The ‘Europes of Football’: Working towards a cohesive understanding of the ‘beautiful game’ in the pan-European public sphere

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From Habermas to Fanblogs: Exploring the Public Sphere of European Football

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Abstract

The paper proposes that football is uniquely and ideally placed to offer new perspectives on what it means to be ‘European’ in the twenty first century sporting sphere. In doing so, the paper will first attempt to come to a working definition of Europe by examining some of the most commonly used criteria by which it can be so defined. From this standpoint, the paper then proposes that football is uniquely placed to provide alternative definitions of Europe. By conducting statistical tests on a variety of data about the 54 member associations under the auspices of Union of European Football Associations (UEFA), it is possible to create new and imaginative understandings of what it means to be ‘European’ in the footballing sphere

Background

The notion of Europe as adhering to one definition of identity has long been contested. Considering Europe politically, culturally, economically and geographically all reveal different understandings of Europe and the countries which comprise it. It is first necessary to consider these different working definitions in order to provide a context within which football can be useful in providing further identities.

1) Politically

As of July 1, 2013, there are twenty-eight member countries of the European Union (EU). On July 1, 2013 Croatia became the 28th and newest member of the European Union joining Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, United Kingdom. The Treaty on the European Union states that any European country may apply for membership if it respects the democratic values of the EU and is committed to promoting them.\(^1\) This requires a level of political unity across member states.

2) Culturally

Using the term in its broadest sense, Europe can be defined as sharing common telecommunications and networks. The most prominent of these is perhaps the European Broadcasting Union (EBU) which consists of 74 active members.\(^2\) Of these, many conform to other definitions of being European whether politically (e.g. EU members such as France and Germany), economically (e.g. members of the Eurozone such as Ireland and Italy), geographically (e.g. have borders within ‘European’ boundaries such as Netherlands and Spain). The Eurovision Song Contest is perhaps the most important event organised by the EBU. It is watched every year by an estimated 125 million viewers and includes a high amount of countries with 43 participating in 2008 and 2011.\(^3\) In the sporting arena, there are also common events such as European Football Championships, Euroleague Basketball, Six Nations Rugby, which bind together the countries of ‘Europe.’

3) Economically

Europe can be defined as including those member states which use the single currency. Today, the euro is one of the world’s most powerful currencies, used by more than 320 million Europeans in twenty-three countries. The countries currently using the euro are: Andorra, Austria, Belgium, Cyprus, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Kosovo, Luxembourg, Malta, Monaco, Montenegro, Netherlands, Portugal, San

\(^1\) http://ec.europa.eu/enlargement/policy/conditions-membership/
\(^2\) http://www.eurovision.tv/page/about/which-countries-can-take-part
\(^3\) http://www.eurovision.tv/page/history/facts-figures
Marino, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Vatican City. To become a member of the Eurozone, countries must meet the economic convergence criteria, and make changes to national laws and rules, notably governing its national central bank and other monetary issues, in order to make them compatible with the Treaty. In particular, national central banks must be independent, such that the monetary policy decided by the European Central Bank is also independent.4

4) Geographically

European boundaries can be defined as comprising the westernmost peninsula of Eurasia. Europe is generally divided from Asia by the watershed divides of the Ural and Caucasus Mountains, the Ural River, the Caspian and Black Seas, and the waterways connecting the Black and Aegean Seas. Europe is bordered by the Arctic Ocean to the north, the Atlantic Ocean to the west, the Mediterranean Sea to the south, and the Black Sea and connected waterways to the southeast.

Many competing ‘Europees’

Of course none of these definitions are 100% accurate. Some compete and conflict with each other. For example, economically, only 17 of the 27 members of the EU are part of the Eurozone, the name for the collection of EU countries that utilize the euro. Notably, the United Kingdom, Denmark, and Sweden have thus far decided not to convert to the euro. Other new EU member countries are working toward becoming part of the Eurozone. On the other hand, Andorra, Kosovo, Montenegro, Monaco, San Marino, and the Vatican City are not EU members but do officially use the euro as their currencies.

As new technologies continue to bridge the differences in location, the geography of Europe may become less important. For example, EBU Active Members come from as far north as Iceland and as far south as Egypt, from Ireland in the west and Azerbaijan in the east, and almost every nation from geographical Europe in between. Associate Members are from countries and territories beyond Europe, such as Canada, Japan, Mexico, India and Hong Kong. In addition, Israel, Iraq, Jordan and that part of the territory of Syrian Arab Republic, Turkey and Ukraine are included in the European Broadcasting Area.

The paper proposes that football is uniquely placed to provide alternative definitions of Europe. Football is not just a game, and the game is not just about football. The status of sport more generally as social currency has shifted somewhat from being perceived as predominantly an arena for entertainment to becoming in recent years one of the most important mechanisms in human society and a highly significant social agent (Ben-Porat, 2006).5 Increased revenue streams mean that sport has increasingly become lucrative to elite sportstas, broadcasters and merchandisers. Aside from the capital that can be generated, sport also serves a wide range of social functions as has been identified through a number of studies. Sport is an important educational tool, a central social agent, a significant instrument for social mobility, and an essential institution in the political arena (e.g., Kremer-Sadlik & Kim, 2007; Lidor & Fejgin, 2004; Sorek, 2006a).6

Sport also has a pivotal role in defining identity, at personal, team, local and national levels. This is a growing area of research. Hunter (2003) illustrates the distinctive complexities to the interface of sport, nation and identities. Hunter investigates the notion

