

Hegemonic Discourses Clash in the Stadium: Sport, Nationalism, and Globalization in Turkey

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As globalization spreads consumerism and rationalism across the world, there is a corresponding trend towards homogenization and commercialization in culture. As an important element of culture, sport—in particular soccer—is not immune to this trend. The commercialization of soccer¹ has globalized what had hitherto been a national phenomenon, and the integration of local sports into the global economy has changed the way that fans interact with the game all over the world; in short, fans have been transformed into apolitical consumers. Yet the turn to “modern football” has not affected fans in the Middle East in the same manner; on the contrary, sport in the Middle East has been politicized in a way that it hitherto has not been. In Egypt “ultras”² played a role in social protest during the so-called Arab Spring,³ and in Turkey Beşiktaş fans did the same during the 2013 Gezi Park protests.⁴ These instances can be interpreted as an appeal to the local, national, and emotional aspects of sport and, in the case of Turkey, the participation of soccer fans in these protests was tied to these collectivist sentiments.

The connection between sports and nationalism is well documented⁵ and not surprising, as organized sport itself is both a reflection of modernity—with its emphasis on rationalism⁶—and a reaction against modernity, providing a space wherein the free release of emotional energy is permitted.⁷ This duality is also reflected by the concept of nationalism; whereas modernist scholars such as Benedict Anderson⁸ and Ernest Gellner⁹ see nations and nationalism as manifestations of modernity, others such as Anthony Smith view nations and nationalism as a reaction against modernity that appeals to the past. In this latter view they are

a product of the discontents of modernity . . . the nation and nationalism represent the fundamental response to the crisis of identity so many human beings faced with the onslaught of modernity on the traditions of their ancestors. Nationalism is the natural response of human beings whose social world, with its stable groupings, has collapsed; yearning to belong to a durable community, they turn to the transhistorical nation as the only available replacement for the extended family, neighborhood and religious community, all of which have been eroded by capitalism and westernization.¹⁰

The aforementioned ultras in Egypt and Beşiktaş fans in Turkey who played a role in social protest can also be seen as emotionally appealing to a distinctly national and collectivist identity that has been progressively eroded by the forces of globalization and modernity. Thus sports are a cultural field in which various hegemonic discourses (in the Gramscian sense) such as nationalism and globalism are presented, debated, and reacted to.

Turkey has a deep love of football, and some of the country’s most famous teams played major roles in developing a sense of Turkish nationalism in the face of foreign

occupation following the collapse of the Ottoman Empire.¹¹ At the same time, Turkey is a country whose leaders have more recently wholeheartedly embraced neoliberal globalization¹²—so much so, in fact, that “the Turkish model” was once proposed as a blueprint for the successful fusion of conservative Islamic politics and global capitalism in the wider Middle East. The Turkish case also reflects the struggle for neoliberal (and globalist) hegemony in culture; after all, the football fans of the Istanbul team Beşiktaş played a major role in the Gezi Park protests that resisted the transformation of Istanbul’s Gezi Park into a shopping mall.¹³ Cihan Tuğal outlines how this neoliberal/conservative hegemony slowly challenged the existing statist/secular (Kemalist) hegemony in all elements of Turkish society (sports included) in order to entrench the “Turkish model,” described as “the ability of businesses to monopolize most of a country’s wealth *combined with* its ability to market this monopolization to the region’s downtrodden (and to the rest of the world) as ‘justice.’”¹⁴

Indeed, this emphasis on “justice” (however loosely defined) has since begun to ring hollow for many Turks. This threatens the hegemony of neoliberal globalization, which (according to some analysts) disguises a competition among elites for resources and wealth.¹⁵ Because sports bring people from diverse backgrounds together in an emotional context in a way that few other cultural formations do, they will continue to be important where hegemonic discourses are interpreted and responded to. Given the trend toward individualism, rationalism, and consumerism encouraged by globalization, it is not surprising that, as Tuğal recognizes, social protest offers an escape from the one-dimensional nature of global, neoliberal society by appealing to emotional and collectivist sentiment¹⁶ in ways similar to sport. This is why the stadium is uniquely situated to offer a space for collective social protest in a region of the world where the social bonds of family and neighborhood are strong.

The group identity provided by football fans transcends the “micropolitics” of post-modern society,¹⁷ bringing together people from various class, ideological, ethnic, and religious backgrounds. Although sports in both Turkey and the broader Middle East have been used, in the past, to inculcate the values of the secular, modern nation-state,¹⁸ the case of Turkey has shown that sports have recently come to reflect the growth of neoliberal globalism, and the Turkish state has undertaken an ambitious stadium-building program¹⁹ (designed to attract a world-class sporting event) and introduced an e-ticketing scheme based on giving all those who wish to attend a game a Mastercard credit card.²⁰ These examples show the changing use of sports in the Turkish context; whereas in the past sports were a vehicle reflecting official state nationalism, more recently they have become a tool for entrenching the values of consumerism, rationalism, and modernity, as they relate to global capitalism. This new emphasis on the global as modern has elicited a response from fans—rooted in emotion and tied to their own local, national cultures—taking the form of social protest.

The wider Middle East faces new hegemonic discourses related to modernity and globalization that will continue to clash with more traditional perspectives. These discourses will also continue to evolve as they are interpreted by such actors as the state, the market, and individual citizens. Ultimately it is the stadium, as a space where globalism, localism, and nationalism meet, that will remain an arena for voices that echo—or oppose—these various hegemonic discourses concerning the future of the national community.

