

Football and Spanish Cultural Life; Some contemporary perspectives and observations

Jim O'Brien

Southampton Solent University

Abstract

How can the cultural life and identity of a nation state be articulated and expressed when the existence of that nation state is contested and challenged? If history has any capacity to repeat itself, current cultural and political issues in Spanish society provide much evidence for the continued presence of the struggles between centre and region, unity and division which have permeated constructions and representations of Spain since medieval times.

Keywords: cultural life, identity, football

In 2014, these debates and tensions resonate as potently as ever. Following the death of Franco in 1975 and the subsequent uneasy transition from autocracy to democracy, the constitutional settlement of 1978, built as it was on the consensus of the 'Pact of Forgetting' (Encarnacion,2008) set the blueprint for the classic compromise between the forces of unity and the emergent Spain of seventeen autonomous regions. A modern democracy based on competitive party politics was couched against the backdrop of the turbulence of Spain's political history in the twentieth century, which had embraced monarchy, republic, civil war and dictatorship. Decentralisation and devolved power gave special status to the historic communities of the Basque Country, Catalonia and Galicia, embedded in the cultural and political renaissance following the collapse and retreat of imperial Spain in the late nineteenth century (Junco and Schuster, 2005). Membership of the European Community in 1986 consolidated the democratic credentials of the Spanish state and confirmed the shift from isolationism to internationalism. Yet, in spite of these carefully wrought

Football and Spanish Cultural Life; Some contemporary perspectives and observations

compromises recognising the parity of Spain's diverse languages, ethnicities and cultural mores, constructions of Spanish nationhood remained complex and fluid. Once the manufactured consent and political control underpinning the Franco regime's representation and iconography of national identity had gradually eroded, traditional conflicts and cleavages began to be played out once more, reframed and recast within the distinctive hue of the contemporary landscape. Since the economic meltdown of 2008, the divisions at the heart of Spanish society have resurfaced in the form of direct political protest with frequent marches of the loose affiliation making up the 'indignados' crystallising the economic, political and cultural tensions within the Spanish psyche. The campaigns for increased autonomy, separation and independence have gained momentum, especially in the historic regions of the Basque Country and Catalonia. At the end of 2014, the Spanish state is once again at a seminal crossroads, with the potential to implode and fragment into a cluster of self-governing sovereign nations. The forces of disunity and division currently outweigh centrifugal forces. From this perspective, of divergent constructions, symbols and images of competing nationalisms and ethnicities, how can Spanish cultural identity be currently defined? What forces of cohesion exist to reflect contemporary Spain? In a time of political uncertainty and economic depression, how are more positive landscapes of national identity framed?

Football is deeply rooted in the Spanish psyche and is a seminal factor in defining sporting, cultural and political patterns of alliance and rivalry. From its folkloric genesis in the Andalusian mining town of Huelva in the 1870s to its burgeoning development in the urban and industrial heartlands of the Basque Country and Catalonia in the 1890s, the game is historically rooted in the ideological, political, socio-economic and cultural factors which shaped the pivotal features of twentieth century Spain (Ball, 2011). The parallel histories of Spanish club football, founded on locality, region, language and cultural diversity and *La Selección*, the Spanish national side, based on repeated attempts to manufacture and galvanise a coherent sense of national pride and identity since 1920 and the birth of the symbolic ritualism of *La Furia Española*, have witnessed an interlocking synthesis of values, images and representations to reflect and define the divided sensibilities of the game's lexicon. From the Franco regime's exploitation and manipulation of football's increased mediatisation in the 1950s to become the social drug of distraction and mass spectacle at the core of the apparatus of *No-Do* (Relano, 2014), to its crucial role as a force of both continuity and change during the transition to democracy in the late 1970s and

early 1980s, the Spanish game was a barometer of cultural and ethnic cohesion and diversity, and embellished the key forces of historical and political rivalry between Madrid, Barcelona and Bilbao. Spanish club football's transformation since the mid-1990s into a global spectacle of mass consumption and the evolution of the fabled *La Furia Espanola* into *La Roja's* glittering success on the international stage have underscored the notion that football remains a vital element in the dichotomy of contemporary Spanish culture. Whilst the myths and folklore of tradition retain the power of legacy and legend, critical changes and developments have altered the prism in which Spanish football is contextualised. These changes are interwoven within wider political themes to shed considerable light on 'Spanishness' in the early years of the twenty-first century.

