Available online at www.sserr.ro

Social Sciences and Education Research Review

(3) 2 3-12 (2016) ISSN 2392-9683

# GLOBALISATION, TRADITION AND CULTURAL IDENTITY IN SPANISH FOOTBALL: REFLECTIONS AND OBSERVATIONS

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**Abstract**

This article offers some reflections and observations on the complex relationship between the forces of Globalisation and Spanish football, posing the key question as to whether the impact of Globalisation has been a quintessentially corrosive dynamic, eroding the quasi – sacrosanct traditions of the Spanish game to fashion a distinctive post- modern pastiche of elitism and inequality based on an orgy of consumption and commodity.

**Keywords**: football, identity, mass populism, world cup, iconography

**JEL classification:** Z10, O52, H10



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## 1 INTRODUCTION. FOOTBALL IN THE SPANISH POLITICAL AND CULTURAL LANDSCAPE

The history of Spanish football is deeply embedded in political, cultural and sporting traditions rooted in the socio – economic changes of the last two decades of the nineteenth century (Ball, 2011). These traditions have spawned a cluster of folkloric customs, rituals and rivalries which have impacted on the development of both the rich mosaic of Spanish club football and on the complex nuances surrounding the growth of the Spanish national team, La Seleccion. The distinctive synthesis of the Spanish game has served as a metaphor for the representation of local, regional and national identities, as well as providing critical insights into the oscillating barometers of social class, cultural values and political change (Burns, 2012). Indeed, at seminal moments in the turbulent political landscape of the Spanish state, football has been the embodiment of continuity and cohesion, whilst paradoxically being in the vanguard of societal change.

In recent years, there have been increasing signs that the myriad implications of Globalisation have radically challenged the core traditions which have shaped and defined the cultural power of Spanish football (O'Brien, 2017). Some of these changes have stemmed from the seemingly remorseless pull of Globalisation itself, in which the archetypal constraints of time, space and distance, so fashioned by modernity, have been all but vanquished in the instant blur of cyberspace, to articulate layers of economic, political and cultural interdependence. Further changes emanate from the nexus of Spanish football itself, confronting the old orthodoxies which had defined the historic mores of the game and its relationship with Spanish society. Moreover, Spain itself has undergone seismic developments in the post millennium era, with the juxtaposition of economic austerity and political fragmentation giving rise to new political movements to signal the end of the consensus which had dominated the post Franco settlement in the contemporary Spanish state (Ibid).

## 2 THE CULTURAL TRADITIONS OF SPANISH FOOTBALL

This article offers some reflections and observations on the complex relationship between the forces of Globalisation and Spanish football, posing the key question as to whether the impact of Globalisation has been a quintessentially corrosive dynamic, eroding the quasi – sacrosanct traditions of the Spanish game to fashion a distinctive post- modern pastiche of elitism and inequality based on an orgy



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of consumption and commodity; or whether the global impulses driving the Spanish game have reframed and reinvented tradition to generate interest and awareness to an audience of global consumers across multi – platform media interfaces (Llopis Goig, 2009). The focal points of the discussion consider the impacts of Globalisation on the divergent aspects of Spanish club football and the contemporary success of Spain, *La Roja*, in recent international tournaments (Burns, 2012).

The key historic traditions underpinning the Spanish football lexicon are locality and region. From the folkloric genesis of the game in the Andalusian industrial backwater of Huelva during the 1870s which witnessed the emergence of Recreavito as Spain's first club ( Brentnell, 2009) the fusion of locality and region with politics, social class and ethnicity fashioned the distinctive hue of Spanish club football ( Ball, 2011) the rivalries generated by these cleavages came to reflect wider tensions both within the localities and the regions themselves, and in the historic tensions between Centre and Region at the core of the contested notions of political and cultural identity in Spain ( Junco and Shubert, 2005).

