

Nationalism and Sport: A Review of the Field

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Abstract

The connection between nationalism and sport seems at once both obvious and manifest, with the most lavish praise of the nation often arising at sporting events. While a sizeable body of academic literature exists on the connection between the two concepts, it remains overlapping and unstructured. This state of the field review essay accounts for the major works in this field and categorizes it according to the function it fulfills in the subfield. Specifically, it focuses on sport as a mechanism for the diffusion and creation of nationalism, sport under conditions of globalization at Sporting Mega Events (SMEs), and the connection between sport and the distinction between civic and ethnic definitions of nationality.

Keywords: nationalism; national identity; nation-building; sport; foreign policy

Where does the current literature stand on the relationship between sport and nationalism? What future avenues for research exist? What is the nature of the relationship between nationalism and sport? Broad questions like these inevitably open a multitude of pathways in which they can be refined, but this is even more the case when looking at a subject as disparate and fragmented as sport and nationalism (although see Barnier 2001). It is also an important area for nationalism studies, as the connection between sport and the nation-state continues to evolve, and states, such as Brazil (World Cup host in 2014; Summer Olympics in 2016), China (Summer Olympic host in 2008 and Winter Olympic host in 2022), and Russia (Winter Olympics in 2014; World Cup host in 2018), seek to make sport a central component of their diplomatic outreach efforts.

Like any social practice, sport is both a reflection *of* and constitutive force *for* society, with latent tensions or disputes about boundary regulation often finding expression on the field of play. Given the hegemony of the (Western, or Eurocentric) nationalist model in the modern world, it is unsurprising that there is a strong connection between sport and nationalism. Sport “often provides a uniquely effective medium for inculcating national feelings; it provides a form of symbolic action which states the case for the nation itself” (Jarvie, 1993: 74, quoted in Barnier, 2001: 17). As a popular social practice, sport offers a tactile opportunity to instantiate the concept of the nation onto which individuals can simultaneously consume and reproduce national culture. While there are legitimate questions about whether sport reflects or constructs nations, this essay evades such concerns by acknowledging the role of sport in *co-constructing* the nation. Accordingly, this essay focuses solely on sport’s symbolic and prestige-endowing functions.

In terms of symbolism, it is no surprise that sporting teams stand as proxies for the performance of the nation. As Hobsbawm wrote,

what has made sport so uniquely effective a medium for inculcating national feelings, at all events for males, is the ease with which even the least political or public individuals can

identify with the nation as symbolized by young persons excelling at what practically every man wants, or at one point in his life has wanted, to be good at. The imagined community of millions seems more real as a team of eleven named people. (1990, 143)

King (2006) draws a parallel between the seemingly non-instrumental nature of sport's rituals and the aboriginal totem-worship studied by Durkheim (the atmosphere inside stadia could certainly at times be called *effervescent*, moreover). Being able to identify a discreet list sheet of players or athletes who represent the nation (and thus embody it) or, indeed, any community is a powerful function sport performs.

This is especially important when one considers what is at stake in modern team sports. More than any material prize, in international games the fans compete for abstract glory or pre-eminence. This was an early feature of modern sports, and George Orwell (1945) noted that “nearly all the sports practiced nowadays are competitive... As soon as you feel that you and some larger unit will be disgraced if you lose, the most savage combative instincts are aroused.” Indeed, of the practice of modern sport “there cannot be much doubt that the whole thing is bound up with the rise of nationalism.” (Orwell, 1945) The performance of the sporting team reflects on the nation which it represents. So, there are real costs to a bad performance.

This essay focuses on three ways that sport produces and reflects nationalism. First, sport is a vehicle or mechanism for nationalism, having the ability both to impress cognizance of the nation and to take responsibility for the spread of nationalism. The World Football Association FIFA, for instance, has more members than the United Nations. Second, sport continues to play an important role in nation-formation under conditions of globalization, particularly so in the case of Sporting Mega Events (SMEs), such as the World Cup or Olympics. Finally, sport can go a long way toward superimposing the civic and ethnic definitions of nationalism on a society. Necessarily, these three research agendas are not discreet and overlap in some cases. While much more could be said about the relationship, even limiting attention to these three topics provides more than is easily digestible in a single essay. Each section concludes with thoughts on new lines of inquiry and how the research agenda might be strengthened.

