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Racism and Sport: Myths and Facts

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BARBARA FAEDDA, JUL 5 2012

Racism and xenophobia are important issues in sports, and soccer very often seems to provoke the most violent and uncontrolled behaviors. Such a topic requires an interdisciplinary analysis, where psychology, anthropology, sociology, just to mention a few, must work together in order to understand why and how specific individual, collective, social, and national expressions are elaborated and expressed in the sports arena.

Many scholars are convinced that today it is clear to everyone, even to groups on the far right, that biological race does not exist and that today's racism is a *cultural* racism[1]. Nonetheless, other scholars notice that myths around 'race', biology, and athletic performance are still widespread and very deep[2]. Last spring some students in my class were quite surprised to know that 'race' is not a crucial factor in athletic performance and ability, and that blacks are not *biologically* better in sports than whites.

However, this is not the whole story. We should investigate how many different types and expressions of racism and racist attitudes, stereotypes, xenophobia, anti-Semitism and anti-Islamism are generated; how many different levels of personal and collective involvement are created; how many identities are elaborated in the sports arena; and, finally, how many different ways of belonging are considered, reconsidered and reframed before and during the sport events.

Nationalism, regionalism, postcolonialism, and immigration are huge and interesting topics to discuss in such a debate. When we speak about racism in European football, we have episodes related to the UK, Spain, Italy, etc. clearly in mind, and in all of them we can locate different variables and elaborations of national, regional, cultural, and 'ethnic' histories and identities. We know that identities, in this case, are particularly flexible and elastic. All Italians are proud of the Azzurri soccer team, but when we deal with historical national issues and characteristics, we all know about the very often difficult relation between the North and the South of Italy, the very deep '*campanilismo*' (exaggerated parochialism and local pride), and the resistance against immigrants and new citizens (e.g. the "Balotelli case", related to the famous football player, born in Italy to a Ghanaian couple, fostered by an Italian couple, and who finally received his Italian citizenship in 2008).

Faced with a very low birth rate and an aging population, Europe desperately needs immigrants to keep the labor market alive and to maintain an expensive welfare system, but the general attitude toward immigration keeps being hostile. Immigration is viewed as a constant emergency; a problem that no country in Europe has been able to solve, although it is a common assumption that immigration is an integral part of European (and global) history[3]. Because it is so closely tied to the sovereignty and identity of the nation-state, immigration has been deeply politicized and manipulated as a crucial tool of control and coercion. Although northern European countries have been dealing with immigration for several decades in the 20th century, they are still trying to create a homogeneous policy, while the southern European countries strive to take full control of the problem. A terrorizing rhetoric – along with the support of a conniving media – contributes to the creation of a widespread fear of immigrants. Immigrants are considered to be one of the main sources of feelings of insecurity.

In the so called 'crowd dynamics' related to the football events, the analysis of such a social and cultural background cannot be avoided. Targets of racism and discrimination can change, while some remain a constant on the soccer stage. We know that many groups can be – and have been – racialized in different times and places, and that skin

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color is not always the main factor (is Mario Balotelli today the “Italian hero” for all Italians?). Citing another recent episode related to Euro2012, we heard the Italian soccer champion Antonio Cassano “hoping there are no gay players in the Italian squad” and then apologizing for his remarks[4].

Do we really know how many gay, lesbian, black, Jewish, “mestizos”, Islamic, not native, etc. players have been excluded from professional sports so far in Europe and elsewhere? Racism in the stadiums and during matches is one – very evident and very serious – expression of such a social malaise, cultural backwardness, and general injustice. However, what should be explored is the ‘racist’ and discriminating system behind stadiums, where such a racism originated, where it is elaborated, how and why it is continuously reframed and conceptualized in different situations, and above all why, it is still so pervasive and reluctant to die.

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[1] Horvath K. and Rosenberg J., Euroschoools 2008: the difficult relationship of culture, nation and anti-racism in UEFA’s campaign work, *Soccer & Society*, vol. 11, no. 6, nov. 2010, 829-842.

[2] Graves J.L. Jr., *The Race Myth*, Plume, 2005.

[3] Saskia Sassen., *Guest and Aliens*, (New York: The New Press, 1999), 157. See also Kalid Koser, *International Migration. A Very Short Introduction*, (Oxford-New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 1. Natalia Ribas-Mateos, *The Mediterranean in the Age of Globalization*, (New Brunswick and London: Transaction Publishers, 2005).

[4] <http://www.guardian.co.uk/football/2012/jun/12/euro-2012-antonio-cassano-gays>;