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4 http://ec.europa.eu/economy_finance/euro/adoption/who_can_join/
that sport presents a problematic intervention into the concept of a nation and the reshaping of identities alongside the imbalance in the depth of consideration about this complexity from different academic disciplines. Holmes (1994) offers one case study of the importance of sport and national identity. Holmes argues that the success of the Republic of Ireland’s football team since 1988 has had a large impact upon Irish national identity. The article argues that the political impact of that success mirrors and thus reinforces changes of identity that are taking place in Ireland. The team has been very important in both reflecting a more heterogeneous and pluralist representation of Ireland and representing the clearest available expression of a 26-county national identity, which views Northern Ireland as a separate entity. The article concludes that the football team’s success has already been incorporated into Irish literary culture suggests it will remain an important social and political influence as well. Ward (2009) analyses the connection between national identity and sport in relation to Europe. Ward suggests that changes have occurred in national images linked to sport and concludes that although there is some reality behind the images, there is not as much as generally thought. Jarvie (2003) however questions the simplicity of framing contemporary sport purely in global or local terms. Jarvie suggests that global sport has presented fundamental challenges to local and national sport, but it has also created the opportunity for sport to be more international. Jarvie also notes how the role of sport in terms of reconciliation is rarely mentioned within contemporary discussions of global sport, power, and culture; the same is true for sports’ contribution to the process of anti-globalization.

Football is uniquely placed to consider how European identity can be moulded on the pitch. This is mainly due to the number of people involved. Indeed according to the 2006 Big Count, FIFA survey, 265 million male and female players in addition to 5 million referees and officials make a grand total of 270 million people – or 4% of the world’s population – who are actively involved in the game of football. This participation has broader implications. To rephrase Clausewitz’s famous aphorism, football can become a political arena and assume the role of politics by other means. This is due to its strong symbolic dimensions, its role as a proxy for political and social dispute, its carnivalesque rituals and playful performances that often bring about social inversion. This paper argues that by conducting statistical tests on a variety of data about the 54 member associations under the auspices of Union of European Football Associations (UEFA), it is possible to create new and imaginative understandings of what it means to be ‘European’ in the footballing sphere.

Method
A set of pre-determined figures will be entered. These fall into two distinct groups relating to the first two definitions of Europe which use political and cultural criteria.

1) Politics and football (e.g. length of time a country has been an EU member state and the length of time it has been UEFA affiliated)
2) Culture and football (e.g. European club attendances and when the country joined the EBU)

To determine relationships between sets of variables a correlation matrix will be produced. To elaborate further, correlation is a technique for investigating the relationship between two quantitative, continuous variables. Here the Pearson’s coefficient will be used. This is a measure of the strength of the association between sets of variables. A positive correlation

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8 Michael Holmes, ‘Symbols of national identity and sport: The case of the Irish football team’ *Irish Political Studies*, volume 9, issue 1, 1994, 81-98
9 Tony Ward, ‘Sport and national identity’ *Soccer and Society*, volume 10, issue 5, 2009, 518-531
indicates that either variables increase or decrease together, whereas negative correlation indicates that as one variable increases, so the other decreases. The t-test is used to establish if the correlation coefficient is significantly different from zero, and, hence that there is evidence of an association between the two variables is significant (greater than chance). These statistical tests will enable other definitions of what it means to be European in a specific football sense to be determined.

Results

With respect of the role of Politics and football (e.g. length of time a country has been an EU member state and the length of time it has been UEFA affiliated), there was a significant correlation between the length of time a country has been in EU with the length of time a country’s football team has been affiliated to UEFA (t(27) .521, p<.01). This demonstrates that the longer a country is in the EU the longer they will have been affiliated to UEFA (see graph 1).

![Graph 1: showing the correlation between length of time a country has been an EU member state and the length of time it has been UEFA affiliated](image)

There was also a significant correlation between the length of time a country has been in the EU with the length of time a country’s football team has been affiliated to FIFA (t(48) .841, p<.001). This demonstrates that the longer a country is in the EU the longer they will have been affiliated to FIFA (see graph 2).
Graph 2: showing the correlation between the length of time a country has been an EU member state and the length of time it has been FIFA affiliated

With respect of the role of Culture and football (e.g. European club attendances and when the country joined the EBU), there was a significant correlation between the length of time a country has been an EU member state with the club average attendance ($t(13) = -0.623$, $p<.05$). This demonstrates that the longer a country is in the EU the larger their club average attendance will be (see graph 3).
Graph 3: showing the correlation between European club attendances and when the country joined the EBU
Discussion
The paper proposes that football is uniquely placed to provide alternative definitions of Europe and that it is furthermore useful as a tool to measure social equality, in line with EU targets. Presently we identify a number of significant associations that may be indicative of football being a proxy for development and evolution of a country.

Both FIFA and UEFA affiliations are seen to strongly correlate with the length of time a country has been an EU member. This development of a country’s sporting prowess may therefore be seen as integral to its political ambitions and power. Indeed although membership of the EU is not a prerequisite of being members of either UEFA or FIFA, the fact that they correlate may also indicate that being part of a political framework is as central as being part of a sporting framework.

Finally, we identify that European club attendance was negatively correlated with the length of time a country was in the EBU. EBU is a measure of media development in a country, which is indicative of individual citizens’ wealth. Although this may appear counterintuitive this may be as a consequence of alternative options made available to wealthier countries in their consumption of football material (for example, the availability of sports bars and Sky television).

Conclusion
This paper concludes with the suggestion that football can successfully be used as a proxy for Politics and Culture at the European level. Future work may usefully assess the extent to which this claim is valid for further EU targets/goals.