Football and Mass Populism in Spanish Society

Jim O'Brien
Southampton Solent University, Great Britain

Abstract

This paper was first presented at the plenary session of the International Conference of Humanities and Social Sciences; Creativity, Imaginary, Language at the University of Craiova, Romania in May 2015. The study is divided into two parts: PART A examines the relationship between Football and Mass Populism in Spain and considers the first Case Study, the national team's victory over England in the Brazil World Cup, 1950. PART B examines the implications of Case Studies 2 and 3, Spain's victories in the European Nations Cup of 1964 and the World Cup of 2010. PART B is forthcoming in SSERR Review no1/2015.

Keywords: football, mass populism, Spanish identity

PART A

'Under Franco, the notion of a single Spanish identity and the promotion of its image were encouraged by football and the sport's role as the vehicle for frustrated nationalism was central.' (Crolley and Hand, p127)

From its genesis in the volatility of the Spanish state in the 1880s and 1890s (Ball, pp 39 - 60), encompassing the loss of Empire and the key social and economic consequences of late industrialisation and urbanisation, football has been an important metaphor in defining and articulating concepts and representations of local, regional and national ethnicities and identities within the evolving cultural and political landscapes of Spanish society. In twentieth century Spain, embellishing monarchy, republic, civil war, dictatorship and democracy, the burgeoning influence and power of the game as a mass spectacle through the distinctive stages of its development, made it a reference point for contested debates around the construction of national identity and the site for the expression of alternative nationalisms at the core of the centre-region schisms fracturing notions of unity in Spain (Encarnacion, pp 91-110). Football's iconography also enabled it to be manipulated, utilised and exploited by the Spanish state, particularly though not exclusively under the Franco regime, in order to fashion constructions of legitimacy, unity and coherence (Quiroga, pp 52- 72)). As such, the historic growth of Spanish football from its folkloric beginnings in the industrial backwater of Huelva in the 1870s (Burns;

BDD-V1838 © 2015 Sitech
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:48:20 UTC)

La Roja pp 18- 20) to its global reach across multi- platform media in the post millennium period, is framed within the vortex of Mass Populism (Vincent, pp178-188). The paradoxes and contradictions of Spanish society are articulated through the sporting rivalries and cultural values of the game to engender a synthesis between Mass Society, Mass Populism and the Mass Spectacle. The Mass Populism of football, through its capacity to appeal to notions of ethnicity, identity, nationalism and patriotism, particularly when fused with a myriad of mediated representations, constructions, images and symbols in both historic and contemporary frameworks gives it a distinctive political and cultural role in the contested debates around locality, region and nation in the political history of contemporary Spanish society. An exploration and analysis of these dynamics is at the core of this paper.

The focus of the paper centres on a discussion of three case studies in order to elucidate the ways in which the Spanish State has attempted to tap into the emotional, locational and cultural appeal of football in order to engender a sense of national cohesion and unity in periods of austerity, uncertainty and fragmentation. By the 1950s, football had become culturally embedded as Spain's national sport; a labyrinth of associations and rivalries rooted in the game's heartlands in the Basque Country and Catalonia, but expanding to encompass a rich tradition of localism, regionalism and nationalism (Ball pp 121- 129)). Moreover, football was becoming increasingly international in character, thereby providing significant opportunities for propaganda and publicity. The appearance of the Spanish national team, *'La Seleccion'* in the Brazil World Cup of 1950 provides the first example of the Franco regime intentionally exploiting the appeal of football to construct sentiments of support and unity in framing Mass Populism (Glanville, pp 43- 57). Zarra's iconic goal in the 1-0 defeat of England at the Maracana stadium in Rio de Janeiro is at the nexus of this analysis. By the 1960s, austerity had given way to consumerist growth in a predominately urban society (Lawlor and Rigby, pp100 – 102/ 304-310) Still the Francoist state craved legitimacy. The hosting of the European Nations Cup in 1964 in Barcelona and Madrid gave the regime a perfect opportunity to showcase 'The New Spain' though the most potent weapon of sporting propaganda – winning. Thus the second case study examines the impact of Spain's victory over the Soviet Union in the final of the tournament as a means of manufacturing consent through the patriotism engendered by Mass Populism (Ball,pp242- 243). The final case study, involving a consideration of the impact on Spanish society, of Iniesta's winning goal in the 2010 World Cup Final in Johannesburg, seems to be a world away, in football and political terms, from the grainy black and white images of the Franco period. Yet, even within the maturity of Spain's democracy, some patterns of similarity can be witnessed. Once again the game is utilised to tap into notions of Mass Populism at a time of economic austerity and political volatility (Burns, La Roja pp 357 – 364))