Sports as a Mechanism of Nationalism

Sport has been one of the main ways in which a nationalist ontology has impressed its reality on the populace. The automatic belief (or, at least, passive acceptance) that the world is composed nations is entrenched by international competitions at which national teams compete. Indeed, “what is important about a particular sport is not so much its content, but the category supplied by its creation” (MacClancy 1996, 4). That sport performs this categorizing function was a product of historical contingency, for “in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, sport [had] become the vehicle *par excellence* for national sentiment, because sport [involved] a competition that [was] based on the very system of the nation-state” (Amara 2012, 10). By creating an (ideally) non-violent arena where national and ethnic identities can be negotiated and reified, sport provides opportunities for the spreading of the nationalist worldview. This can be seen in the spread of nationalism and sporting practices throughout the world, the ability of sport to circumvent the nation-state divide, the spread of national sports, and sport's setting against a national canvas.

First, sports played a significant role in the diffusion and consolidation of nationalism as an ideological system in the modern world. Initially conceived of as a way of inculcating the right dispositions amongst youth at British public schools, organized sport diffused through the colonies and spread the ontology of nations at a mass or popular level. British administrators were especially convinced that sport “created moral fiber along with muscle mass,” as was also the case in the selection of local elites. Indeed, “if Britannia were to rule the savannah and the rain forests as well as the waves, one had to be true to the games ethic, to the belief that sports—especially team games—created the kind of character needed to meet extreme physical and psychological challenges and to

impose European civilization upon what Kipling called ‘lesser breeds of men’” (Guttman 2004, 64). Political dominance would be implied and legitimated by physical dominance.

In so doing, sport became a central component of the discourse of modernity and an emblem of the “civilized” world. When new nation-states formed out of Empires, it was far easier to continue practicing sports inherited from the former colonial masters than to invent new national traditions—even though by doing so they implied European signified civilized (Amara 2012, 126–127). For example, Symanski and Zimbalist (2005) demonstrate the importance of sporting victories over the former colonial masters for new nations in the Americas. Likewise, in Brazil “the stadiums of Rio de Janeiro are instrumental in identifying the consolidation of a central element of Brazilian national identity” (Gaffney 2008, 49). So too in Africa, where soccer rivalry became identified with the new urban centers in Zimbabwe and a cauldron for their cohesion (Stuart 1996). For the Chinese in the 1920s, a program of sports education was a way of overcoming subordination as well as literally and figuratively beating Western nations at their own game (Guoqi 2008; Broudehoux 2012). Playing sport became an entry-ticket into the club of civilized nations.

This function of sport continues today. On the one hand, sport is one of the primary ways in which nations as political units negotiate the complexity of the globalized world (Barnier 2001, 164). On the other, sport can be an area in which cultural nations can persist and flourish. King (2006) argues that sporting practices are one of the ways in which globalization helps to revive or invent submerged national identities. For example, the British-English distinction is continuously worked out on the sporting soccer field, and “English football, just like the St. George’s cross, is one of those rare things that cannot be mistaken as British” (Robinson 2009, 55). Across the Atlantic, Sotomayor (2016) outlines how Puerto Rico’s ostensible national identity has been promoted through sport. While surely not the only location in which such contestations over identity can be resolved, sport is especially powerful due to its genuine popularity. Maguire and Tuck take a similar approach, holding that “sporting competition arguably provides *the* primary expression of imagined communities” and that “the nation becomes more ‘real’ in the domain of sport” (2005, 108). In sport, the nation becomes tangible.

