

Book Review

Liz Crolley & David Hand

Football and European Identity: Historical Narratives Through the Press

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As a sport sociologist, one of my main interests is the impact of sport and sporting successes on European identity-formation. Consequently, the main title of Liz Crolley and David Hand's 2006 book –'*Football and European Identity*'– was definitely an eye-catcher. However, since I am quite skeptical towards contextual analyses of print media texts –in my opinion, these studies rarely depart from well-defined theoretical frameworks and often stick to a descriptive and superficial level– the subtitle '*Historical Narratives Through the Press*' was less attractive. But before turning to these (rather subjective) issues, what is this book about in broad terms? During the 20th century, not only the socio-economic value of football to Europe increased, so did its coverage in the daily press. However, this has not always been the case. Consequently, a *first* broad aim of the book is to track this development towards a burgeoning attention paid to football in European newspapers. Moreover, newspaper reports of international football matches are inextricably linked with wider psychological, cultural and ideological processes which provide information about the nations whose representatives are participating in the match. In this way, a *second* aim of the book is to explore the role of football in the construction of national and cultural identities. Both themes are unquestionably emphasized throughout the book. The methodology used involved the structural analysis of print media texts from the early 20th century to the present day as well as a contextual analysis of the social, political and historical environments in which the newspaper texts were produced, consumed and decoded. The following countries were the focus of the present study: England, France, Italy, Germany, Spain, Africa, The USA and North East Asia. However, football writing was only examined in '*quality daily newspapers*' (p. 9) from England (*The Times* and *The Guardian*), France (*Le Monde*, *Libération*, *Le Figaro*, *Le Temps* and *Le Matin*), and Spain (*ABC* and *El Pais*).

The book is broadly divided into three main parts. The first part, *Old Europe*, analyses the ways in which the national identities of the main European football nations (England, France, Italy, Germany and Spain) are portrayed in print media discourse on football. This is done from the perspective of both autotypification (how they perceive themselves, i.e. how the image of Frenchness is portrayed in sports media texts inside France) and heterotypification (how they are perceived by others, i.e. how the image of Frenchness is portrayed in sports media text outside France). The second part, *Nations within States*, examines the status of Corsican, Catalanian and the Basque identities within French and Spanish football. The third part, *New (Football) Worlds*, explores the ways in which the newly emerged football regions of Africa, North East Asia and the USA are covered in the European press. In all three parts, the richness of stimulating examples is impressive as is the range and the level of detail, which is one of the book's greatest strengths. The authors definitely surprised me by going several steps further than the pure descriptive level. However, the book might have benefited from a synthesis at the end of it or at the end of each chapter to gain better insight into the key principles. In addition, a critical comparison of the different case studies might have been interesting. This, however, was not the primary aim of the researchers.

Our achievement is less a cross-national comparison of the ways in which national identities are mediated than an exploration of how and why identities are mediated in each context. Identification of similarities and differences in portrayals of national identities –generally considered a principle objective of cross-cultural research- was, therefore, not a primary objective of the research. (p. 11)

Perhaps this might be a suggestion for further research? Despite my initial reservations with respect to the (non-)description of theoretical frameworks, the introductory section of this book provides the reader with a brief but comprehensible overview of the following three issues. First, the authors give a concise outline of 'one of the most important frames to be identified and analysed in print media discourse on football' (p. 2), *national identity*, of which several definitions are discussed. The next session provides a brief summary of the evolution of football journalism from description-based to interpretative journalism in England, France and Spain. A final theoretical frame is related to different playing styles which are perceived as representatives of national identities. The authors rely on the conceptual model of Larsen (2001), who identifies three levels within which the concept of football playing style operates: (1) the preferred playing style influenced by various socio-cultural factors, (2) the chosen team tactics, and (3) the configuration of the match, the match climate and the playing style.¹ According to the authors, 'quality' daily newspaper reports always seem to consider *level 3* events (the match as it unfolds) to the interpretive framework provided by *level 2* choices and especially *level 1* factors. Although this theoretical background section provides an excellent starting point for the research conducted by Crolley and Hand, some readers might have welcomed a more elaborated framework.

Overall, I consider *Football and European identity: Historical Narratives Through the Press* a very welcome addition to the sport, media and communication literature. Moreover, the detailed picture of the used methodology makes this book an excellent example for all scholars with an interest in the field of discourse analysis.

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Football and European Identity is a clever, but misleading title for a book which accomplishes much but does at no point refer to what one could call a 'European identity'. As currently debated in European Studies, such an identity might stand for some sense of belonging across different European societies. If 'football' is invoked, this sense of belonging might have been fostered by certain structures such as the Champions League or specific juridical or political decisions (the *Bosman* ruling or the Commission's policies).

A more appropriate title for the book could have been *Football and Identities in Europe*. As the authors state, the focus of their study 'concerns the definition and transmission of shared national identities' (p. 4). This is an interesting starting point, since it acknowledges from the very beginning that football impacts on wider societal and political relationships because it is embedded in socio-political contexts. In analysing press accounts Crolley and Hand want to show how print media 'construct' football in terms of (sub-)national football cultures, styles of play, football's historical moments and places, as well as their meaning(s) for the respective societies. The original sample of print media consists of nine 'quality' newspapers from England (2), France (5) and Spain (2); so it is mostly English, French and Spanish self-images and stereotyping of other nations that is covered. The book itself is divided into three

¹ Larsen, O. (2001). 'Charles Reep: A major influence on British and Norwegian football', *Soccer and Society*, 2 (3), pp. 58-78.

main sections: 'Old Europe', which deals with accounts of football in England, France, Spain, Italy and Germany; 'Nations within States' provides accounts of Catalonia, the Basque country and Corsica; and 'New (Football) Worlds' refers to Africa, the United States and Japan/South Korea. There is a short introduction outlining the plan of the book and discussing methodological issues but no conclusion at the end of the book.