As the game subsequently developed within the fulcrum of the seminal socio – economic changes manifested by industrialisation and urbanisation during the 1880s and 1890s, Catalonia and the Basque Country resonated as the emergent heartbeat of the embryonic Spanish game (Ball, 2011). In this formative period, football was regional and amateur in nature, with a national, professional league not being established until 1928. Indeed, football was slower to evolve in Madrid, with Athletico being established by the city's Basque community in 1905, and Real only defining a secure identity as a club in 1920 ( Ibid). In political, cultural and football terms, the centre was weak, with Spain struggling to come to terms with the loss of its colonial Empire in the late 1890s, with resurgent regionalism finding potent expression in the historic communities of Catalonia and The Basque Country ( Conversi, 2000).The growth of football in these regions had already become synonymous with the articulation of separatism and alternative nationalisms by the time *La Seleccion* made its first appearance in an International Tournament with its participation in the Antwerp Olympic Games of 1920 ( Quiroga, 2013).

In the game's pre – professional epoch, many of the archetypal precepts of football's Spanish iconography were crystallised to articulate its nascent folkloric roots. From the distinctive representations of Basqueness with the respective foundations of Athletic Bilbao (1895) and Real Sociedad ( 1909) to the mythical humble origins surrounding the birth of FC Barcelona ( 1899) to fashion a coherent sense of Catalanism, football eschewed wider political and cultural significance. In



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Seville, Social Class rivalry was reflected in the origins of the city's two main clubs; Real Betis (1905 ) and FC Sevilla ( 1907), whilst in Pamplona, the genesis of CA Osasuna ( 1920) came to articulate the complexities of Basque, Navarrese and Spanish sentiments in the region ( O'Brien, 2016).These patterns were reflected throughout Spain's volatile political landscape during the period 1890 - !930; Two critical football and cultural legacies define the power of tradition most acutely in the iconography of the Spanish game and provide an insight into the historic tension at the core of contested debates around regional and national identity in the Spanish state ( Burns, 2012).

Within the locality/ regional dichotomy, the notion and concept of *La Cantera* occupies a pivotal space (Endnote 1). This cherished tradition refers to the practice of the club drawing as many of its players as possible from the local/ regional community, thereby creating an academy or infrastructure in which a close bond is forged between the club, community and a feeling of ethnic identity. This practice is most clearly expressed by Athletic Bilbao, which has promoted and defined *La Cantera* as the essence of its distinctive representation of stateless nationhood, *with* the club's players, fans, values and style of play framing defining the traditional juxtaposition of football, political culture and identity in the construction of Basqueness. Whilst most of Spain's other clubs may not have adopted the practice to the same extent as Athletic, it remains a potent manifestation and symbol of tradition; a way of maintaining and projecting the link between football, community and identity in order to secure and legitimise regionalism and diversity within Spanish society.

In the framing and representation of the national team the celebrated and heroic success of *La Seleccion* in winning the Silver Medal at the Antwerp Olympics (1920) gave rise to the traditional values of *La Furia Espanola* ( Spanish Fury) being associated with Spain's national side ( Ball, 2011) . The values which were defined as indicative to the deeds of the 1920 team, those of team spirit, courage, physical strength and hard work came to be appropriated as key manifestations of 'Spanishmess' This was particularly significant during the lengthy period of the Franco dictatorship (1939- 1975) when the mores and values associated with *La Furia* were exploited to manufacture consent and foster a sense of national unity and identity ( Quiroga, 2013).In their interlocking synthesis both *La Cantera* and *La Furia* were emblematic of a set of customs, rituals and rivalries acting as a pivotal nexus of tradition. This gave Spanish football its coherence, stability and maturity in consolidating the forces of modernism to contain and express political and cultural difference. The players also reinforced this coherence and stability, being drawn *La*



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*Cantera*, the wider domain of Spain's national and regional leagues and from *'Los Oriundi*', the Spanish diaspora from Central and South America, utilising Spanish ancestry to play for the clubs, and on occasions for *La Seleccion*. By the Franco period, football was the focal point of complex political and cultural sensibilities; from being the social drug of mass popular distraction to acting as a catalyst for national unity and a vehicle to contain dissent and potential opposition to the regime (Vincent, 2010).