The contribution of sporting practices to national identity is an emergent field of research. One strand of theorizing holds that “national sports” (Barnier 2001) are essential to national identity. National sports may be defined as a sport at which the nation has traditionally excelled and in which a defeat is seen as a major loss of prestige. Maguire and Tuck argue that “particular sports have also come to symbolize the nation—for example—the ‘quintessential Englishness’ of cricket is frequently referred to. Likewise, in Wales, rugby union is viewed as a central linchpin of what it means to be Welsh” (2005, 108). One might also add the importance of rugby union to South Africans (Keech 2004) or soccer to Brazil. In the same way, ice hockey presented Canada and Czechoslovakia with safe arenas to compete against their more powerful neighbors, the United States and the Soviet Union (Soares 2014). Ice hockey was also a way celebrating a unique Canadianness (Scherer, Duquette, and Mason 2007). Indeed, perhaps nowhere is the idea of “American exceptionalism” more real than in the sports played in the USA. Although immensely popular in the United States, American football is virtually unknown in much of the world, including nations in Europe, those culturally closest to the United States, and so has become a symbol of both national distinction and American exceptionalism (Collins 2013).

In some countries, the positive promotion of a sport has become an intentional matter of government policy that invents traditions to help consolidate the nation (Arnold 2018). This sporting nationalism has been consciously used in a few contexts. Sport was intimately connected with China’s evolution into a modern nation-state and today represents one of its primary concerns (Lu and Hong 2017). In Indonesia, volleyball and *Gerak Jalan* marching competitions filled this role (Moser 2010) as did taekwondo and mass gymnastics in North Korea (Lee and Barnier 2009). In Kazakhstan, the Astana Professional Cycling team helped to promote a positive image of the country overseas (Koch 2013). Adair (1998) shows how the different ethnic groups that migrated to Australia used sport as a form of cultural contestation to negotiate ideas of Australianness in the

first 130 years of its existence. At other times, “sport has also been used in attempts to defuse tension and bring rival communities together” (Sugden and Bairner 1999, 2), such as in North and South Yemen, where sport facilitated the union of two states into one country (Stevenson and Alaug 1999).

At a deeper level, sporting leagues are an example of how nationalist discourses are rendered “banal” (Billig 1995) and so entrench the reality of the nation. Although it is common to note the presence of national flags at international sporting arenas (at all sporting events in the USA), what is less mentioned is that team sports have evolved to buttress the existence of the nation in other ways. Sporting events mark major national holidays and draw the gaze of the nation (Fox 2006), for example. Even the assumptions of the national sports framework venerate the nation. After all, it is the *English* Premier League, the *Italian* Seria A, or the *German* Bundesliga which host games and work out schedules.¹ Indeed, it seems reasonable to suggest that many people learn about the other places in their nations primarily through a program of national sports, although this awaits empirical demonstration. Thus, further research could focus upon the contribution of national sporting institutions to feelings of national identity.

The understanding of the relationship between sport and nationalism has become more nuanced and elaborate in recent times, with a greater appreciation of how sport contributed to the diffusion of nationalist ontology and how it forms an important invented tradition itself. Sport has historically helped to reconstruct and entrench the existence of the nation. The next section turns its attention to the relationship between sports, nationalism, and the seemingly increasing numbers of SMEs that take place today.

Sporting Mega Events and Sporting Nationalism

One of the earliest ways in which people learn about the places in their world is through sport. Sport plays a role in concretizing the inter-state worldview. The assumptions and comments in the reporting of international sporting events invariably re-affirm the existence of the nation-state and present such a world as the natural or inevitable one (Levermore 2004). Yet if sport plays an important role in concretizing the inter-state worldview, then nowhere is this more apparent than at international sporting events, also known as Sporting Mega Events (SMEs). SMEs have become a regular feature of the globalized world, both a cause and effect of globalization (Barnier 2001; Foer 2004).