Since the mid-1990s Spanish club football has become increasingly globalised, particularly at its elite levels. The global economy of the game, allied to the implications of the 1995 Bosman Ruling has changed the composition of the Spanish game, the ebb and flow of the constant migration of players creating a more fluid cultural dynamic. This has challenged the old orthodoxies which defined the traditional constructs of locality, region and ethnicity surrounding the quasi-sacred folkloric identities of Spanish football and has produced a number of paradoxes. The influx of galaticos such as Zidane, Beckham, Ronaldo and Bale into Real Madrid since 2001 has both maintained the club's tradition of importing international stars as a basis for its success since the era of Puskas and Di Stefano in the 1950s and pushed it to new levels of exposure and consumption. This has made the concept of '*Madridista*' more difficult to define, with only the historic legacy of being framed as Franco's team, representing the centre and the regime, to fuse tradition with post modernity to create a sense of cultural and political identity. The identity of FC Barcelona, on the other hand, deeply embedded as it is in the dissident regionalism of Catalonia, crafted its contemporary identity on the bedrock of *La Cantera*, which produced a galaxy of star players such as Xavi, Iniesta, Messi and Busquets from 2004, developing the specific tiki-taka style of play with great success to celebrate and promote Catalanism and Catalonia to a global audience (Burns, 2012). The rich tapestry of the Spanish football mosaic maintains the tradition of Athletic Bilbao's Basques only policy as the embodiment of the club's football and ethnic identity, though its ability to engender success on the field has been compromised by the global composition of *La Liga* (O'Brien, 2014). Within these nuances of diversity, the pattern is one of *La Liga* becoming more homogenised through football's global

Football and Spanish Cultural Life; Some contemporary perspectives and observations

market- place, with an incumbent loss of the constituent components of 'Spanishness'. The Spanish game has also become ever more globalised in respect of its mediatisation and representation to global audiences across a plethora of global media platforms. Spanish football, especially through the distorted lens of the excessive and hyperbolic coverage of *'El Clasico'* between Real Madrid and FC Barcelona as the global mega spectacle, has become a focal element within football's mass consumption as a global entertainment. Television determines the scheduling, wealth and presentation of the Spanish game at saturation levels to both domestic and global audiences. *'El Clasico'* is framed as the dominant duopoly defining the essence of Spanish football, illustrating cultural conformity and narrowness, for the most part ignoring the rich political and ethnic textures which have shaped the history of football in Spain. The globalisation of Spanish football mirrors the wider demise of identity which has left its mark on both the Spanish economy and the current political context. Its impact has been to accentuate inequality, promote spiralling debt, eroding tradition to catapult the game into the global entertainment industry.

The transformation of *La Seleccion* from perennial failure in international competition (Ball, 2011) to the success of *La Roja* in winning three successive tournaments between 2008 and 2012 has impacted on Spanish cultural life in a number of ways. Once again this reveals certain paradoxes. In football terms, *La Roja* banished the ghosts of *La Furia* and *El Fatalismo* from the historic associations of the game (Burns). Prior to winning the Euros in 2008, the national team had previously won only one international tournament, the European Nations Cup of 1964, when the Franco regime exploited the ideological propaganda of victory over the Soviet Union in Madrid, utilising the values of *La Furia* to embody the spirit, courage and hard work at the centre of the dictatorship's representations of Spain's cultural heritage and identity. The fluent elegance of *La Roja's* tactical approach rejected the dourness of *La Furia* and laid to rest the curse of *El Fatalismo*, the perceived misfortune of *La Seleccion* in international competition. The wider cultural dynamic underpinning *La Roja* centred around both a rebranding of the national team to stimulate marketing and publicity, but also to engender support so that the contemporary incarnation of the side was no longer tainted by association to the Franco era, especially amongst the young and within the regions of Spain. The fact that *La Roja* was composed of players drawn mostly from FC Barcelona and adopted a similar style of play to the Catalan club assisted this metamorphosis and suggested that at least in football terms, Spain could reconcile the traditional regional antipathy towards

