Theory Synthesis in Sport and International Relations Research

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The main focus of contemporary 'sport & international relations (IR)' research is on the hosting of mega-sporting events as campaigns that may help the host country enhance its international image and status. The research uses Nye's (2008) *neoliberal* concept of *soft power* (see Grix and Lee, 2013; Grix and Houlihan, 2014; Grix *et al*., 2015; Grix and Brannagan, 2016). But, the *soft power* template is only one element of the *neoliberal* paradigm, so the analysis remains devoid of theoretical significance. In addition, it overlooks or downplays the importance of studying international affairs in hostile environments, where countries are faced with conflict and the need for rapprochement.

Is There Another Way?

The central question is whether a single theory, let alone a single component of that theory, can supplement 'sport & IR' research. To answer this question requires searching for an approach that would incorporate the roles of domestic actors and non-government organizations (NGOs), avoiding the weak points of state-centered IR paradigms. During the last three decades, the strict adherence to single theories – so-called *monism* – has led to a debate around the possibility of synthetic approaches being a viable alternative in IR research. In a special forum of experts in the early 2000s, Moravcsik (2003b) proposed that synthesis in IR research is straightforward, so long as it comprises a set of discrete IR theories intertwined coherently at some essential level (e.g. some overarching assumptions) but not the full range of each theory's fundamental ontology. By now, IR scholars including Andreatta and Koenig-Archibugi (2010) and Checkel (2010) have proposed three models of theoretical synthesis: (1) *domains of application*, (2) *temporal sequencing* and (3) *subsumption*. In the *domains of application* model, the attempt focuses on combining different theories specified independently, e.g. *neoliberalism* and *constructivism*, in the hope that together they may enhance our understanding of the real world. It deals with different empirical domains within a one-time frame. If the result is successful, the composite theory is deemed more comprehensive than each of the separate theories. This combination works best when the aim is to explain similar phenomena and the explanatory variables are complementary, i.e. they have little overlap – not interacting to influence the outcomes. The *temporal sequencing* model is similar to the *domains of application* but synthesizes theories that are temporally dependent, working together over time to explain a given domain. In this way, one theory is allowed to fill in the gap in the explanatory power of the other. In *subsumption*, one theory subsumes another when the latter constitutes a special case of the former so there is no scope of carrying out research under either of them separately.

In search of theoretical syntheses that could incorporate the role of domestic actors, a brief review of IR paradigms indicates the following. *Neorealism* or *structural realism* remains a state-centered theory. It focuses on the never-ending struggle for power among sovereign states, viewing them as the sole IR actors – and thus units of analysis – in an 'anarchic' (anarchic meaning lack of a world government) global system. However, an invigorated realist view, n*eoclassical realism,* does pay attention to the dire role of domestic level variables such as public opinion and political culture in the formulation of effective foreign policy (Ripsman *et al*, 2016). *Neoliberalism* also remains a state-centered model. Although it maintains that international political institutions and global powers can help states avoid 'anarchy', it does not explain how the state aggregates societal preferences in order to formulate its foreign policy. Princeton's liberal theorist Moravcsik (2003a) dismisses *neoliberalism* altogether, arguing for a '*non-utopian' liberal* approach in which individuals and private groups comprise the set of fundamental actors in international politics, with

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governments and other political institutions being only a subset. *Constructivism* sees 'anarchy' as a concept socially constructed (Guzzini and Leander, 2005). Social construction implies the creation of world politics through a process involving the interaction between individuals, states and non-state actors, on the one hand, and the structure of the global system on the other. Constructivists do not see states as the sole actors in IR and consider that the individuals of a country with their ideational attributes and norms impact on IR, while NGOs hold a significant role in the diffusion of these ideas and norms to the population. The *English School*, finally, a 'middle-ground' approach in itself, provides a view of IR as a whole and advances three key concepts: *International system, international society* and *world society* (Murray, 2015). The first one incorporates the realist's view of anarchy, while the second approximates the *neoliberal* approach by stressing the importance of norms, rules, and institutions for maximum shared interests among states. Its third concept, *world society,* places individuals, the global population, and non-state actors as the center of analysis.