While one effect of hosting (enormously costly) SMEs is to generate “soft power” (Grix and Branaghan 2016; Grix and Kamareva 2017), there are also effects on the evocation of nationalism in a sporting context that can be connected to the increased respect and celebration afforded a national culture during an SME. Excellence in sports—and hosting events in particular—can signal the secular and progressive aspirations of the nation as well as entry into the discourse of modernity. Polo (2012) cites Turkey’s bifurcated identity between Europe and Asia as one of the main reasons Istanbul has bid to hold so many international sporting events. As venues where teams from all around the world come to compete, SMEs form a microcosm of the international world and a place where national reputations can be made and lost. This includes popularizing one’s own national team amongst the domestic society as well as raising the level of esteem by defeating global competition.

In a world where wars between major powers have for the main been consigned to history, SMEs play an important role in constituting national identity and nationalism. Indeed, “even more so than war, sport produces a tangible metric to compare the self with the other, by producing winners and losers” (Watson 2016, 290). SMEs permit a form of everyday nationalism by allowing people to perform the nation, supporting “our boys” in the game. Smith (2002, 23) argues that, while some nations may have been born fighting against perceived oppression, other situations may throw “up heroes and victims for national myth-making.” Such myths and genuinely popular social practices are important ways of tying the masses to elite conceptions of the nation. Sport is one arena in which

exemplary myths can be forged through the association of certain sports with national identities, hosting sporting events, and creating national sporting legends.

The longevity of such community-feeling is debatable, with Goksoyr noting that “the identity that is revealed and exposed during international football matches is without doubt national. However, its duration and operation is limited to the time around the match itself” (Goksoyr 1994, 189). Other contributors hold, however, that sport can indeed form the basis of long-lasting myths of association and community ties. Chas Critcher (1994), for example, examines the memory of England’s great victory in the 1966 World Cup as being integral to national identity and on a par with the 1953 coronation. Archetti (2006) examines the 1978 Argentina World Cup, where the ideology of the junta was challenged and contested. Bromberger (1994, 283) argues that the symbolic function of sport “provides a forum for the expression of affirmed collective identities and local or regional antagonisms” which inevitably reproduces the core postulates of nationalism and of a world of nations.²

Olympic sport also forms a perfect environment in which to re-situate one’s nation in a world of nations. Edelman and Riordan (1994) argue that, after Stalin, the main purpose of sport for elites in the Soviet Union and Russia was to connect with their peers in other countries and achieve Russia’s seemingly eternal quest for recognition. Assessing the possible impacts of Russia’s prolonged ban on competing as punishment for doping (BBC 2019) promises important future research, possibly to be compared with South Africa under Apartheid that was likewise ostracized from the international sporting community. Recognition on the sporting field has useful benefits for nations seeking a place in the modern world. Another line of future inquiry would be examining when and under what conditions states unrecognized by at least some of the world’s major powers—like Abkhazia, South Ossetia, or Kosovo—decide to create representative teams and how or whether they compete.³ My initial impression is that competing in such sports events is a central part of what the international community considers a state to do and so statelets like those mentioned try to use sport as a means of recognition.

Countries also gain prestige and recognition from hosting SMEs—a development which partially explains the enthusiasm of authoritarian states to host and win (sometimes through nefarious means) them. Gorokhov (2015), for example, examines Russia’s strategy of building national identity through three SMEs: the Universiade in Kazan (2013), the Sochi Winter Olympics (2014), and the FIFA World Cup (2018). He finds that “the Russian government builds national identity through showing sporting excellence to the global public. Top Russian officials see sports mega-events (which are believed to be the heart of global sport) as a legitimate means of recognition of the strength and power of the Russian nation” (2015, 279–280). Indeed, Peterssen (2014) sees the revival of Russia’s “great-power myth” inherent in its hosting of the Olympics, whereas Orttung and Zhemukhov (2018) see both the Sochi Olympics and the annexation of Crimea as complementary parts of a narrative that showed Russia rising from her knees.

Similarly, Penfold (2018) argues that one of the hoped-for outcomes from holding both the 2014 World Cup and the 2016 Rio Olympics in Brazil was a greater sense of national unity. The two SMEs would give a focal point around which all those proud of the South American nation could unite. A similar rationale was at work in China with the Beijing Olympics of 2008 (Brownall 2013) and now the upcoming Winter Olympics in 2022 as well as with China’s mission to become a soccer powerhouse (Leite Junior and Rodrigues 2017). Regarding Europe, Grix and Houlihan (2014) argue persuasively that Germany’s hosting of the 2006 World Cup was a chance to generate a repository of national myths away from its unsavory past.