La Seleccion under the seductive drug of success pulling the nation together. Indeed, the images of the team returning from South Africa in triumph after winning the World Cup in 2010 struck a rare moment of harmony and cohesion in the midst of discord and disintegration. Del Bosque's success as coach was founded on defusing the hostility between Mourinho's Real Madrid and Guardiola's FC Barcelona to bridge the *Madridista* – Catalan divide to foster a cohesive identity for *La Seleccion*, best exemplified by the enduring friendship which developed between Real's Casillas and Barcelona's Xavi. By 2014 and the Brazil World Cup, the golden period of *La Roja* success was abruptly eclipsed with the side's 5- 1 humbling by the Netherlands. Questions resurfaced as to the extent to which football was able to paper over the complexities surrounding contested nationalisms and identities to foster a sense of national consensus without the coercive hand of a dictatorship to maintain unity. For all the success of *La Roja*, old issues remain central to football's capacity to define cultural life at the level of the nation state in Spain; club football is still at the core of the myriad constructions of Spanish cultural identity.

As we have noted, representations of *El Clasico* form the central tenet of Spanish Club football's globalisation. FC Barcelona was welded to Catalanism from the club's foundation in 1899, just after the cultural and political renaissance of Barcelona itself in the later years of that decade. In a similar vein, the genesis of Athletic Bilbao in 1898 was foreshadowed by the foundation of the Basque Nationalist Party (PNV) in 1894. Thus football, politics and culture were intertwined in Spain's historic regions. Football in Madrid developed more slowly and drew on both Catalan and Basque influences before forging its own distinctive dichotomy in the 1920s, when the political and class centred rivalry between Real Madrid and Atletico Madrid became more sharply articulated. In Catalonia, the Basque Country, Galicia, Andalusia and in the capital itself, the roots of Spanish football are local. In 2014, these local roots are still at the core of the symbols, folklore and images which create the distinctive history of the Spanish game. Traditions of fandom, *La Cantera*, language and the physical terrain of the Spanish landscape combine to ensure this hegemony. But this tradition of locality is challenged by changes in the fabric of Spanish football, in the shift from national and regional identity to corporate identity. As football became part of the business and entertainment vortex from 2000 onwards, traditional patterns of ownership and control have been compromised. The majority of Spanish clubs in the top two tiers are run as private companies, albeit with sporadic state intervention to regulate them and limit excessive financial

Football and Spanish Cultural Life; Some contemporary perspectives and observations

debt. But the distinctive tradition remains intact of member owned clubs, of which currently four exist (Real Madrid, FC Barcelona, Athletic Bilbao and CF Osasuna). This tradition is much lauded and celebrated, but it has been increasingly scrutinised and challenged in recent years. It constitutes a symbolic democracy which maintains a bond between governance, ownership and the club's wider community and support. It carves a distinctive niche in Spanish cultural life. But the contemporary reality is rather more mixed. The controversial relationship between FC Barcelona and the Qatar Foundation since 2006 raises key questions about identity, ownership and corporate involvement. On the one hand the club has defended its links with the Qatar Foundation on the grounds of enabling FC Barcelona to compete with its key rivals by securing the financial backing required to retain its elite position in global football. Critics have castigated the move as not only a sell-out of the clubs traditions but also in respect of a decline in ethical values at the altar of global capitalism. In this sense Catalaniism and the club's folklore have been hi - jacked and re- packaged to frame the contemporary rivalry with Real Madrid for mass global consumption. The stratospheric transfer fees paid by Real in pursuit of the latest galactico demonstrate the Spanish game's contemporary values, and the controversial foreign investment in FC Malaga and FC Santander in recent years pinpoints a deeper malaise in Spanish football itself, serving as a wider metaphor for Spanish cultural life based on the secular pursuit of conspicuous consumerism. Within this rather pessimistic scenario, there are vestiges of hope. The miracle of FC Eibar in progressing from the third level of Spanish football to nestle comfortably within its elite represents localism at its best, suggesting that the romance of the Spanish game is not entirely lost. The combination of small town, tiny stadium, with all of the team's players residing in Eibar itself seems to buck the contemporary trend. When the club hosted Real Madrid in November 2014 at its 5,500 capacity ground, the stark contrast between the teams was clearly visible. The starting eleven of Real cost 400 million euros to assemble, whilst the Eibar side cost just £162,000! In a wider cultural context, the match appealed to the imagination because it evokes the diversity and roots of the Spanish nation itself. Eibar, deep in the Basque Country, owed its creation to 1940 post civil war Spain and the need for industrial regeneration - competing in the same competition against the global city of Madrid, current Champions League holders.