A Cautious Step Forward and Some Case Studies

Thus far, the only known empirical study on 'sport & IR' which follows a multi-theoretic approach is by Giulianotti *et al* (2017) on Kosovo's quest for international recognition through membership in international sport governance organizations. In presenting their methodology, Giulianotti *et al* defend their approach as follows:

We situate our overall analysis within international relations theories, more specifically within the selective usage and integration of four main perspectives: realist, liberal, constructivist, and critical. Our overall emphasis is on a mix of critical and constructivist approaches. While this synthesis may appear excessively diverse for some scholars, we consider this to be essential in order to register conceptually both the complexity of Kosovo's national and international position and the depth of our data… (p. 122).

Unfortunately, Giulianotti *et al* do not construct a systematic theoretical framework upon which to formulate their research questions first in an *ex-ante* fashion, and then present their analysis. Instead, they use their data to reflect on different IR perspectives in an *ex-post* mode. In addition, they make no reference to the literature on synthetic models. Thus, while their contribution reflects a unique approach to the study of 'sport & IR', it is based on subjective readings of their data in relation to variant relevant scholarship.

This article presents four brief case-study examples that highlight the strength of the proposed approach, following mainly the *domains of application* model. These cases, that are not necessarily comparable among them, include two football rivalries, the cases of Algeria *vs* Egypt and Palestine vs Israel, and two rapprochements, the cases of the two Koreas and the Turkish-Cypriot and Greek-Cypriot communities. The appropriate *ex-ante* research questions center on "what were the roots of the conflict/rapprochement", "how it was resolved/executed" and "whether there were outside actors in support of the negotiating parties' actions.

Algeria vs Egypt

Egypt and Algeria had tense relations over Egypt's recognition of Israel when they were drawn to play in the same group for the qualifying matches in the both the 1990 and 2010 FIFA (Fédération Internationale de Football Association) World Cups. The media fuelled this tension decisively with confrontational reports. In the second tournament, the playoff match took place in Sudan – a neutral country. Algerian fans attempted to exercise violence, while the Egyptian ones also tried to attack the Algerian team. The then Egyptian President Mubarak bluntly told the Sudanese government that he was ready to send in the army if necessary, because "…Egypt does not tolerate those who hurt the dignity of its sons" (Benghida, 2014, p. 237). After Egypt lost by 1-0, hundreds of Egyptians attacked the Algerian Embassy in Cairo, vandalizing cars, stores, and burning Algerian flags. FIFA, the international football governance institution, charged the Egyptian Football Association (EFA) over the attacks on the Algerian team and its disciplinary committee sanctioned EFA with a two-match ban. Subsequently, the presidents of the two countries ordered the media to discontinue their adverse reporting on the events and tensions gradually subsided. Given the disciplinary role of an international institution, FIFA, this rivalry fits into a *neoliberal* frame of analysis. However, to fully comprehend the roots of this conflict requires looking beyond the two countries' differing views on Israel. Using the *constructivist* lens would have unveiled evidence from historical records, which shows that the Algerian team

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players were the heirs of those who had given up professional careers in France in 1958 to participate in Algeria's war of independence. Algeria's resistance movement, the *Front de Libération Nationale* (FLN) had created the national football team, and when the country won its independence in 1962, that team composed the core of the new national side (Dorsey, 2015). The match between Algeria and Egypt, therefore, may have been socially constructed as a battle over Arab international representation, i.e. a conflict over which of the two countries had the historical and cultural credentials to represent the Arab world on the global pitch. Would it be Egypt, as the world's most populous Arab country or Algeria whose struggle for freedom became a model for Egypt's independence?