## 3 TRADITION AND THE CHALLENGE OF GLOBALISATION IN SPANISH FOOTBALL

Spain's transition to Democracy during the late 1970s and early 1980s demonstrated the capacity of football to both act as a vehicle of national cohesion and unity at a time of political uncertainty (Moltalban, 2005) and to be in the vanguard of cultural and societal change. Not only did the strike action of players signal a break away from the shackles of the Franco era, the emergent Spain of the Autonomous Communities envisaged by the Constitutional Settlement of 1978 paved the way for the devolved politics of Regionalism, particularly in the historic communities of Catalonia, The Basque Country and Galicia. The successes of Real Sociedad, Athletic Bilbao and FC Barcelona during the 1980s gave potent cultural and political symbolism to the democratic legitimacy of the Spain of the Regions (Burns, 2011). Significant as these developments were, they were precursors to profound changes in the evolving landscape of Spanish football, which moved it away from the coherent orbit of stability and political control which had defined much of its recent history. Four seminal changes combined to catapult the Spanish game within the shifting dynamics of a democratic Spanish state towards its contemporary global prominence.

From the 1990s, the increased mediatisation of elite level Spanish football, both within Spain itself and subsequently to a burgeoning global audience across a plethora of multi- platform media, has radically altered and challenged the traditional media spaces in which it had previously been represented (Quiroga, 2013). These changes are rooted in the consequences of both the opening up of the Spanish media in the post Franco era and the impact of technological change, most markedly in the growth of cable and satellite television and in the rise of Social Media. These trends have accelerated in the post millennium period, so that the higher echelons of the Spanish game now sits comfortably within the domain of the global reach of Europe's



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elite leagues, so that live broadcasts of virtually all *La Liga's* matches to an audience of global consumers is now commonplace. This has spawned the phenomenon of global fandom, in which a small cluster of Europe's elite clubs are supported by millions of virtual fans, buying the club's merchandise, and following their team via Television, Websites, Facebook and Twitter. In Spain, this is the counterpoint to the tradition of *Pena*s, or Supporters' Clubs, at the folkloric heart of maintaining cultural and sporting identity. The postmodern blurring between tradition and the global occurs at the Camp Nou or the Bernabeu, when the global fan fuses with the local supporter to manufacture the pastiche of the mega – spectacle.

As Spain's elite clubs have become ensnared in this prism of globalisation, the Spanish game itself has become more global in its orientation. The 1995 Bosman Ruling (Endnote 2) opened up the global market in players, so that the established traditions of *L*a *Liga* were challenged by the influx and exodus of players, suggesting that cultural cohesion has become much more fluid since the 1990s. The result has been to transform players and stars into galaticos and commodities, particularly at the elite level of the European game. In the Spanish vortex, the combined impact of these developments is most clearly articulated in the transformation of the traditional rivalry between Real Madrid and FC Barcelona from one rooted in political and cultural conflict between Centre and Region, into an orgy of mass global consumerism and commodification around the farming and representation of a mediated mega spectacle (O'Brien, 2013). The market dominance and branding of these two clubs has not only produced a dominant duopoly within *La Lig*a, which barring the recent notable exception of Athletico Madrid, has made Spanish football less competitive in the last ten years, such is the inequality between Real Madrid, FC Barcelona and the rest. This is in stark contrast to the preceding era, when Valencia, Athletic Bilbao, Real Sociedad and Deportivo La Coruna all won *La Liga*. More significantly, the global dominance of the duopoly has eroded the rich tapestry of tradition at the heart of Spanish football's cultural and political identities, to fashion a distorted representation in which the hyperbole of the FC Barcelona – Real Madrid axis is legitimised and reinforced as the global reference point for an understanding of the Spanish game (Ibid).

If FC Barcelona and Real Madrid form the global bubble through which the contemporary Spanish game is viewed and contextualised, its corollary in respect of the national side has been the transformation of *La Furia* into *La Roja* since 2006. With the exception of having won the European Cup of Nations in 1964, *La Seleccion* had a long tradition of underachievement and failure in international competitions (Ball, 2011). Moreover, the national team was politically and culturally



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associated with the Franco Regime, and was regarded with indifference or even hostility in Catalonia and the Basque Country (Ibid). In essence its history tended to mirror the wider cleavages in Spanish society. From 2006 onwards, under the coaching of Luis Aragones then Vincente Del Bosque, *La Seleccion* enjoyed a period of unparalleled success, winning the European Championship in 2008 and 2012, and the World Cup in 2010 (Burns, 2012). This success embellished several political and cultural paradoxes. It took place at a time of economic austerity and political crisis, encapsulating rare moments of national cohesion and unity, most particularly in the response to Iniesta's iconoclastic winning goal in the South Africa World Cup (Ibid). Furthermore, the success was based largely on both the players and style of Guardiola's all conquering FC Barcelona, so that Catalanism became Globalised as a cultural force through the media profile of the team. The rebranding of *La Seleccion* into *La Roja* was not only a slick Marketing and Public Relations strategy to engender mass support across Spain for the iconic stars of the team, it also suggested that the vexed questions surrounding identity in Spanish football were even more contested, fashioning the constructions of both Dual Identity (Quiroga, 2013) and a Globally framed identity around the Spanish national team.

