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Die Deutsche Elf: The German National Football Team and Multicultural Integration in the Twenty-First Century

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ABSTRACT

Since the end of World War II, football in its institutionally organized forms has provided German citizens with a means of reconstructing national identity in a way that is considered politically “safe” in light of the country’s fascist past. As the sport and the culture surrounding it are normally viewed as an apolitical realm, the feedback effects from football on society have been under-researched and widely under-acknowledged, particularly in relation to discrimination in football and the repercussions it may have on society at large. This paper uses primary survey and sociological data, empirical data, a selection of secondary literature which make their own analyses of data-based research studies, primary media sources, and secondary media analysis studies on the topics of the German national football team, the 2006, 2010, and 2014 FIFA World Cups, and the local leagues of the German Football Association (DFB), to investigate the impact of football on social cohesion, integration, and multiculturalism in twenty-first century Germany. Far from being a non-political entity, the research shows that football has had a significant effect on integration efforts and multiculturalism in Germany over the past two decades, and that it has largely been a negative one. However, it is also evident from some positive, uniquely unifying effects of football upon society, that with changes to regulation, social accountability, and media representation, the sport has the potential to positively impact German integration in the future.

KEYWORDS

sport, integration, multiculturalism, national identity

1. INTRODUCTION

Sports have played a crucial role in the formation of national identity and the way that humans conceptualize social group-formation for centuries. Today, football is widely acknowledged as the most popular sport around the globe. The quadrennial FIFA World Cup is one of the most-viewed international sporting events in the world, with countries from all six inhabited continents sending their national teams to compete for the global championship. Due to the enormous global appeal of football, the particular importance of national teams in channeling expressions of national identity among supporters of the sport and its relevance in economics, politics, media, and culture, football presents an interesting medium for examining the relationship between sport and integration, both within and between nations, in today's ever-globalizing world. However, the feedback effects from football on society have been under-researched and under-acknowledged, particularly in relation to discrimination in football and the repercussions it may have on society at large (Brunssen, 2021). This paper explores the intersection between football and integration in Germany since the 1990s, investigating the German national team and the media discourse surrounding it as they relate to multiculturalism, national identity, and integration in Germany. Considering the particular relevance of football in Germany, the visibility of their national team on the global stage, and the country's noteworthy ongoing struggles with multiculturalism, this paper's aim is to analyze the role of football within German politics, determining if and in what ways German football and the culture surrounding it have impacted integration and multiculturalism efforts in the country since the 1990s.

This paper examines sources which present primary survey and sociological data, empirical data, a selection of secondary literature which make their own analyses of selected data-based research studies, secondary media analysis studies, and primary media sources on the topic of the German national football team. Integration of immigrant groups into complex and evolving societies such as Germany's is difficult to measure and evaluate, particularly in the specific context of organized football leagues and events in the country, and thus has been contextualized in this paper into an examination of policy around football and migrant players, German national identity construction around the societal factor of football, media responses to the 2006, 2010, and 2014 FIFA World Cups, and the role that football plays at the national and local level in perpetuating social divisions along identity lines. In this way, the analysis undertaken here will be used to assess the overall impact of football in Germany upon social cohesion in the twenty-first century, an era which has been characterized in by increased immigration and varying attempts at integration and multiculturalism.

2. ANALYZING THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN FOOTBALL AND THE (RE)CONSTRUCTION OF GERMAN NATIONAL IDENTITY POST-WAR AND POST-UNIFICATION

Throughout the second half of the twentieth century, the ramifications of World War II and the cultural legacy of the Holocaust necessitated a careful re-construction of national identity in Germany, which would allow the country to move beyond its fascist past. While football played a significant role in that process, it is to this day seen by many as a "non-political" field. The resulting constructions of German national identity are also heavily intertwined with the multicultural makeup of Germany's national team throughout the years.

