

[Reflections on Football, Nationalism, and National Identity](#)

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Just in case nobody told you (or if you were actively trying to avoid it): the 20th FIFA World Cup starts today with the opening match of Croatia against hosts and record champions Brazil. You may have also heard about some of the many troubling socio-political circumstances surrounding the event, in particular the utterly corrupt nature of football's governing body, FIFA. In order to be able to enjoy the World Cup one should thus adhere to what John Oliver calls the "[sausage principle](#)": "if you love something, never find out how it was made."

Football/soccer is often described as the only truly global game and, given its near-universal cultural resonance, this claim might not even be an overstatement. The World Cup is undoubtedly the sport's global showcase and, as a result, every four years football talk tends to dominate conversations in the "global public sphere" and national settings alike. It's obvious that the world's fascination with the "beautiful game" transcends the game itself - football is just as much about culture and even politics as it is about trying to kick a ball into a net.

Specifically, many observers of international football - academics, journalists, and fans - have noticed the manifold relationships between the sport and various phenomena associated with ideas of nationhood, nationalism and national identities. Far from being an exhaustive list, three main aspects can be differentiated within this broader context: (1) football as an alleged expression or reflection of specific national identities, (2) football as part of nationalistic practices and politics, and (3) football as a discursive bearer of the very idea of the nation.

(1) Let's begin with what I like to call the "style of play-national identity-nexus." Allegedly, one needs an [identity](#) to win football games. Intellectually overambitious journalists and certain strands of cultural studies being its main culprits, this is the area where selective stereotyping, recalcitrant clichés, and narrative legerdemain flourish. A few rather typical examples:

[David Goldblatt](#), one of the foremost experts on Brazilian football, recently claimed that "modern Brazil's global brand, its sense of identity in the wider world, has been tied almost exclusively to football." Brazil's assumed national identity - still often represented by Western media through the stale exoticism of Samba and the Copacabana - is allegedly mirrored in and expressed through its exceptionally skillful football players and their free flowing style of play. Brazil hasn't really played this kind of [futebol arte](#) since the mid-1980s, but this does not mean that the national narrative of *jogo bonito* has lost its potency. On the contrary, the narrative power of national identity is greatly strengthened when imbued with a healthy dose of nostalgia and longing for the golden ages (and teams) of Pelé, Garrincha, Zico and Sócrates.

Brazil is, of course, also a country that takes good old-fashioned national pride in its footballing achievements. In the impassioned words of embattled President [Dina Rouseff](#): "We are the Land of Football because of our glorious history of five world championships and for the passion that every Brazilian dedicates to their team, to their heroes and to the Seleção, our National Team. The love of

our people for football has become part of our national identity. For us, football is a celebration of life.”

Conversely, the teams of (Western) Germany are still often remembered and characterized as the equivalent of human steam engines. Certain stereotypical aspects of German culture and society (precision, efficiency, and even ruthlessness) are emphasized while others that do not fit the narrative of the German steamrollers aren't mentioned at all. In terms of Germany's footballing identity, the nation is thought of as 100 percent Krupp steel and zero percent Beethoven. In reality, however, there have been many footballing Beethovens (Beckenbauer, Netzer, Schuster, to name just a few), but for the collective memory of international football Germany is represented by [Hans Peter Briegel](#), the “steamroller from Palatine.”

To be sure, this is not simply an issue of misrepresentation from the outside; in fact many Germans are deeply implicated in these stereotyping processes. For example, today one can hear complaints from both former players and supporters about a lack of “German virtues” (“run, fight, never give up!”) in the current [multicultural Nationalmannschaft](#).

The list goes on. The crucial aspect here is that the inherent contradictoriness of national identities allows for the accommodation of countless interpretations, even if this requires a high degree of intellectual gymnastics at times. So what if Italian football is usually highly tactical, organized, and defensive and as such does not match well with most of the established stereotypes of Italy's national identity? No problem here apparently, as “Italian football merely reflects the cautious, pragmatic nature of many Italians. This is, after all, the country of [Machiavelli](#).” The Dutch adhere to strict systems yet often lack team spirit? [Calvinist individualism](#). The English always play with a lot of passion? (In reality, they sometimes do and sometimes don't.) Best explained by the “[bulldog spirit](#),” isn't it? But let's not forget about [Victorian masturbation anxiety](#).

(2) I vividly remember watching a football match in Zagreb's *Maksimir* stadium in the early 1990s when the old Yugoslavia was in a process of disintegration. Dinamo Zagreb played Banja Luka, a Bosnian team, and the whole match was one huge political rally for the nationalist HDZ party. During most of the game, the Dinamo supporters - we were sitting with the everyday people... grandpas rather than the notorious Bad Blue Boys - were hurling abuse at the Bosnian team: “Cigani, Cigani, Cigani” (“gypsies, gypsies, gypsies”).

I didn't fully understand what was happening at the time, but this is my first personal memory of the relationship between football and nationalism and, in the case of the former Yugoslavia, football did play a substantial role in the disintegration of the country and the construction of its neo-national successor states. As [Dario Brentin](#) points out, even a “decade after the end of Tudman's regime, sport, and particularly football, has remained a central social field in which Croatia's (national) identity is still intensively articulated, debated and contested.”

The proximity of football and nationalistic politics is a common point of critique, even though the “people's game” can also be [claimed](#) as an inherently proletarian and integrative force. In 2006, football allegedly allowed Germans to experience a [joyful patriotism](#) for the first time since the end of World War II. It is probably necessary to point out the inherent tribalism of most sporting competitions (and club football in many ways is just as emotionally charged as international football).

But the very fact that it is nations (well, states, technically - with the exception of England, and sometimes Scotland, of course) that compete at the World Cup allegedly makes a major difference. Speaking of England: The Argentine team made sure to remind the world of a "[minor geopolitical dispute](#)" just in time for the big party.

(3) Perhaps the most abstract, yet I believe also efficacious aspect of events such as the World Cup (and the Olympics) is their role in reifying the global discourse of nation-ness. What could be more "natural" than seeing the "nations of the world" compete with each other? The World Cup only makes sense in a deeply "nationalized" world. In an age of globalization shaped by transnational corporations, mass migrations, and multiple citizenships, the World Cup should perhaps be seen as an anachronism, but that really is not the case; in fact, it instead serves to reinforce the ongoing global imagination of national distinctiveness.

If we understand nationalism broadly as a discursive form that functions as the "[common denominator](#)" among, say, Japanese economic protectionism, Serbian ethnic cleansing, Americans singing the 'Star-Spangled Banner' before baseball games, and the way the World Bank collects statistics" it may help us understand that it isn't just that football is implicated in spawning nationalism or certain national identities, but that it is nation-ness as a universal political language that makes competitions like the World Cup possible and plausible in the first place. The World Cup may thus be best understood as a contemporary concretization of nation-ness - and as one that is imbued with great emotive powers.

In this regard, I often wonder whether I would enjoy or care about the World Cup as much if my own team (Germany) wasn't playing. I support various sports teams (e.g., Eintracht Frankfurt and the Green Bay Packers) and I honestly couldn't say if I am more stressed watching these teams play or more disappointed if they lose compared to watching Germany compete in a big tournament. (A [friend](#) of mine also pointed out that supporters of sports teams, and fan cultures more generally, take on many features of national allegiance in an almost mimetic fashion.) Losing always hurts, but on some level nationalism wants to make us believe that if "our" team loses at the World Cup, we've been personally defeated as well. Cynicism, sportsmanship, and the gracious acceptance of defeat are all useful remedies, but at the World Cup the nation always looms large.

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