

**SPORT
AND GEOPOLITICS
PROGRAMME**

**SPAIN'S RED FLAGS:
MEDIA REPRESENTATIONS OF THE NATION(S)
FOLLOWING *LA ROJA'S* VICTORY
IN THE 2010 WORLD CUP**

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MAY 2020

GEOSTRATEGIC SPORTS OBSERVATORY



INTRODUCTION

In 2017, Fútbol Club Barcelona (Barça) and national football team player Gerard Piqué sparked controversy when he declared himself in favour of the Catalan independence referendum, which was held in October, although it had been declared unconstitutional by Madrid a month prior and eventually violently repressed by Spanish police forces (Burgen, 2017; Piquer, 2017). Several days after participating in the referendum – and having reaffirmed his support of Catalonia’s self-determination claims on Twitter – a public training of *La Roja* (the red; i.e. Spanish national team) was cut short after supporters voiced their discontent with Piqué through banners and chants asking him to resign (Payne, 2017). Ahead of upcoming qualifiers for the 2018 Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA) World Cup, Piqué declared that being part of the national team was not a competition of who was more patriotic (Doyle, 2017).

This episode epitomises interactions between regionalist tensions and national football in Spain, a country championing both top-class sport and national self-determination movements. Ten years ago, after *La Roja* – with Piqué – won the 2010 FIFA World Cup in South Africa, the *BBC* published an article entitled ‘Does football unite Spain?’. Although, such questions deserve to be open-ended, the *BBC* joined other mass media narratives in attempting to interpret symbolisms of renewed forms of patriotism behind *La Roja*’s triumph, which had sparked celebrations throughout the country, including in regionalist Catalonia and the Basque Country.

Football as a scientific object represents a fertile ground for investigating questions on identity formation and nation building. Football is a powerful source of identification to the nation as it has helped forging them (Gasparini and Wahl, 2017; Hobsbawm, 1995), often encouraging social cohesion (Archambault, Baud and Gasparini, 2018). This is especially the case during mega sporting events such as the World Cup or Olympic Games, which become sites to contest, negotiate and reshape collective identities (Tomlinson and Young, 2006).

Indeed, national identity is a complex notion widely studied in the field of social sciences, often understood as a historically contingent and socially constructed ‘imagined

community' (Anderson 1983). According to Fredrick Barth's understanding of ethnicity (1969), social boundaries separating ethnic groups are constantly being negotiated hence focusing on interactions rather than primordial differences between groups. Football, in this sense, participates in the shaping and reshaping of such community by becoming a site in which identities are expressed and challenged, notably through systematic displaying of national symbols such as the flag or the national jersey during mega sporting events – coined as demonstrations of 'banal nationalism' by Michael Billig (1995). The case of football in Spain is particularly resonant to this literature, as it is home to various ethno-regional communities that often formulate claims for national self-determination while holding a prime track record in many popular sports such as basketball, tennis and football. To this day, *La Roja* is the only national football team to have won consecutively a UEFA European Football Championship (Euro), a World Cup, and the following Euro in 2008, 2010 and 2012 respectively.

This article, by looking at national and international media reports published during and immediately following *La Roja's* triumph in the 2010 World Cup, aims to answer the following question: 'How did Spanish and international media interpret widespread World Cup victory celebrations in Spain?'. To answer this question, articles from three major Spanish newspapers (*El País, El Mundo, ABC*) and four dominant international media outlets (*The Guardian, BBC, CNN, Le Monde*) published during a one-week coverage between July 11th, 2010 – the day of the World Cup final – through July 17th (or a total of seven days) were selected. Articles reporting on popular celebrations only were retained, amounting to a dataset of 21 newspaper articles (8 from the selected international media and 13 from the selected Spanish media). To analyse the data, methods of content and comparative analyses were used. After doing so, it argues that both international and national (Spanish) narratives construct World Cup celebrations and *La Roja* more broadly as symbols of the nation, although the content of such narratives varies. Indeed, while the Spanish press tends to detach festivities from the socio-economic and historical context of Spain while describing 'emotional' and 'rational' celebrations of the Spanish identity, the international press discusses regionalisms and their historical implications but also tends to consider celebrations as signs of Spanish unity.