2.1. DEFINING NATIONAL IDENTITY IN THE GERMAN CONTEXT

In the aftermath of World War II, Germany moved away from nationalism, national symbolism, and its aggressive approach to international politics in an effort to overcome

the persistent stigma of the Nazi party and the Third Reich (Ervedosa, 2020). In this way, mechanisms that had previously been key for the formation of German national identity were removed from the political and social zeitgeist, and the country was for many years defined less by the strong, unified national identity of its past, and more by the set of taboos which had to be avoided in order to move forward. Although this was indeed a completely necessary process for Germany to undergo in the aftermath of its involvement in World War II and given its global reputation for extreme fascism, it must also be acknowledged that national identity is a crucial mechanism through which citizens are able to create a coherent image of themselves as a nation by way of constructing the notion of the other (Capon, 2012). One way in which German citizens were able to reassign those important feelings of national identity in the post-war era was through football, which allowed that creation of uniqueness and difference in relation to others in a way that did not at first seem inherently political.

2.2. APOLITICAL PERCEPTIONS OF FOOTBALL IN GERMANY

Within the world of German football, it is common for Deutscher Fußball-Bund (DFB; English: German Football Association) officials at all levels to voice the opinion that football is a generally nonpolitical entity. Indeed, fans also often report seeing the football world as being completely detached from ordinary society, with laws concerning certain types of discrimination having different value in affairs involving the sport than in larger society (Brunssen, 2021). This has allowed Germans to show emotions toward their country and assign national identity to football by using the sport as a ‘neutral field,’ and thus a surrogate discourse on post-war taboos surrounding the topics of nationalism and national identity (Ervedosa, 2020). Far from being an actual “non-political” identity, football’s widespread conception as such was crucial in its ability to make significant contributions to the reconstruction of the German nation throughout the latter part of the twentieth century, which in turn made it inherently political. When these characteristics of the sport as it relates to the German context are applied in turn to the ideas of group-formation, particularly around race, ethnicity, and nationality in a country that has increasingly been experiencing immigration, it is perhaps unsurprising that today there is a widespread consensus that racism still exists within the sport. This reality is reinforced by the equally broad insistence that manifestations of racism therein are not symptoms of football itself but of the society around it (Kassimeris, 2021). In this respect as well, football cannot be viewed as “non-political.”

2.3. IMPLICATIONS OF A MULTICULTURAL NATIONAL TEAM

While the presence in national football teams of foreign-born players is by no means a new phenomenon, the World Cup has become “more migratory” over the past century, as shown by the analysis of national team demographics since the 1930s. There has been an increase in both the number of foreign-born footballers on national teams as well as the diversity of countries of origin of foreign-born players (van Campenhout et al., 2019). Among what van Campenhout et. al. (2019) define as “countries of immigration,” Germany holds the third highest proportion of foreign-born players selected for their national team, with an average of 12% over the entire history of the country’s participation in the FIFA World Cup. The existence of the German national team as a key factor in national identity formation while the country is at the same time consistently multicultural in terms of its demographic makeup, leads to a shift in the meaning of the “national,” as footballers and fans alike exist in transitory formations of regional, national, and transnational affiliation (Stehle & Weber,

2013). Furthermore, as eligibility rules have become increasingly flexible over time, this ability of footballers to move between national teams and therefore between national identities when it is convenient for their careers can exacerbate tensions around immigration, in some cases increasing the conception of immigrants as “mercenaries” (W., 2018).

3. WINNERS OUTSIDE OF THE STADIUM: FOOTBALL ECONOMICS AND MERKEL’S MULTICULTURAL GERMANY

In 2006, Chancellor Angela Merkel championed the missions of multiculturalism and inclusion in Germany through her unveiling of a National Integration Plan which built on ten proposed core themes of integration, one of which was integration through sports (Mushaben, 2017). While this presence of sports in the national political mind would seemingly point to a close positive relationship between sports and integration efforts in Germany, the reality was more complex. By considering the economic construction of football by the EU in the Bosman ruling of 1995, the political and economic applications of football in Germany throughout the twenty-first century may be better understood as they relate to the topic of integration.