The Spanish Sporting press is obsessed with football. On one level this respects a long tradition of a specialist sporting press, with *El Mundo Deportivo* dating back to 1906 and *Marca* to 1938. Football still operates as that social drug,

continuing to seduce readers with sensationalism, speculation, propaganda and a highly developed sense of cultural stereotyping which reinforces and recycles the traditional political rivalry between Madrid and Barcelona, Spain and Catalonia (Vincent, 2010). Whilst this is frequently at the expense of analysis and objectivity, it further reinforces the politicisation of football in Spanish cultural life. Since 2008, this has become a benchmark for political populism, in which the game has been at the forefront of both the projection and expression of the symbols and rituals of banal nationalism (Billig, 2004). This has given publicity to mass global audiences of many of the contemporary tensions around unity, separation, autonomy and independence which divide Spanish politics. In recent years the Camp Nou has witnessed frequent incidents of this type of political populism to promote Catalan nationalism and antipathy towards Madrid. In 2010, when FC Barcelona played Arsenal in the Champions League, a banner was unfurled opposite the media centre, proclaiming in English that 'Catalonia is not Spain'. Moreover, at every home match the events of 1714 are celebrated with chants of '*Independencia*'. Football reflects wider political and cultural concerns, fusing the game's own history and rivalries with contemporary events. On November 9th 2014, the day of the unofficial independence referendum in Catalonia, Valencia played Athletic Bilbao at *La Mestalla*. Throughout the match, Valencia supporters sang '*Viva Espana!*' in clear reference to this event. The stadium is well known for its support of the national team, with *La Seleccion* frequently playing matches there. Are these incidents merely reflective of the banal nationalism of gesture politics or do they suggest a deeper cultural significance? At a time of protest and demands for change, is football a key site of political and cultural dissemination, utilising its rich political and cultural history to promote and project messages which demonstrate the pulse of the Spanish psyche?

In contemporary Spanish cultural life, football is a fulcrum and nexus which encapsulates many of the key issues impacting upon the divergent strands of identity. It still acts as a vehicle for cohesion; *La Liga* and *La Segunda* are national competitions which link Coruna with Almeria, Las Palmas with Girona. The success of *La Roja* caused national celebration, and however briefly brought the nation together under the Spanish flag, thus suggesting that the phenomenon of 'Dual Identity' may indeed link football with divergent aspects of regional and national sentiment (Quiroga, 2013). It also showed the game's capacity to be in the vanguard of change. As was the case in the early 1980s when the successes of Real Sociedad, Athletic Bilbao and FC Barcelona symbolised resurgent

Football and Spanish Cultural Life; Some contemporary perspectives and observations

regionalism, the continued capacity of football to fuel and represent political aspirations in the Basque Country and Catalonia, juxtaposed with the campaigns for recognition by the national teams of these regions put further pressure on the central Spanish state to hold together as a unified nation. Spanish football exhibits consensus and dissent in its contemporary cultural composition - the national structure of the elite levels of club football are likely to retain their function as a focal point of cohesion in which regional rivalries can be defused and contained, however the political debate develops pertaining to Spain's future in the next few years.

References

- 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, Schuster and Schuster
- Encarnacion, O (2008) *Spanish Politics; Democracy after Dictatorship*, London, Polity Press
- Junco, J and Shubert, A (2005) *Spanish History since 1868*, London, Hodder Arnold
- O'Brien, J (2014) *Shades of Basqueness (Dashpar et al; Sports Events, Society and Culture)*, London, Routledge
- Quiroga, A (2013) *Football and National Identities in Spain*, London, Palgrave Macmillan
- Relano, A (2014) *Memorias en Blanco y Negro (Memories in Black and White)*, Barcelona, Roca Editorial
- Vincent, M (2010) *Spain 1833 – 2002, People and State*, Oxford, OUP