THE SPANISH NATION(S) THROUGH THE ACADEMIC LENS

A foundational work to understand meanings behind celebrations following national sporting victories is that of John Hargreaves, *Freedom for Catalonia: Catalan Nationalism, Spanish Identity and the Barcelona Olympic Games* (2000), a sociological study on interactions between local, regional and national identities depicting the Barcelona Olympics as a site for constant negotiations of identities, which ought not to be mutually exclusive. In other words, Hargreaves affirmed that Catalan and Spanish identities could co-exist, particularly at times of mega sporting events.

Several studies were conducted on other sporting events in Spain, notably following *La Roja's* victories in the 2008 and 2012 Euros and 2010 World Cup, although none have compared national and international media discourses. Molina and Quiroga (2017) argued that reactions following each football victory represented expressions of dual identities with compatible allegiances to both Spain and Catalonia. Simon Kuper and Stefan Szymanski (2012) confirmed that celebrations in Bilbao and Barcelona following the 2010 World Cup showed that football fans could feel both Basque and Spanish, and Catalan and Spanish. Delgado (2010) found that discourses following the 2010 World Cup success constructed celebrations as a “much delayed, ‘normal’ enjoyment of Spanishness”, confirming the “realisation of the Spanish Normal fantasy” (p. 266), in which inhabitants of Spain finally and collectively accepted and even took pride of their Spanish identity – at the expense of Catalan or Basque identities. Such discourses, clashing with sociological studies, are often formulated and expressed by the media.

Indeed, the nexus of football – mega sporting events particularly –, identity and the media has been a popular focus in the relatively new field of social sciences and sport (Crolley and Hand, 2013; Hand, 2002; Vidacs, 2006 and 2011) because mass media is a key instrument in identity building (Castelló, 2008). However, empirical analyses of media construction of identities at times of football events in Spain remain scarce (Quiroga, 2014; Herrero-Andreu and García-Jiménez 2020). The limited existing scholarship includes analyses of written and visual discourses on identity through football in Catalan newspapers, the general sports press, non-regionally affiliated national newspapers during Euros or World Cups (González Ramallal, 2008; Herrero-Andreu and García-Jiménez 2020; Puebla, Carrillo and Íñigo, 2012; Quiroga, 2014; Resina de la Fuente and

Limón López 2014) as well as a comparison of narratives between the sports press of Barcelona and Madrid during the 2010 World Cup (González Ramallal, 2014).

Within this nexus of media, football and identity in Spain, it is argued that football is constructed by the media as a metaphor for the Spanish nation and a vector of emotional and symbolic (Spanish) identity (González Ramallal, 2008 and 2014), which uses football as an “additional way of talking about the nation” (Quiroga, 2014). Media narratives tend to depict the Spanish identity as unique while sovereignty issues and cultural diversity are not evoked (Resina de la Fuente and Limón López, 2014). Rather, in the context of the ‘Catalan problem’, the Spanish media has framed football as “building block for Spanish nationalism” (Rodríguez Ortega, 2015). Symbolisms of such nationalism are expressed through waving the flag or wearing the colour red, as suggested by the study of Iñigo et al. (2012) which explored the photographic treatment of the victory of *La Roja* in 2010.

This article considers these studies on the relationship between the media and identity in Spain while aiming to add to the existing scholarship by comparing discourses which have emerged from the national (Spanish) and international media during celebrations following the 2010 World Cup victory of *La Roja*, focusing notably on the media depiction of Spain and its plural identities. Indeed, major and trusted international media outlets such as *Le Monde* or the *BBC* also contribute to media construction of Spain’s identities and empirical analyses should not be limited to national and regional media within Spain.

