-administered Northern Ireland).⁶ As a particularly clear exemplar, the case of the GAA stands as a paradigm of sport's multifaceted social role, and this at both the national and local levels, additionally serving to underline the broader value of the academic study of the history and sociology of modern sport. Again, significant contributions in this field have been made by analysts such as John Sugden and Alan Bairner (the latter a contributor to the present volume) in their pioneering *Sport, Sectarianism and Society in a Divided Ireland* (1986), as well as in subsequent works, including especially their edited volume on *Sport in Divided Societies* (1999).⁷

While the quintessentially home-grown sphere of Gaelic games will not be focused on in this European volume, other Irish sporting traditions do figure here. More specifically, the most global of sports, association football, is discussed in two of its most intriguing incarnations, north and south of the still divided island's political border, by Alan Bairner

6 See, among others, M. Cronin, M. Duncan and P. Rouse, *The GAA: A People's History* (Cork: The Collins Press, 2009); M. Cronin, W. Murphy and P. Rouse (eds), *The Gaelic Athletic Association, 1884–2009* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2009); J. Scally, *The GAA: An Oral History* (Edinburgh: Mainstream, 2009).

7 J. Sugden and A. Bairner, *Sport, Sectarianism and Society in a Divided Ireland* (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1986); J. Sugden and A. Bairner (eds), *Sport in Divided Societies* (Aachen: Meyer and Meyer, 1999).

(in Chapter 10) and Marcus Free (in Chapter 9) respectively. These Irish analyses are juxtaposed with case studies taken from the United Kingdom and across continental Europe to highlight both perceptual and structural commonalities as well as important situational divergences. The editors' aim has not been, and clearly cannot be, comprehensiveness in such a richly diverse area of study. Rather, they have sought to encourage a methodologically coherent and thematically representative eclecticism, so as to derive the maximum possible benefit from this gathering of specialists from across Europe and from a broad range of disciplinary backgrounds, including sports administration, anthropology, art criticism, geography, history, literature, film and media studies, and sociology, as well as having a variety of practical engagements with the sports under discussion, up to and including personal involvement in elite competition. The fifteen individual contributions collected here together highlight the magnitude, diversity and consequent social complexity of modern European sport. The dual function of contemporary sporting practices, which are typically experienced as participant activities and/or mass-mediated spectacles, is reflected in the attention given by our contributors both to 'playing the game' and to the mechanics of fandom. The closely related issue of the symbiotic relationship between sport and the media – previously explored by scholars including Raymond Boyle and Richard Haynes in their co-authored *Power Play: Sport, the Media and Popular Culture* (2000), Alina Bernstein and Neil Blain in their edited volume on *Sport, Media, Culture: Local and Global Dimensions* (2003) and David Rowe in his edited volume on *Critical Readings: Sport, Culture and the Media* (2004)⁸ – is also, inevitably, an important focus of our own volume, in which attention is regularly drawn to their mutually dependent economies and systems of representation.

8 R. Boyle and R. Haynes, *Power Play: Sport, the Media and Popular Culture* (London: Longman, 2000); A. Bernstein and N. Blain (eds), *Sport, Media, Culture: Local and Global Dimensions* (London: Frank Cass, 2003); D. Rowe (ed.), *Critical Readings: Sport, Culture and the Media* (Maidenhead, Open University Press, 2004).

Sport is undoubtedly a privileged site for studying European modes of social organization and their associated mindsets. In the final analysis, as Fred Inglis explained three decades ago in a pioneering study of modern games, ‘Sports tell us stories; they make sense of the world.’⁹ This is at least as true in the European context as it is in any other. More specifically, sport serves to explain a Europe that is constantly evolving, often in apparently bewildering ways, offering interpretative schemata that are increasingly mobilized as a result of sport’s exceptionally visible location at the interface between local, national and global cultures. Inevitably, issues of governance are raised by sports policy and sports administration at both national and international levels. Our study consequently includes an analysis of the role of European sporting bodies such as the Union of European Football Associations (UEFA), concentrating not only on their management of key tournaments (such as the European club and nations cup competitions), but also on their role in the supra-national governance of European sport. Additionally considered is the impact on traditional, nationally based management structures of interventions by other key agencies, such as the European Court of Justice, whose Bosman ruling of 1995 was a landmark in the regulation of the transfer market in professional football players. Patterns of migration affecting both elite performers and broader populations are themselves an important component of evolving European identities, and thus of the constantly evolving sporting context with which the present volume seeks to engage.