NOTES

¹For a discussion of the commercialization of Turkish football, see Cem Emrence, "From Elite Circles to Power Networks: Turkish Soccer Clubs in a Global Age, 1903–2005," *Soccer & Society* 11 (2010): 242–52. For a discussion of commercialization as it relates to the fans of Istanbul's Beşiktaş specifically, see John McManus "Been There, Done That, Bought the T-Shirt: Beşiktaş Fans and the Commodification of Football in Turkey," *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 45 (2013): 3–24. For a discussion of similar trends in Israel, see Amir Ben Porat, "From Community to Commodity: The Commodification of Football in Israel," *Soccer & Society* 13 (2012): 443–57.

²The ultras are "hardcore" soccer fans described by Vincenzo Scalia as "organized groups with an independent subculture that enjoys the legitimacy of other football supporters." Vincenzo Scalia, "Just a Few Rogues? Football Ultras, Clubs, and Politics in Contemporary Italy," *International Review for the Sociology of Sport* 44 (2009): 41–53.

³See James Dorsey, "Pitched Battles: The Role of Ultra Soccer Fans in the Arab Spring," *Mobilization* 17 (2012): 411–18; Shawki El-Zatmah, "From Terso into Ultras: The 2011 Egyptian Revolution and the Radicalization of Soccer's Ultra-Fans," *Soccer & Society* 13 (2012): 801–13; and Robert Woltering "Unusual Suspects: 'Ultras' as Political Actors in the Egyptian Revolution," *Arab Studies Quarterly* 35 (2013): 290–304.

⁴See Ömer Turan and Burak Özçetin, "Football Fans and Contentious Politics: The Role of Çarşı in the Gezi Park Protests," *International Review for the Sociology of Sport* 54 (2019): 199–217.

⁵Alan Bairner, *Sport, Nationalism, and Globalization: European and North American Perspectives* (Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 2001).

⁶Allen Guttman, *From Ritual to Record: The Nature of Modern Sports* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004).

⁷Norbert Elias and Eric Dunning, *Quest for Excitement: Sport and Leisure in the Civilizing Process* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986).

⁸Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 2001).

⁹Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006).

¹⁰Anthony D. Smith, *Nationalism and Modernism: A Critical Survey of Recent Theories of Nations and Nationalism* (London: Routledge, 1998), 97.

¹¹For more on this in the context of Izmir specifically, see Yiğit Akın, ed., *KafSinKaf* (Istanbul: İletişim, 2010); Ahmet Diker, *Direnışten Diriliş: Kaf Sin Kaf Destanını Yazanlar* (Izmir: Duvar Yayınları, 2014); and *Altay Izmir Spor Tarihi* (Izmir: Acargil Matbaası, n.d.). See also Can Kozanoğlu, "Beyond Edirne: Football and the National Identity Crisis in Turkey," in *Football Cultures and Identities*, ed. Gary Armstrong and Richard Giulianotti (Basingstoke, UK: Macmillan, 1999): 117–25

¹²Cihan Tuğal, *Passive Revolution: Absorbing the Islamic Challenge to Capitalism* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2009).

¹³Turan and Özçetin, "Football Fans and Contentious Politics."

¹⁴Cihan Tuğal, *The Fall of the Turkish Model: How the Arab Uprisings Brought Down Islamic Liberalism* (London: Verso, 2016), 149.

¹⁵This is well documented by Anita Oğurlu and Ahmet Öncü who point out that "an apparent Islamist versus laic ideological split is in effect the façade against the actual class struggle within the dominant class between the Islamist and laic factions." Oğurlu and Öncü, "The Laic-Islamist Schism in the Turkish Dominant Class and Media," in *The Neoliberal Landscape and the Rise of Islamist Capital in Turkey*, ed. Neşecan Balkan, Erol Balkan, and Ahmet Öncü (New York: Berghahn, 2015), 275.

¹⁶As Tuğal observes, "The Gezi revolt provided a noncommodified space (the barricades, the public park, shared meals) where [the protestors] momentarily tasted the fruits of a collectivistic life"; Tuğal, *The Fall of the Turkish Model*, 260.

¹⁷Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism: Or, The Cultural Politics of Late Capitalism* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1991). For an example of how this relates to Turkish football, see Adrien Battini "Reshaping the National Bounds through Fandom: The UltrAslan of Galatasaray," *Soccer & Society* 13 (2012): 701–19.

¹⁸Alon Raab, "Soccer in the Middle East: An introduction," *Soccer & Society* 13 (2012): 619–38.

¹⁹See John Konuk Blasing, "Half Built Stadiums and Promises Left Unkept: Turkey's Political Landscape Seen through Stadiums," *thisisfootballislife*, 12 June 2015, accessed 28 March 2019, <https://thisisfootballislife.com/2015/06/12/half-built-stadiums-and-promises-left-unkept-turkeys-political-landscape-seen-through-stadiums/>; John Konuk Blasing, "Besiktas' New Stadium Opens as a Political Event: What's In a Name?," *thisisfootballislife*, 12 April 2016, accessed 28 March 2019, <https://thisisfootballislife.com/2016/04/12/besiktas-new-stadium-opens-as-a-political-event-whats-in-a-name/>.

²⁰This e-ticketing scheme also represents the trend towards a surveillance society reflecting Foucauldian panopticism, as all fans who enter the stadium are tracked via their citizenship numbers attached to their Passolig cards.