NATIONAL (SPANISH) AND INTERNATIONAL NARRATIVES IN PERSPECTIVE

In order to study narratives on Spanish identity/identities built through football by the media, this article focuses on newspapers reports about people’s celebrations of *La Roja*’s victory in the 2010 World Cup, hence no articles focusing specifically on the Spanish football team or reactions of celebrities were retained. The studied Spanish newspapers are *El País*, *El Mundo* and *ABC*, considered as the three major national newspapers (Puebla et al., 2012). Internationally, the focus was given to English-language media outlets such as the British *Guardian* and the *BBC*, American *CCN* – all documented as major national and global news resources (BBC’s Global Audience, 2018; CCN Worldwide Fact Sheet, 2019; YouGov, 2020) – as well as *Le Monde*, an internationally known French newspaper

whose online platform is the most popular news website in France (Eveno, 2001; Mesquita, 2017). Using a qualitative approach, articles published from July 11th, 2010–the day of the World Cup final – through July 17th, equating to a one-week coverage, were analysed. The data is constituted of 21 articles¹, 13 from Spanish newspapers and 8 from international outlets². Using content analysis, the data was coded and turned into main themes and sub-themes, mixing a deductive and inductive approach in order to become familiar with and make sense of the data. As articles emerged out of the same context – celebrations in Spain following *La Roja*'s triumph at the World Cup – and were published on the same dates, a comparative analysis could be conducted between national and international narratives.

Main differences in media narratives

Emphasis on football club culture in Spain by the international press

Only two articles in the Spanish media (15 %) mentioned clubs, either to refer to *La Roja*'s players from Barça or to suggest that Catalans celebrate both Barça and *La Roja*. The international press, on the contrary, fueled a narrative in which celebrations in Catalonia were encouraged by the high presence of Barça players in *La Roja*, either tacitly or overtly, hence suggesting that celebrations were not mere expressions of support to the Spanish selection. Clubs were mentioned in four out of eight articles from the chosen international newspapers (50 %) and one said, for example: “Seven players belong to FC Barcelona, the club some Catalans treat as a national team” (Tremlett, 2010).

Although it is impossible to measure the influence of the high presence of Barça players onto people's decision to celebrate in Barcelona – or that of Athletic Bilbao influencing festivities in the Basque Country³ –, it is interesting to note that the Spanish media chose to focus on the success of the national team while barely mentioning prominent club rivalry in Spain, hence contributing to the overall narrative of the Spanish football team as a metaphor for the united nation (Vaczi 2015). In contrast, narratives emerging out of

¹ *ABC* (6 articles), *El Mundo* (3 articles), *El País* (4 articles), *Le Monde* (3 articles), *The Guardian* (3 articles), *BBC* (1 article), *CNN* (1 article). A detailed list of the data is available below in the reference section.

² For practicality, articles selected from *ABC*, *El País* and *El Mundo* are sometimes referred to as the 'Spanish media' and articles selected from *The Guardian*, *Le Monde*, the *BBC* and *CNN* are sometimes referred to as the 'international media'.

³ Two players from Athletic Bilbao, Fernando Llorente and Javi Martínez, played for *La Roja* during the 2010 World Cup. The club is very important in Basque popular culture and has an official policy of recruiting native Basque players only.

international newspapers, which suppose that the high ratio of Barça players in *La Roja* provoked greater support from Catalans, are tying national celebrations to regionalist club loyalties. In this case, the Spanish team is also an allegory of the nation, whose presence and influence of Barça players represent broader regionalist sentiments within the Spanish nation.

Emphasis on the broader historical and immediate context of Spain by the international press

All articles from international newspapers refer to the broader Spanish context, in immediate and/or in historical terms. The ongoing economic recession in Spain, which had debuted in 2008, is mentioned in five articles out of eight (63 %) against one out of 13 for the Spanish press (8 %). For instance, on the day preceding the World Cup final, large protests in favour of Catalan autonomy were held in Barcelona. More than one million Catalans had gathered to protest the Spanish constitutional court's decision to rule out the legal basis of Catalonia's recognition as an independent nation ("Catalan protesters rally", 2010). Five international articles (63 %) refer to the protest whereas only one Spanish article (8 %) evokes the very recent event. This lack of contextualisation in the Spanish media further detaches *La Roja's* victory from regionalist dynamics expressed notably through massive protests, consequently feeding into a narrative of a timeless, victorious and united Spain.