Another theme of inquiry connecting sports and nationalism is present in the work on sport as a means of integrating diverse peoples. Particularly in the globalized world where migration is so frequent, sport represents one of the best ways of promoting community feeling amongst ethnically or religiously diverse populations. Numerous studies offer insight into how such a process operates, including Nelson (2005) on how Jews in New York City used basketball as a means of connecting to the local population. Today, sport is used as a vehicle by anti-racism campaigners who seek to rid

their sports of nasty associations, such as the Kick It Out campaign, which started in the UK but has since spread over Europe and Russia (Arnold and Veth 2018). Sport is also used as a way of promoting women's rights as well as those of minorities, especially in the Global South. The immediate answer that springs to mind is that such events represent chances for people to congregate in enjoyment, so a kind of Durkheimian effervescence takes over and binds them together in a positive experience.

Ethnic and Civic Nationalisms in Sport

The symbolism of sport also has important connections to bolstering the hegemonic definition of the nation, whether ethnic or civic. The ethnic/civic distinction is one of the most fundamental in nationalism studies. Greenfeld writes that

nationalism may be distinguished according to criteria of membership in the national collectivity, which may be either 'civic,' identical with citizenship, or 'ethnic.' In the former case, nationality is at least in principle open and voluntaristic; it can and sometimes must formally be acquired. In the latter, it is believed to be inherent—one can neither acquire it if one does not have it, nor change it if one does. (1992, 11)

Some have contested its utility, however, and the almost pre-packaged assumptions that ethnic nationalists are the bad actors and civic the good (e.g., Barnier 2001, 174–175). Leaving such disagreements aside, it is nonetheless a useful way to divide the literature. The ethnic/civic distinction can make itself manifest at both domestic and international levels.

Domestically, sport (especially football) has sometimes been associated with racism and xenophobia. The conventional story about how far right ideas of ethnic exclusivity became associated with football starts in England in the late 1970s, when the militant wing of the British National Party saw in the football terraces a ready source of recruits for their cause (Arnold and Veth 2018). Of course, there were many other contributory factors—such as the location of stadia and increased immigration from the former colonies (Symanski and Zimbalist 2005; Back, Crabbe, and Solomos 1999)—but the main point is that soccer became a vehicle to express an ethnically distinctive and pure form of the nation. The situation was so bad that by the end of the 1980s that all English clubs had been banned from European competition (Foer 2004).

Nor has attention solely been given to the noisiest component of racism in soccer. Everyday racism in the game leads to a paucity of Asian players in the English game as well as the structural racist image of black players but white owners (Burdsey 2011). Similarly, anti-racism initiatives in the game itself are conducive to eradicating intolerance (Wachter, Franke, and Purski 2009). Greater sensitivity to how the structure of football (or any sport) creates an environment in which such attitudes proliferate is important in tackling this issue. Yet just like the diffusion of soccer itself, there was also the diffusion of xenophobic sentiments aligned with soccer.

Football hooliganism spread to other European countries where it became a vehicle for ethnic antagonism and, in some cases, the proximate cause of a conflict. Kuper (2006, 276) writes that in Zagreb a plaque beneath a statue venerates the Bad Blue Boys supporters of the eponymous club who allegedly "started" the war with Serbia in 1990. In Italy, the association of racism and neo-fascism with football was strongly institutionalized (Testa and Armstrong 2008). Indeed, Italian footballer of African background Mario Balotelli became the target of vicious attacks from fans (Doidge 2015; Mauro 2016) as he was scapegoated for Italy's early exit from the 2014 World Cup. Likewise, German Neo-Nazis established a clear presence in football stadia in the 1990s.