BDD-V1838 © 2015 Sitech
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:48:20 UTC)

Spain 1 England 0, Rio de Janeiro, 1950

'Zarra scored the goal of the most glorious Spanish victory…we have taught a sublime lesson to the alleged masters…a splendid demonstration to the whole world that the traditional Spanish virtues of passion, aggression, fury, virility and impetuosity have been completely recovered in the 'New Spain' born out of that bloody conflict – the Civil War' (Marca, July 3rd 1950)

Spain in 1950 was a bleak place for most of the country's population. The shadow of a brutal civil war hung apocalyptically over a deeply divided society (Vincent pp 160- 169). The ensuing repression of the 1940s aimed to eradicate and stifle any political dissent or any aspirations to the historic cultures and languages of the regions (Junco and Shubert, pp 260- 276)). The Franco regime needed distraction and success in order to secure support and consent for its vision of a unified catholic nation celebrating the ideals and values of its rural and imperial past. Furthermore, the autocracy was isolated from contact with other states and societies. Sport, in particular football, provided the perfect catalyst to both break the spell of isolation and to manufacture domestic approval and consent. These visions could only be partially achieved by the pervasive presence of No – Do *(Noticias Documentales y Cinematograficas* 1941-1981), the state censored news agency, which sought to exploit any sporting achievement to create a discourse and narrative in order to engender a positive sense of national identity (Relano pp13-19)), Within these contemporary contexts, the folkloric values associated with football, derived from the national team's first participation in international competition, resulting in the heroic deeds of *La Seleccion* in the Antwerp Olympics of 1920, seemed distant in the annals of recorded memory (Quiroga, pp39-51). The values accorded to 'the Lions of Antwerp'- courage, strength, hard work, bravery in the face of adversity, lay at the heart of *La Furia Espanola*, and captured a popular contemporary mood in the Spain of the 1920s. It also underscored the first significant attempt by the Spanish state, in the divisive politics surrounding the rise to power of the dictatorship of Primo de Riviera, to use the moral values and the emotional impulses of football to create allegiance and loyalty to the centralised nation. The spirit of *La Furi*a stemmed largely from the majority of Basque players at the team's core (Ball, pp 98-99/ 221-224). Spain's participation in the Brazil World Cup of 1950 allowed the quintessential dynamics of *La Furia Espanola* to be rekindled and reframed for a mass audience seeking escape from the realities of everyday life.

Spain's image and reputation as an international 'pariah' state was given its first real opportunity to participate in international sport through its participation in the Brazil tournament, which not only provided some respite from the barren terrain of this isolation; the success of the team in finishing fourth gave *El Caudillo* the chance to refashion the values of *La Furia* within a contemporary idiom (Vinolo pp 151- 156). The most potent expression of the renaissance of football's historic iconography within the Spanish lexicon took

BDD-V1838 © 2015 Sitech
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:48:20 UTC)

place with the team's single goal victory over England at the Marcacana on July 2, 1950. Whilst the match received scant coverage in the English press, following the more sensational defeat earlier in the tournament at the hands of the United States, the game gave heroic status to the players representing *La Seleccion*, being celebrated as one of its greatest ever triumphs. The winning goal was scored by the talismanic Zarra, with his physically, courage and presence seeming to characterise not only the spirit of *La Furia* reborn but also defining a nation seeking a hero. He subsequently went on to become the leading marksman for Athletic Bilbao in La Liga during football's boom in the 1950s. However, through the coverage of No- Do and the eulogised radio coverage of the match, replayed repeatedly throughout the decade, the image and memory of his untidy and rather untypical goal against England (Archive 1) became one of the defining moments in capturing the atmosphere of 1950s Spain (Ibid pp151- 156). Press and Radio coverage of the event maximised its propaganda potential, particularly as the cherished victory had come against the old imperial foe and the vaunted inventors of the game.Zarra's iconic goal and the spirit displayed by the 1950 team allowed the regime to recast the values of La Furia Espanola to resonate more explicitly as the virtues of contemporary Spanish society in order to foster national identity and unity.(Burns, La Roja pp143-144).It also marked the first discernible shift in the autocracy from repression to austerity, whilst presaging the game's impending growth as a mass spectacle and the social drug of mass popular entertainment and distraction (Ball pp119-153)). Although the cherished ideals of Francoism harked back to an earlier rural society, best exemplified by Andalusia, patterns of migration during the 1950s and 1960s suggested that Spain was becoming increasingly urban in its demographic make-up (Lawlor and Rigby,pp304-316). Bullfighting juxtaposed well with the construction and representation of this tradition, in which historic festivals and celebrations of regional cultures were appropriated to manifest the heritage of Spanish nationhood; but it was the burgeoning power and influence of football which became the reality underscoring seminal cultural developments during the 1950s.