Additionally, regionalisms are more readily discussed by the international media (63 %), already visible through the majority of headlines which refer to World Cup celebrations in conjunction with '*fiertés regionales*' [regional pride] in a 'divided' Spain. Legacies from Francoist Spain are evoked in four out of eight articles (50 %), including through the mentioning of *La Furia* period⁴, in an attempt to explain prominent internal divisions within Spain's 'nations'. Non-Spanish newspapers also tend to draw comparisons with sporting events such as the 1954 World Cup, the 1992 Barcelona Olympics and the 2009 Copa del Rey final⁵.

⁴ Referring to the under-performance of national team known as *la Furia* which attributed defeats of the Spanish national team to its players' lack of patriotism, in contrast with the spectacular performance of *La Roja* as sign of new unity of nation (Vaczi 2015).

⁵ Supporters of the Copa del Rey's finalists Athletic Bilbao and Barça sparked national controversy when they booed the national anthem (Tremlett 2009).

When reporting on nationwide celebrations, it is interesting to note that the Spanish press avoids discussing regionalisms, as it was previously found by prior research (Resina de la Fuente and Limón López, 2014). Rather, in a very simplistic approach, Spanish newspapers articles depict scenes of celebrations in Barcelona and Bilbao without explaining why emphasis is given to these particular locations. In contrast, the international media tends to parallel celebrations in Bilbao and Barcelona with broader regionalist and nationalist movements of the Basque Country and Catalonia, although the dominant narrative is ultimately the same: these celebrations are unexpected and account for greater national (Spanish) unity.

Description of celebrations as cognitive and emotional reactions by the Spanish press

Vocabulary on emotions and reason is much more prominent throughout Spanish articles (77 %) where the ‘emotional solidarity’ to *La Roja* and/or to broader Spain is depicted as a form of ‘visceral’, ‘passionate’ pride and a sign of reborn self-esteem in a united joyful nation. Such expressions of ‘Spanishness’ are described as ‘reasonable’ in a context where support to the national football team can be expressed ‘freely’. This lexicon, privileged by the Spanish media, suggests that feelings of patriotism and ‘Spanishness’ are both uncontrollable and rational, hence confirming prior studies which found that the media used football as vehicle for emotional and national identity (González Rammallal, 2008 and 2014). Such prominent lexicon was not identified in international newspapers.

Main commonalities in media narratives

Unsurprisingly the majority of articles from both national and international media outlets ascribe symbolisms to the World Cup celebrations, although it is not dominant in the entirety of articles (three, including two in international articles and one in national articles), which warn against overestimating the impact of football onto the Spanish nation. In the rest of the articles however (86 %), celebrations are perceived as a sign of national integration and a symbol of unity.

Expressions of banal nationalism

Banal nationalism refers to daily practices and everyday representations of the nation in ways through which people become ‘national’ (Billig, 1995; Vidacs, 2011). Indeed, nationalism becomes banal when subtle and popular expressions of belonging to a nation

take precedent over explicit nationalist discourses (Billig, 1995). The media coverage of 2010 World Cup celebrations shows how relevant banal nationalism is in the tacit promotion of Spanish national unity at times of mega sporting events. The emphasis on flags, the national colour red, national jerseys and patriotic chants – all being expressions of banal nationalism according to Billig (1995) – is prominent throughout the entirety of articles, including in headlines such as ‘*La España roja*’ [The red Spain].

By describing chants like ‘*Yo soy Español*’ [I am Spanish] sang by Barcelonan youth waving flags and wearing red shirts – and this is ultimately the most dominant narrative of the data set –, the media attributes nationalist symbolisms to *La Roja*’s victory. Indeed, in this narrative, celebrations of a football victory and of Spain – or Spanishness – become completely intertwined and complementary. In short, celebrating football becomes a celebration of the Spanish nation.