Palestine vs Israel

The overall Palestine-Israel conflict has its roots in the competing Arab-Jewish ethnic nationalisms of the 19th century around territorial rights deriving from historical and religious narratives. While awaiting its resolution in international political institutions, the conflict has been extended to the football arena, thus engaging the international body governing football – FIFA. Using the power conferred to it by its FIFA membership, the Palestinian Football Association (PFA) has been campaigning to suspend Israel's Football Association (IFA) membership in both FIFA and the Union of European Football Associations (UEFA). Its main recent strategy has rested on a resolution it submitted to the May 2015 FIFA Congress, demanding the removal of all restrictions on Palestinian player movement and development of Palestinian sport, the banning of football clubs operating in Israeli settlements from playing in IFA matches, and the combat of racism in Israeli football. This Palestinian strategy seeks to help move from a 'submerged state' status to full statehood. Their initiative was facilitated both by Palestine's acceptance into various UN bodies, and its latest symbolic recognition by some European states. The PFA has the support of various activist groups especially the BDS (Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions) movement, an international NGO initiated by the Palestinian civil society against any actions that gain from the violation of Palestinian rights. FIFA has so far avoided sanctioning Israel by appointing a special committee instead to examine Palestinian complaints, and UEFA has made it clear to Israel that several European associations will side with the Palestinians (Xenakis and Lekakis, 2018). In retaliation, an Israeli law firm accused the head of the PFA, a former general, in front of the UN International Criminal Court (ICC) of committing war crimes during the Gaza war (Dorsey, 2015b). This stalemate will continue, following the Palestinian football leader's last-minute political move, due to internal pressure, to alter his motion and the FIFA Congress decided to monitor the situation through an independent agency. This case could benefit from the combination of the *neoliberal* and *constructivist* paradigms. While the first one emphasizes the dynamics around decisions taken in international football governance institutions and the role of Western actors, the second could unveil the role of personal ideational attributes and norms that drive the conflict on, as well as the specific role played by civil society actors such as the BDS movement.

The two Koreas

At the 2000 Sydney, 2004 Athens and 2006 Turin Winter Olympic opening ceremonies, while all Korean athletes marched together under the same flag, 'Korea', the heads of the two Olympic committees followed with two separate flags. South Korea has made several attempts to approach the North through sports reunification gestures, but their attempts have stumbled in bureaucracies. Efforts to organize sporting events and exchanges between the two countries have been met with success, and all these attempts have seemed to bring North Korea out of its isolation. This outcome is attributed to the structure of the international system (Merkel, 2008, p. 294; 2016). "In general, the *status quo* of two co-existing Korean states is beneficial to all parties concerned, most of all the Republic of Korea (ROK) and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK), as well as the two superpowers of China and the USA who have a vested interest in the political events on the divided peninsula".

The two Koreas case is understood better in a synthetic framework that also unveils the role of sport in the competing discourse between North and South for national representation (Cho, 2012). After the Korean War, both countries considered themselves as legitimate powers in the Korean peninsula, but neither of them recognized the other as such. Instead, the North saw the South as a capitalist colony, while the South viewed the North as a satellite of totalitarian communism. With such negative projections of each other, the issue of unification was unimaginable. In the first period, the 1980 Moscow Olympics and the 1984 Los Angeles Olympics offered both countries the opportunity to affect inter-Korean relations by inviting each one to participate as a single Korean team. During the

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Moscow-led 1980's Olympics, the social construction by the South of its invitation by the North was as an attempt to block its independent participation. In 1984, when the Olympics were US-led, it was the North's turn to develop a similar conception. In the second period, the 1988 Seoul Olympics were an opportunity for non-state actors to intervene. The IOC brokered talks between the North and South with the direct involvement of its President, Juan Antonio Samaranch. In the last period, sporting events created an opportunity for all participants – players, coaching staff and spectators – to experience a sense of belonging to a larger family. Material realities have changed the form of sports diplomacy as the South has now emerged as a strong Asian economy. Other non-state actors, such as the car manufacturer *Hyundai,* have entered the sports' diplomatic process by building a large stadium in North Korea's capital, Pyongyang, funding various regional sports meetings and even supporting needy people. The experience of the last period does not imply the dismissal of the role which social construction can play in the framing of IR. Instead, the space for constructing that reality is mediated, framed and, to a certain extent, structured by the fact of IR and the efforts of the wider sporting community.