Crolley and Hand describe themselves as 'linguists with an interest in the cultural, social, historical and political environment' (p. 14), which may help explain some of the unease concerning their approach on behalf of a more social science-oriented audience. The authors analyse print media accounts of (mostly, but not exclusively) games of national football teams; in case the subnational level is involved, club football and subnational *selecciones* are included. Since it is their ambition to cover data over a period of a whole century and to offer a structural analysis of media texts (which combines the understanding of various meanings and their contexts), the authors have to be selective. Rather unproblematic is their – acknowledged – focus on quality daily newspapers. Although analysis of football magazines, fanzines and tabloids might have shed some light on the issues as well, one cannot do everything at once. What is problematic is the fact that the reader is left in the dark concerning the question on *what grounds specific accounts* have been chosen. As Crolley and Hand are keen to stress: 'Selecting samples was a challenge, and here we acknowledge a level of subjectivism in our judgement' (p. 10). Indeed, there is – and it is unnecessary prominent, since the authors could have given a hint on the size of their article base as well as the selection criteria instead of referring to some unspecified 'data'. The study clearly is a qualitative one, and I do by no means intend to apply the categories of a quantitative design amenable to statistical analysis. But the approach of Crolley and Hand resembles subjectivism bordering on arbitrariness.

As has been noted, the title of the book arouses expectations it does not fulfil. In a way, it is as if your favourite football club pretends it is about to sign Kaka and two weeks later, Rivaldo is introduced at a press conference. Not that bad, but slightly disappointing. But even measured against the book's aims, the results are mixed. First, the 'identity issue' remains surprisingly under-explored and murky. No doubt, the specific use(s) of language and the meanings conveyed through covering football are of paramount interest to the authors. Needless to say, autotypification, stereotyping, clichés, and the 'othering' of 'other' nations are all processes intimately related to various mechanisms of identity construction, however, throughout the book, there is no conceptual framework that links identity *systematically* with these processes. There is not even a definition of the term 'identity' that is constantly applied. Second, as the authors acknowledge, their sample might produce an uneven distribution of football coverage. But, what is more, some of the author's decisions even aggravate the unevenness of their story. In the Germany-chapter, a few domestic press accounts and some material on self-images are included, while in the Italy chapter both are absent. Sporadically, club football plays a role, but except for the subnational chapters (where their importance is self-explanatory) it is not clear exactly why clubs pop up or not. At some points, players of a certain nationality are mentioned, while other chapters remain silent on them. Third, as Crolley and Hand make clear, they are interested in the societal embedding of football. Of course, football undoubtedly constitutes an important societal discourse which may have formative effects on identity constructions, in that, at least, it resonates with relatively large segments of the respective societies. Indeed, football is eminently political, but what does the book tell us beyond this truism? It certainly illuminates some particular backgrounds (as in the case of Franco's Spain or post-colonial Africa). However, it fails in carving out any recognisable patterns, crucial mechanisms to be identified, which could be abstracted from the specific cases.

Despite these shortcomings, the book is definitively worth reading. It is full of interesting stories and facts, some more, some less perplexing. Its main strength lies in the chapters where sub-national and national contexts overlap as in the case of Spain and France. The chapters on Spain and on Catalonia, the Basque country and Corsica especially make a fascinating read. The reader gets a convincingly structured narrative and learns a lot about the ingredients of (sub-)national football cultures. Spain may be indeed the most interesting

case, since its mixture of a relatively high degree of regional autonomy and the experiences with dictatorship arguably leads to a precarious national identity paralleled by vivid subnational identifications. It thus seems fairly reasonable, for instance, to assume that 'since Catalans do not enjoy official recognition...they must turn to FC Barcelona as an institution to represent them' (p. 125). These accounts of branding, stereotyping etc. and their political implications are interesting; one obviously does not need a larger conceptual framework to find pleasure in reading them. In sum, the book is a rich source of knowledge for people interested in football in general, not least sport journalists. It is also recommendable for academia, if the respective readers are out for interesting narratives on different styles of football coverage.

Puzzling still – in a book on *European* identities – is the inclusion of Africa, the United States and Asia, especially if no interpretative framework is given on how the othering of these football cultures might fit into European 'identity constructions'. Of course, to regard Africans as being mostly naïve, unorganised but technically brilliant players has had an impact on, say, French identity constructions. The same could be said about the othering of the United States' football culture as being just another media-driven and money-obsessed business. Indeed a curious thing given recent developments in European (club) football, since commercialisation surely predates the arrival of Glazer, Gazprom and others. All this is fascinating stuff, but unfortunately the reader is left alone in trying to get the bigger picture. Disappointingly, the book ends with a sentence on South Korean football as seen from a Spanish newspaper – no summary, no conclusion. This, again, leaves the impression of expectations unfulfilled.
