Football & Racism: Euro 2012 in Perspective

Published in 1898 by a physical education teacher named Karl Planck, *Fusslümmelei* epitomized the Germans' dislike of football, particularly its English origins. Planck considered the game of football as an 'English disease' that threatened the more dignified gymnastics that dominated the almost militarized German way of life. Football was a menace because of how the game was played; famished workers that resembled apes for the animal-like movements that the game required. Even though it was hooliganism that was later on described as the 'English disease,' one cannot dismiss Planck's views since aping is ever so prevalent nowadays in the game all around Europe. Highlighting the kind of social unrest that characterizes Europe in the 21st century are monkey chanting, banana missiles, swastikas and offensive banners of all sorts in football stadia across the continent. Of course, social exclusion and racial discrimination are not exclusive to football. Rather, they are social phenomena magnified, perhaps, through the lens of European integration and, therefore, effortlessly transmitted to every sector of society including sports.

Racism refers explicitly to social, political and economic manifestations denoting prejudice, precisely the all-important ingredients that oftentimes define the agendas of extreme right formations. That the popularity of football dictates that the game is best accommodated in large stadiums cannot be overlooked when examining the causes of racism in football for sports grounds may just as well be converted to political arenas allowing the extreme right an opportunity to recruit members and disseminate xenophobic material. It is worthy of note, however, that while some scholars emphasize the role of the extreme right in football [1], others stress their lack of influence [2]. What is important, nevertheless, is that both under- and over-estimating the likely impact of the extreme right in football could have equally serious repercussions for the popular game. Racism in European football has several different guises, when anti-racism measures are concerned, thus rendering discrimination all the more distressing. Football in England suffers from a lack of black managers at the top division, as well as the absence of non-white officials at institutional level.

The 'Frenchness' of those football players making up the national team of France is often disputed, just as Germany's own version of multi-culti football has not escaped insult. Interestingly, the Dutch national football team has in the past appeared divided over racial issues, whereas in Italy black footballers and southerners alike suffer the same racial abuse. Along similar lines, Scottish football is overwhelmed with sectarianism; ethnic tension continues to define football in the Balkans; and even the record-braking Spaniards beg for a stronger national identity against the background of regionalism. As for the east European countries, the transition from communism to democracy and the suppression of all things nationalist during the Cold War suffice for accounting for much the same issues that blemish football elsewhere in Europe. It is within this context that non-white players threatening to leave the football pitch when confronted with racism has become a regular phenomenon, at the same time as the low turnout of non-white spectators is probably no more important than a mere statistic.

The archetype of racism in football is almost identical to the kind of discrimination witnessed in other parts of society, which only serves to emphasize the fact that racism in football is a socially transmitted disease that society must remedy. While this may suggest that the game's governing bodies need not address the issue single-handedly or, perhaps, not even at all, it is important to note that the compelling urge to eliminate racism from football presupposes the authenticity of those allegations that render football subject to prejudice. In this light, the semiotics of football fan culture cannot be ignored, considering that abusing rival fans and players alike is an integral part of football culture

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the world over. As a matter of fact, underlining the complexity of racism in football is "fans who racially abuse the black players who play for their opponents, yet cheer those who play for their own side"[3], even though "the 'acceptance' of black players and spectators by certain white fans can be contingent upon them demonstrating allegiance to the 'right' club or team" [4]. Furthermore, the physique of black football players has always been attributed to racialized features. Complementing or ridiculing a black player, therefore, depends much on whether he plays for 'us' or 'them', since those that have played a part in 'our' team's success are often celebrated whereas those playing for the opposition are abused in hope of affecting their overall performance and not, perhaps, with the intention of expressing instinctively racist beliefs. Certain football rituals often border on the racist aspects of the game as any two sets of rival fans strive to impose their distinct fan identity. Hence, certain football-related racist incidents should not be confused with the more prevalent forms of racial discrimination that currently disturb European societies.

Yet for the popular game to rid itself of racism it is imperative that institutional racism is addressed first. Just over a decade ago Les Back, Tim Crabbe and John Solomos pondered quite a topical question: "If black players can pull on the England shirt, is it possible that one day there could be a black manager of England?" [5] Seemingly, 'no' is the answer, considering the fact that Paul Ince became the first ever black premier league manager only as recently as 2008. Surely, Dutchman Ruud Gullit at Chelsea Football Club and Frenchman Jean Tigana at Fulham Football Club both preceded him in club management; however, in their case nationality probably preceded skin color. Conditions at lower football divisions in England are no better, since Edwin Stein became the first black manager at Barnet Football Club in 1993. Evidently, during last football season in England, only two of the ninety-two English league clubs featured a black manager–neither one enjoying management at the top division.

Naturally, a mega sporting event such as EURO 2012 would not escape the attention of the omnipresent bigots. To protect non-white fans, the Football Against Racism in Europe (FARE) network created a number of 'inclusivity zones' and operated a 24-hour hotline that provided those fans with information concerning which areas to avoid, all part of its 'Respect Diversity, Football Unites' campaign. UEFA, too, created a number of safe areas for non-white fans, particularly in Ukraine. In Piara Powar's words, executive director of FARE, "It may seem a bit extreme to some having to set up inclusivity zones but we don't want non-white fans being put off from travelling to the European Championship." In much the same context, Theo van Seggelen, General Secretary of Fifpro, the European football players' body, feared that footballers would face racial abuse, while non-white fans could be targeted by extreme right hooligans [6]. Indeed, non-white players of the Dutch national team were racially abused during an open training session [7], Czech Republic defender Theodor Gebre Selassie was subjected to monkey chants during a game against Russia [8] and Italy's Mario Balotelli was abused by Spanish and Croatian supporters [9]. The Croatian, Spanish and Russian football associations have all been charged by UEFA for racist chanting by fans [10], while the German Football Association has been charged for the "displaying of inappropriate banners and symbols, and inappropriate chanting" by their fans during the game against Denmark [11]. Considering the fact that only this many incidents were officially recorded by anti-racism organizations such as Kick It Out during a football marathon of thirty-one matches attended by close to 1.5 million people, one can only speculate about the actual degree of racism in European football.

Unless of course racism in football is purposely exaggerated not so much as to raise awareness, but to cater to the needs of the media and other pertinent agents. Evidently, a BBC Panorama documentary, entitled 'Stadiums of Hate', seems to have focused exclusively on a number of isolated incidents in Polish and Ukrainian football in order to establish, inaccurately so, the extent of racism in the two host countries. In fact, one of the people interviewed by the BBC reporters, Jonathan Ornstein (Executive Director of the Jewish Community Centre of Krakow), did not hesitate to express his fury at how he was exploited as a source by sending a statement to The Economist [12]. The documentary was condemned by England fan groups as misleading, while Mark Perryman, Convenor of the London England fans' group, "noted that there had been no cases of racism or hooliganism when England last played in Ukraine in 2009, or during recent visits there by Premier League teams including Arsenal, Tottenham, Manchester City and Everton" [13]. Needless to say, racism in European football remains as obscure a phenomenon as ever.

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