Today, most of the concern about xenophobic nationalism and soccer is concentrated on Eastern Europe, where comparatively homogenous nations have existed longer than in the West. Indeed, prior to the Russian World Cup in 2018, numerous journalists and scholars expressed worries about the connections between racism and football culture (Arnold and Foxall 2018; Arnold and Veth

2018; Glathe 2016; Gorshunov and Gorshunova 2015). Similarly, before the 2012 Euro championship finals in Poland and Ukraine, there were concerns about racist fans, which some argued was in fact a reflection of the insecurities of those reporting such concerns (Wawrzyczek, 2017). Fortunately, no major racist incidents occurred at either the 2018 FIFA World Cup or the 2012 Euro championships, and sport has instead been at the forefront of attempts to promote the civic and inclusive definition of the nation.

Sticking with the experience of football, the attention given to combatting racism in the game generated a backlash desire to promote football as a way of combatting ethnically exclusive definitions of the nation. All around the world, sport is at the forefront of anti-racism initiatives. For example, playing with integrated teams is supposed to promote a sense of collective solidarity. Arguably a byproduct of social science's tendency to focus more on problems than on solutions, little work—theoretical or empirical—accounts for the precise mechanisms in sports' anti-racism initiatives (although see Garland and Rowe 2001; Ersherick et al, 2017). Perhaps the most famous example of sport helping reconcile divided communities comes from South Africa, where Nelson Mandela famously called sport “probably the most effective means of communication in the modern world.” (Beck, 2004, 77). Studies documenting the South African case (though see Keech 2004) and its contribution to Mandela's “rainbow nation” would thus be welcome, part of a broader focus on how sport can promote civic conceptions of nationhood at the domestic level.

There is more work on how international sporting events promote a civic definition of the nation. In 2012 London Olympics, for example, Chairmen of the Local Organizing Committee for the Olympic Games (LOCOG) Sebastian Coe argued “sport matters. In all of the 300 languages we speak in this city, sport is spoken about the most. It defines us, our communities and our country” (Falcous and Silk 2010, 171). Indeed, the whole tenor of the bid book for London 2012 was that the city was a perfect metaphor of the Olympic movement itself, being an example of tolerance and inclusion. Likewise, the World Cup 2006 in Germany was used to promote a modern, tolerant, and inclusive Germany which was divorced from its dark past (Grix and Houlihan 2014). By presenting powerful symbols of inter-ethnic harmony (Stura and Lepadatu 2014), the ability and means by which SMEs promote civic national identities is well documented. One interesting future avenue for research could be why SMEs failed to do this until relatively recently—possibly due to a change in narratives of nationalism to be more inclusive.

Conclusion

Sport can both reflect and reproduce dominant discourses of nationalism. This article could not comprehensively address the sheer number of connections between nationalism and sport, for this literature is simply too vast. For example, this article did not address the gender dimension of sports, with the contribution of women's sports leagues as well as women's national sports to the nation being an area in need of coverage. Instead, it identified prominent works and delineated future research trajectories. Moving from the general principle that sport is important for the nationalist imagination in terms of symbolism and prestige, it identified three research trajectories manifest in previous work: sport as a reservoir of nationalist mechanisms; sport, globalization, and SMEs; and sport's connection to civic and ethnic definitions of the nation. For each trajectory, this review focused on possible pathways for future development and areas of theoretical weakness.

One general criticism of the literature is a slight overemphasis on British sports, although this situation has improved over the last 20–30 years. Still, more work exploring the contribution of sport to societies outside of Europe and North America is important for the future of the field. Work that examines the diffusion of non-Western sport to the Western world would be particularly interesting. This and the other interesting lines of possible research raised in this document will have to wait for another time, however.

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Notes

- 1 One could make a similar point regarding American sports: although called “the National Football League,” one rarely asks, “Which nation?”
- 2 I thank Muskingum student Lauren Wisenbarger for her assistance in writing this paragraph.
- 3 The fact that the UEFA currently prohibits Crimean soccer teams from competing in the Russian league is another fascinating opportunity for research. See Agence France-Presse (2017).

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