Part I of the volume consequently focuses on the shift from Europe-led sporting diffusion in the nineteenth century to contemporary sports governance within the European Union, as discussed respectively by Sébastien Darbon and Borja García (Chapters 1 and 2). Their analysis is complemented by that of Eleni Theodoraki (Chapter 3), whose reading of the 2004 Athens Olympics explores the ways in which both the ancient history and entrepreneurial modernity of Greece were mobilized to maximize the positive impacts for national self-images of this most global of

9 F. Inglis, *The Name of the Game: Sport and Society* (London: Heinemann, 1977), p.71.

sporting mega-events. Later in the volume, Gyozo Molnar investigates the concrete impact on individual identities of the increasing mobility of elite sports players, focusing on the under-researched topic of Central and Eastern European professionals, represented here by Hungarian footballers (Chapter 11).

The following section of the book concentrates the contributors' attention on the national level, still arguably the most dynamic sphere of sporting investments, both moral and material, notwithstanding the much anticipated withering away of the nation-state in the era of globalization. All three of the constituent chapters in Part 2 thus underline sport's significance as a remarkably rich field of nation-based representations, exploring its impact on both the 'high' and 'popular' cultures of Europe, from the fine arts, through print and audio-visual media, to the contemporary communications and information industries. The national sporting narratives explored here range from Jeffrey Hill's analysis of the class-bound Englishness of the 'Tough of the Track' comic series (Chapter 4), through Paul Dietschy's survey of the Italian sporting press under Fascism (Chapter 5), to the mediation of Spanish social values in the sports films discussed by Álvaro Rodríguez Díaz (Chapter 6).

As Richard King and David Leonard comment, in the introduction to their edited volume on *Visual Economies of/in Motion: Sport and Film* (2006), the representational economies of sport serve 'to simultaneously fashion magical spaces and to unfold metaphors for the social'.¹⁰ In terms of cinematic representations, the 'sports film' has become one of commercial cinema's most recognizable products. While Hollywood has largely defined and popularized the form since at least Harold Lloyd's *The Freshman* (Fred C. Newmeyer and Sam Taylor, 1925), through classics such as *Rocky* (John G. Avildsen, 1976) and *Raging Bull* (Martin Scorsese, 1980), and the more recent Oscar winner *Million Dollar Baby* (Clint Eastwood, 2004), there have also been important European contributions to the genre. Moreover, while sport has played a crucial role in the articulation of

10 C. R. King and D. J. Leonard (eds), *Visual Economies of/in Motion: Sport and Film* (New York: Peter Lang, 2006), p.3.

local, regional and, particularly, national identities, this role has similarly been identified by scholars with regard to cinema, with Susan Hayward noting that ‘film functions as a cultural articulation of a nation.’¹¹ European sports films have included work from Britain (*The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner*, Tony Richardson, 1962; *This Sporting Life*, Lindsay Anderson, 1963; *Chariots of Fire*, Hugh Hudson, 1981); Norway (*Flåklypa Grand Prix* [*Pinchcliffe Grand Prix*], Ivo Caprino, 1975); Germany (*Die Angst des Tormanns beim Elfmeter* [*The Goalkeeper’s Fear of the Penalty*], Wim Wenders, 1972; *Das Wunder von Bern* [*The Miracle of Bern*], Sönke Wortmann, 2003); France (*Les Triplettes de Belleville* [*Belleville Rendez-Vous*], Sylvain Chomet, 2003); and Ireland (*The Boxer*, Jim Sheridan, 1997), as well as the many Spanish examples Rodríguez Díaz discusses. Indeed, as King and Leonard further contend, ‘sport cinema matters because sport matters and because popular culture matters in the creation, construction, dissemination, and articulation of dominant tropes and discourses of race, gender, class, sexuality and nation.’¹²

Located at the interface of the individual and the social, such sporting representations offer valuable insights into the creation and circulation of identities, particularly as regards their articulation with collective memory. Part 3 of the volume foregrounds such magical spaces and such social metaphors, especially as illuminated by the creative application of feminist critical paradigms to the analysis of conventionally gendered masculinity, the constitutive ambivalence of which is again very much in evidence. This is variously revealed by the relevant chapters: in the hyper-masculinity of boxing, as read both textually and visually by David Scott (Chapter 7); in the consciously ironic surfing culture of Mediterranean France, as explored by Cathal Kilcline (Chapter 8); and in the confected Ireland and Irish-ness communicated by the Irish media through its conflicting representations of the former Manchester United football star Roy Keane, as decoded by Marcus Free (Chapter 9).