Spanish football at the end of 2016 is radically different than many of the traditions that shaped it. The forces of globalisation have eroded many of the most distinctive aspects of its history, or reduced then to the stuff of myth or legend, to be exploited and manipulated in the mediated reconstruction of history. This paper concludes with some concluding reflections on the contemporary impact of the tensions between tradition and globalisation on the Spanish game.

## 4 CONCLUSIONS: GLOBALISATION AND SPANISH FOOTBALL; A FORCE FOR GOOD OR EVIL?

The interface between Globalisation and Tradition in Spanish football presents contrasting conclusions and divergent scenarios for the future. On the one hand, to echo Churchill's apocalyptic prediction in respect of the rise of television during the 1950s, that the impact of globalisation on football has been to create a monster this will devour us all (Endnote 3). Cast in this light, the contemporary Spanish game has reinforced inequality due to the unregulated and unaccountable nature of Global Capitalism. Consequently, at the same time that FC Barcelona and Real Madrid were playing out the ritual of El Clasico to a global audience of hundreds of millions, when Real were spending a hundred million Euros to sign



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Gareth Bale, a host of clubs, each with a distinctive history and tradition, lapsed into financial crisis. Most poignantly, the summer of 2016 witnessed the spectacle of Recreativo de Huelva, Spain's first club, teetering on the edge of bankruptcy. The relentless imitation of the English Premier League has produced a homogenous conformity within the major European leagues, with an incumbent loss of distinctive cultural identity (O'Brien, 2017). Within this vortex, the elite clubs control the global market in the commodity of players. The imagery surrounding absurdly paid superstars cultivating celebrity lifestyles projects the global game into the matrix of sport, business and entertainment. From this perspective, globalisation has been a divisive force in the Spanish game, projecting the excess of the mega- spectacle at the expense of the patterns of cultural and political identities which has historically defined Spanish football at all levels. (O'Brien, 2013).

On the other hand, globalisation can be considered as a vital regenerative force in introducing the Spanish game to new audiences on a global basis. In this context, not only does the impact of globalisation tend to be overstated, with national, regional and local representations still resonating as focal points of unity and divergence in the contemporary Spanish state, its orbit is more than merely accentuating the FC Barcelona – Real Madrid axis; the extensive coverage of *La Liga* by Sky Television, for example, has introduced the traditions of Athletic Bilbao, Athletico Madrid, Valencia and others to more discerning consumers of football as a global sport. This can only assist in the positive profiling of Spain within the global geopolitical space. Planet football celebrates the Global Game; Globalisation is a seminal catalyst in this process.

As the Spanish game looks ahead, will a space remain for the traditions of localism and regionalism in the survival of communities? Or will the Globalisation of the Champions League swallow up the elite clubs of *La Liga* into a prototype European League, so that the mass consumption of football becomes ever more globalised in its focus? The evidence suggests that Spanish club football will be less cohesive and more fragmented, with an increasing chasm between a small number of elite clubs and the rest. In respect of the national team, *La Roja* may well have been an ephemeral phase in the history of *La Seleccio*n, with a reversion to the more traditional cleavages which have been the hallmark of its history.



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## ENDNOTES

1 La Cantera (The Quarry). Term used by clubs to define players either coming from their academies or from the local area or region. It forms part of the folkloric of Spanish Club Football.

2 The Bosman Ruling (1995). From the European Court of Social Justice allowed freedom of movement at end of contract for players, without a transfer fee being paid (Article 39, EC Treaty). It followed a dispute between Jean - Marc Bosman and the Belgian Football Association.

3 These comments are attributed to Winston Churchill when he returned to power as Prime Minster in 1951. His medium was Radio, and he was never able to adapt to the evolution of Television during the 1950s.

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