Cyprus

Cyprus, the victim of Greek and Turkish nationalisms as well as Western power interests, has been divided into two regions following the 1974 invasion by the Turkish armed forces. The northern part, with a Turkish-Cypriot (TC) population, comprises the so-called Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC), a *de facto* state entity recognized only by its motherland Turkey. The southern region hosts the Greek-Cypriot (GC) population under an EU member state known as the Republic of Cyprus (RoC). The TCs are currently banned from participating in international football events because the GCs – the Cyprus Football Association (CFA) -are official members of Cypriot football in the game's world governing body FIFA. FIFA hosted the two sides in Zurich talks, on 5 November 2013, trying to resolve the problem. However, it made clear that the TC Football Association (TCFA) would need to observe the rules, which require that, to play international matches it would have to apply and become a member of CFA. The RoC has welcomed this opportunity, but TRNC's political leaders have not. Solving the football problem through membership in a GC-controlled institution might serve as a role model for a solution to the political unification problem as well – to reunite the island into one state. Thus, football reunification emerges as a 'foreign policy dilemma' for TRNC. Four years after the Zurich agreement, the anticipated football reunification has not materialized as of yet, as the TRNC's administration has rejected the FIFA initiative. Why and how did this happen? Given the mediation of an international institution, the case of Cyprus justifies using a *neoliberal* frame of analysis (Lekakis, 2015). However, under *neoliberalism* societal preferences are aggregated to explain state behavior, this aggregation ignores the central role of the foreign policy executive, i.e., the ministers and officials who are tasked with making foreign and security policy and who stand at the intersection of domestic politics and the international system. Thus, the case requires the addition of the neoclassical realist approach which pays attention to the role of the domestic level power structure. Together, the *neoliberal* and the *neoclassical realist* perspectives can enrich the study of Cyprus. Under this synthesis, the independent variable is the international system, as neoliberals view it, "anarchic", but where international institutions can make a difference, while the dependent variable is football reunification as a foreign policy outcome. The intervening variables are the traits and perceptions of TRNC's political leaders and the relative power of domestic actors – political parties and civil society. In this case, the TC leaders regarded football reunification as a threat to their national security, fearing that their membership of a GC institution would serve as a role model for their political unification.

Conclusion

This article argues that an inadequate embodiment of IR paradigms exists in contemporary 'sport & IR' research. *Soft power* has been a highly influential concept among researchers but it remains theoretically simplistic. The article presents an alternative path that avoids the shortcomings of mainstream IR paradigms. It encourages synthetic theoretic approaches that facilitate the explicit analysis of the role of domestic level actors in foreign policy making and promises to yield more robust research outputs. The evidence for its support draws from a few case studies around the world. Theoretical synthesis is largely facilitated by the *domains of application* model. In the Algeria-Egypt football conflict, the *neoliberal* lens requires the assistance of *constructivism* that would view their football conflict as a battle of the two countries over the historical and cultural representation of the Arab world on the global pitch. In the Palestine-Israel football conflict case, the *neoliberal* framework emphasizes the dynamics around decisions taken in

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international institutions and the role of Western actors but should be supported by *constructivism* which informs on personal ideational attributes and norms that drive the conflict on, as well as the specific role played by NGOs. In the rapprochement case of the two Koreas, again the *constructivist* lens that places the matter as one of competing for national representation or divided nationhood provides a much clearer picture of sport's role in inter-Korean relations. In the rapprochement case of Cyprus, while the *neoliberal* paradigm highlights the mediation of international institutions for the resolution of football separation among the two divided communities, the *neoclassical realist* perspective provides full information on football reunification as a foreign policy issue for the Turkish Cypriots. The foreign policy outcome depends on the traits and perceptions of TRNC's political leaders and the role of domestic actors, such as political parties and civil society.

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