Zarra's goal at the start of the decade paved the way for the game's expansion in the period and its increased manipulation by the regime, so that by the end of the 1950s, the success of Real Madrid in winning the first five European Cups, culminating in the 7- 3 victory over Eintracht Frankfurt in Glasgow, a mass television spectacle witnessed by an international audience of millions in 1960, had secured high profile success to legitimise the regime, the star studded team embellishing ambassadorial status in representing the Spanish national identity and the cohesive unity of a centralised Spanish state. Paradoxically, most of Real's iconic players were from a cluster of different nationalities; yet in the popular domain of mass cultural and its propagandist media outlets, the team was framed as the embodiment of Spain and Spanishness. Football also became critical during the 1950s as a means of

BDD-V1838 © 2015 Sitech
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:48:20 UTC)

containing dissent in the troublesome regions of the Basque Country and Catalonia (Burns, A Peoples' Passion, pp154-173). The rivalries between Real Madrid, FC Barcelona and Athletic Bilbao suppressed political opposition as the game acted as a safety valve for the clandestine expression of repressed alternative nationalisms and formed a focal point in which the flags, symbols and icons of football became substitutes for latent regional identities. (Duke and Crolley pp 168-179). By 1960, the rivalries articulated through the cohesion and consensus of *La Liga*, reinforced on a daily and weekly basis by press and radio coverage, had provided football with the mass audience to define the ultimate escapism from austerity. The subsequent years of economic development in the 1960s catapulted the game into new arenas and further enhanced its potential for political exploitation and manipulation by the increasingly confident Franco regime.

Archive Material

The footage in the links below is taken from contemporary archive sources of these matches.

1 July 2, 1950 Spain 1 England 0 (World Cup) mpg
https.//www.youtube.com/watch?v=cROIn48ptd4
2 June 21, 1964 Spain 2 Soviet Union 1(EC Final) avi-You Tube
https.//www.youtube.com/watch?y=1cVERk1wIw0
3 July 11, 2010 Spain 1 Netherlands 0 INIESTA GOAL 2010 World Cup HQ
https.//www.youtube.com/watch?y=Qw/ADgt3dBE

References

Balfour, S ed (2005) The Politics of Contemporary Spain, London, Routledge

Ball, P (2011) Morbo;The Story of Spanish Football, London, WSC Books

Billig, M (2004) Banal Nationalism, London, Sage

Burns, J (2009) Barca; A People's Passion, London, Bloomsbury

Burns, J (2012) La Roja: A Journey through Spanish Football, London, Shuster and Shuster.

Crolley L and Hand, D (2006) Football, Europe and the Press, London, Routledge

Dukes V and Crolley, L (1998) Storming the Bastille: Football, Nationality and the State, London, Longman

Encarnacion, O (2008) Spanish Politics; Democracy after Dictatorship, Cambridge, Polity Press

Glanville, B, (2014) The Story of the World Cup, London, Faber and Faber

Junco, J and Shubert, A Eds (2000) Spanish History since 1808, London, Edward Arnold

Lawlor, T and Rigby, M (1998) Contemporary Spain: Essays on politics, economics, education and employment, and society, London, Longman

BDD-V1838 © 2015 Sitech
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:48:20 UTC)

Lluis,C (2013) Catalonia; a new state in Europe (in What's up with Catalonia?), Barcelona, Catalonia Press
Quiroga, A (2013) Football and National Identities in Spain: The Strange Death of Don Quixote, London, Palgrave Macmillan
Relano, A (2014) Memorias en Blanco y Negro; Historias Del Deportee n los Tiempos de No – Do, (Memories in Black and White; Sports Stories in the era of No-Do) Corner, Barcelona
Santacana Torres (2006) El Barca y el franquismo, cronicas de unos anos decisivos (Barca and Francoism, chronicles of some decisive years, Barcelona, Apostrophe
Vasci, M (2013) 'The Spanish Fury; a political geography of soccer in Spain, in the International Review for the Sociology of Sport, London, Sage
Vincent, M (2010) Spain 1833-2002, Oxford, OUP
Vinolo, J S (2009) Los Anos 50s. (The 1950s) Madrid, La Esfera

BDD-V1838 © 2015 Sitech
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:48:20 UTC)