11 Susan Hayward, *French National Cinema* (London: Routledge, 1993), p.x.

12 King and Leonard, *Visual Economies of/in Motion*, p.237.

Contested and reinvented identities remain to the fore in Part 4 of the volume, with the initial focus being on the often traumatic complexities of Northern Ireland's historical, political and cultural status as both a part of the island of Ireland and a 'province' of the United Kingdom. A recognized specialist in the area, Alan Bairner delves into the individual negotiations and representational ambiguities resulting from the selection of Catholic players for Northern Ireland's (Protestant and Unionist dominated) association football team (Chapter 10). The very different engagements with personal and cultural displacements experienced by elite Hungarian footballers playing in the professional leagues of Western Europe are then explored by Gyozo Molnar (Chapter 11). In contrast, in his own study of another contested Celtic identity, that of Cornwall, Dilwyn Porter reveals that objectively insignificant sporting competitions (such as English rugby union's traditional county championship, a competition effectively superseded by professionalism and its media-dependent league and cup tournaments) may actually be reinvested and even reinvented, albeit temporarily, by self-conscious and media-aware supporters, as a means of affirming cultural continuity and, indeed, political will (Chapter 12).

In the final section of the book, which focuses on the new sporting Europe, our contributors examine the changes which have occurred in two of the continent's sports superpowers, under the combined impacts of the political, economic and social restructuring that has taken place in Central and Eastern Europe since the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the Soviet Union. Two acknowledged experts in the field, and long-time pioneers of European sports history, Arnd Krüger and James Riordan, reflect here on developments since 1989, providing fresh insights into sport and identity in Germany since reunification (Chapter 13), and into sport and politics in Russia and the former Soviet Union (Chapter 14). Finally (in Chapter 15), John Bale, the respected sports geographer and cultural historian, brings the volume back to the issues of diffusion and representation raised by Sébastien Darbon in Chapter 1, drawing attention to Europe and its Others, specifically as regards Europeans writing (about) the African Olympian, of this and earlier generations.

By investigating a selection of particularly significant practices, locations and representations, the work as a whole seeks to assess the contribution of modern sports, both as participatory activities and sporting

spectacles, to the ongoing construction of identities. It explores both 'traditional' identities (conceived as unitary and fixed) and the emergence of eclectic and unstable forms of identification. The study consequently draws on familiar sociological paradigms (such as age, class, gender and ethnicity), but also seeks to foreground processes of negotiation and reinvention, and the consequent emergence of various forms of hybridization in the sporting and broader public spheres. This includes particularly the emergence of multicultural and trans-national identities in sport and closely related issues of citizenship, empowerment and social inclusion. While sporting practices, locations and representations are prominent concerns throughout the work, individual chapters focus on the moral and material investment made by European citizens, and very often European states, in targeted events, institutions and figures.

This last point highlights the significance both of intra-European and extra-European sports exchanges and influences, as regards both individual practitioners and communities with a shared sporting identity, as well as competitive models imported from outside Europe and most obviously from the United States of America. Examples of such patterns analysed in this volume include the elite Hungarian footballers studied by Gyozo Molnar (in Chapter 11), the case study of Greek national readings of the supposedly universal symbolism of the Olympics at the 2004 Athens Games presented by Eleni Theodoraki (in Chapter 3) and David Scott's semiotic approach to European intellectual and artistic engagements with American constructions of masculinity in and through boxing (in Chapter 7). The last of these contributions is particularly suggestive of the attention to issues of representation that informs the present volume, as well as being exemplary in its broadly conceived, inherently interdisciplinary and consciously inclusive approach to issues of 'European-ness' in modern and contemporary sport. While the concept of 'Europe' itself may be destined to remain a weak marker of sporting identity in the face of more deeply entrenched, and periodically re-imagined, local, regional and national affiliations, there can be no doubting sport's broader contribution to the construction of evolving European identities. The goal of this collaborative study is precisely the scholarly elucidation of those identities and their sports-related interactions.