



History, nationalism and identity. Exploring football in Spain

Summary

This book attempts to show how football in Spain and history of the country intertwine in the context of nationalism and identity. In Spanish football, the past of the country is reconstructed and revindicated at each step. Spanish, Catalan and Basque nationalisms find the sport an ideal space in which their presence can be manifested. The stadiums thus become a singular safety valve, allowing supporters to externalize their views and convictions. For many of the fans, football teams become a mainstay of patriotic sentiments and a brand around which one's identity can be determined and fostered, whether local, regional or national. Matches played by Spain's national team and such clubs as FC Barcelona, Real Madrid C.F., Espanyol Barcelona or Athletic Bilbao reveal profound identity issues affecting Spanish society.

At the outset, the author outlines the peculiarities of Spanish football, explaining how it relates to history, nationalism and identity. For instance, one of the highlighted characteristics is that although Spaniards display strong attachment to local teams, it nevertheless co-exists with supporting the foremost clubs in the country, Real Madrid and FC Barcelona. Using the example of football in Spain, the author also challenges the claim that contemporary football has entered the post-national era.

Chapter One focuses on the phenomenon of the Spanish national team which, for the sake of political correctness, is denoted by the neologism *La Roja*, a reference to the colours worn by its players. Showing how the national team has struggled with Spanish identity, the author deliberates whether the appellation *La Roja* is an expression of strength or weakness of Spanish football and, by extension, of the Spanish society. One of the crucial issues here is why *La Roja* is not accepted by all Cat-

alans and Basques, which may be interpreted as a failure of the concept assuming that it represents an instance of football's soft power, capable of bridging political divides within the Spanish community. The author's assessment of the La Roja phenomenon is-despite the predominant view and taking current circumstances into account-anything but optimistic. The Spanish national team is yet far from being a team of all Spaniards, while the designation La Roja shows more cracks and rifts than elements which promote unity.

Chapter Two discusses FC Barcelona as an indisputable symbol of Catalonia and Catalanness. It is described how historical relationships between Catalonia and Spain determine the identity of the club and influence associations with Catalan nationalism. The dictatorship of Primo de Rivera (1923–1930) and the Francoist era (1939–1975) are recalled to illustrate how stadiums of the club-Les Corts and Camp Nou-became venues for the contestation of the centralist regimes and manifestations of Catalanness. The author underlines strong politicization of the club and overt involvement of its board, players and supporters in the ongoing bids for independence.

Chapter Three is concerned with Real Madrid, a club which for some is the very epitome of centralism and Spanish nationalism, focused solely on winning and reaping even more trophies, whereas for others it is a giant enterprise reflecting transnational trends in contemporary football. The author elucidates the concept of *madridismo* and outlines the already mythical rivalry between Real and FC Barcelona, otherwise known as El Clásico. The adoption of the Madrid perspective is thoroughly deliberate, as the supporters in the capital of the country display a more detached attitude to the rivalry. While for the Catalans this is a contest with powerful identity-related and political undercurrent, the inhabitants of Madrid set greater store by sport and victory as such. Still, we are dealing here with a clash of distinct value systems as well as different visions and notions of Spain.

Chapter Four takes a look at the efforts of Espanyol, FC Barcelona's local competitor, to increase its visibility in the Catalan community. The following vital questions are considered here: Given its history, does Espanyol really represent a branch of Real Madrid in the capital of Catalonia? What changes in the perception of the club followed its Catalanization in recent years? Why is Barcelona Derby the most important match for Espanyol, but not for the Blaugrana (or is it)? The author claims that treating Barça as a model and paragon one engages in a dispute with is something natural and self-evident on the one hand, while on the other it does betray a certain weakness of Espanyol, making it all too dependent on its grand rival.

Chapter Five examines the phenomenon of Athletic Bilbao, a Basque club which-as in the case of FC Barcelona and Espanyol-clearly predominates in the Basque Autonomous Community, supplanting another well-known and popular club Real Sociedad San Sebastián. The significance

of Athletic Bilbao in the Basque Country is so great that it is perceived to symbolize Basque nationalism and evince the essence of Basqueness. However, is it possible to conceive an alternative vision of the club, in which cultivation of Basque values would not be identified with nationalism and enmity towards Spain? Cannot Athletic's football philosophy be categorized simply as an example of cultivating and celebrating regionalism and localness, both of which often become blurred and attenuated in the globalized world today? The author advances a number of arguments in favour of such an interpretation.

Chapter Six is devoted to the Copa del Rey competition, as an event during which supporters of teams identifying with Spain flaunt Spanish national symbols, whereas Catalan (chiefly FC Barcelona) and Basque (mainly Athletic Bilbao) fans—who whistle down the national anthem, boo the king of Spain, shout and parade political slogans and regional flags—symbolically abolish the Spanish monarchy headed by Philip VI, direct descendant of Philip V of the House of Bourbon, who is widely believed by Catalan nationalists to have contributed to the stifling of Catalan freedoms. Although nowadays the king of Spain holds no real power, he naturally embodies the historical legacy of Spanish-Catalan relations which affects their present state. For this reason, the finals of La Copa are a splendid example of how past is reawakened on football pitches and around them, while thanks media coverage they echo Baudrillard's concept of the end of history.

In the final Chapter Seven, the author directs his attention to stadium racism in Spain. Discussing the most notorious cases in the light of the postcolonial paradigm, he shows the role of Spain in forging racist stereotypes and colonial mentality on which exclusion of the Other is based. It is argued that contemporary stadium racism exploits clichés of the colonial era, by means of which black football players are denied humanity and assigned the role of “scapegoats”. Drawing on Achille Mbembe, the author shows possibilities of overcoming racial prejudice and stresses the role of players who are discriminated against, as these very people contribute to decolonization in football through various forms of soft resistance.

In the final remarks, the author presents the conclusions of his analysis, from which it unequivocally follows that Spain's past and present cannot be fully understood without football and, conversely, that one cannot successfully study Spanish football without considering its historical context and the nationalisms which remain quite palpably alive.