Expressions of identity as singular

Although aforementioned sociological studies suggest that identities, and particularly in the case of Spain, are plural and unfixed, narratives on the 2010 World Cup celebrations tend to put regional and national identities against one another. The notion of plural identities was briefly discussed in two articles from *The Guardian* and *El País*, respectively suggesting that protesters in the Saturday demonstrations in Barcelona might have joined the Sunday celebrations, and mentioning the dual identities in Catalonia with the presence of banners reading ‘*Viva España, Visca Espanya*’ [‘Long live Spain’ in Spanish and Catalan] in Barcelona during the celebrations.

Otherwise, the existence of both Spanish and regional identities are automatically put against one another such as by this *Le Monde*’s headline: “*En Espagne, équipe nationale contre fiertés régionales*” [In Spain, the national team against regional pride]. Another article from *Le Monde* found that there were people who felt Spanish in Catalonia while others did not and therefore have not supported *La Roja*. *ABC* saw an ‘*explosión cívica de españolidad*’ [a civic explosion of Spanishness] in celebrations and an opportunity to talk about Spain, and Spain only, with *admiración*. There is indeed no consideration of *La Roja*’s support as being both a sign of Spanishness and Basque ness or Catalan ness in non-conflicting terms. Therefore, although discursive processes differ between the international media which tends to discuss regionalisms more willingly and the Spanish

media which ignores Spain's cultural diversity, dominant narratives fail to depict plural identities of Spain as a nation but also as a host to various culturally distinct regions or 'nations within a nation'.

Unique celebrations?

Finally, the dominant narrative present in both international and Spanish media described the celebrations as 'unique', 'unseen' and 'unthinkable years ago' in places like Bilbao or Barcelona. Such discursive processes implicitly suggest that Spanish unity has grown stronger in the years preceding the 2010 World Cup whereas, quite pragmatically, one can imagine that such celebrations were never seen simply because the Spanish national team had never won the World Cup before. Again, these media narratives attribute symbolisms to celebrations of the 2010 World Cup which go way beyond football.

CONCLUSIONS

This article compared dominant Spanish and international media narratives following the 2010 World Cup celebrations of *La Roja's* triumph in Spain, finding both similarities and differences in discursive processes. Ultimately, although the Spanish media tended to be more detached to the historical and immediate socio-economic context leading up to the 2010 World Cup and used a lexicon of emotions and rationality to depict celebrations, both Spanish and international media outlets produced a dominant narrative perceiving nationwide celebrations as expressions of Spanishness. Importantly, the studied media coverage of Spain's celebrations failed to account for sociological descriptions of plural identities in Spain. Indeed, while studies show that mega sporting events become sites for negotiation of local, regional and national identities, which do not need to be exclusive but rather complementary (Hargreaves, 2000; Kuper and Szymanski, 2012; Molina and Quiroga, 2017), the media nurtures a simplistic narrative imagining individuals' loyalty and affiliation to an identity group as exclusive, fixed and incompatible with other forms of identity.

Simplistic approaches to identity resonate particularly in France, which experienced widespread celebrations using expressions of banal nationalism – with Algerian flags and

jerseys – leading up to Algeria’s victory of the Africa Cup of Nations (CAN) in July 2018. Again, a polemic – mostly nourished by far-right personalities – emerged as participants were accused of being disloyal to France (Parker, 2019) when, in fact, someone can feel both French and Algerian (Geisser 2011; Geisser and Kelfaoui 2001; Lazri 2019) as shown by the Franco-Algerian player and member of the Algerian football team Riyad Mahrez, who replied to a tweet from a political figure of the *Rassemblement National* – a popular French far-right political party – ‘waving’ both the Algerian and the French flag. It is certainly problematic that, as shown by the studied narratives on celebrations in Spain following the 2010 World Cup victory, the media often fails to perceive and depict mega sporting events as a site of negotiations of identities. ■

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MAY 2020

An observatory of the

SPORT AND INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS PROGRAMME

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