3.1. THE BOSMAN RULING

In the 1990s, EU institutions began to increasingly recognize football as a significant economic activity, and thus as an activity which required regulation in accordance with the rules of the Community (Brand & Niemann, 2007). This led to the institution of the Bosman ruling in 1995, which reduced transfer fees for out-of-contract players and ruled out limitations on foreign players in EU football clubs by making ‘nationality restrictions’ illegal. Bosman marked a turning point in the DFB’s stance toward multi-ethnic players, which had previously been quite reluctant, as the DFB aimed to capitalize on the talents of immigrant footballers, inspired in part by the 1998 FIFA World Cup victory of France’s multi-ethnic national team (Meier & Leinwather, 2013). While the Bosman ruling only pertained to EU citizens, Germany took it one step further, implementing the ruling by granting EU resident status to all players living in the member states of the Union of European Football Associations (UEFA). This new liberal construction of citizenship law in Germany was also motivated by the fact that Bosman removed the highly profitable system of transfer fees within the DFB, a loss which could be augmented by opening the market to players from countries such as Poland, the Balkans, or the Czech Republic, who were generally less expensive to sign (Neimann & Brand, 2008). However, the resulting increase in foreign players in Germany’s national leagues led to a concurrent increase in tension between native Germans and immigrant populations, as the former saw the latter as depriving German youth and footballers of spots in their own football leagues. Thus, while the DFB promoted a modernization of citizenship laws and a generally more diverse football league, this was due almost entirely to economic motivations rather than those relating to multiculturalism and integration. This theme remained common in concern to the German national team over the course of the next two decades.

3.2. POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC APPLICATIONS OF THE GERMAN NATIONAL TEAM

As German politicians continued with their attempts to reform the country’s international reputation in the twenty-first century, the German national football team became a convenient tool for the marketing of the “new Germany” on the world stage. As such, the chance to host the 2006 FIFA World Cup presented for Germany an opportunity to present itself as a new, accepting, and multicultural nation. This period indeed marked a

turning point in the minds of the international football community, allowing Germany to move away from the perceived continuation of fascism in the country's football culture and reassigning the sport as a source of positive, modern national identification (Stehle & Weber, 2013). While the German national team which competed in the 2006 World Cup was not demographically representative of the multicultural makeup of Germany's local football leagues, the event was still effective in its goals of presenting a multicultural image on the national stage, and many German citizens felt able to freely express their national pride and display German national symbols for the first time since the end of World War II (Ervedosa, 2020). This event and the dynamics therein present an early example of the German national team as a figurehead for integration in the eyes of the media and the public, even when it was not truly representative of the country's more general reality in regard to multiculturalism and integration.

In the 2010 FIFA World Cup, Germany presented a highly multicultural national team, which was widely celebrated and led to media claims of football as an integration accelerator, uniquely capable of unifying a nation in a way that politics had been unable to accomplish (Stehle & Weber, 2013). However, Germany's presentation of this new face, championed by some as a model for integration across Europe, began debates as to whether the diverse team was a reflection of effective integration throughout Germany or merely an optimistic model for where the country could be headed in regard to integration. Indeed, celebrations of the 2010 German national team were interspersed in the media with racialized commentary about diverse members of the team (Stehle & Weber, 2013). Thus, the use of the German national team at the 2010 World Cup as a vessel for the acceptable resurgence of German patriotism must be considered in the context that this "new" nationalism, while incredibly inclusive in theory, continued to be acceptable almost exclusively in the context of sports (Stehle & Weber, 2013). The argument that the 2010 German national team was an indicator and champion of German integration indeed fell through somewhat when Chancellor Angela Merkel declared the failure of multiculturalism in October 2010, only a few months after the World Cup (Weaver, 2010). Overall, the events surrounding the 2010 World Cup suggest not that football is a force capable of shaping society, but rather that it may simply be a lens through which German society is reflected and a tool by which that reflection can be manipulated for political gain.

Finally, at the 2014 FIFA World Cup in Brazil, the German national team was victorious. This sent a powerful message of German triumph not only in the realm of sports, but also as a resurgent global superpower and northern victor over the Global South (Ervedosa, 2020). Regional TV ratings in Germany surrounding the event indicated low levels of consumer discrimination against players on the national team who were non-conforming to the identity of national in-group, while also presenting evidence towards a marketable "taste for diversity," indicating that German TV consumers had seemingly accepted the multiethnic national team as it coincided with the modernization of German law and citizenship (Meier & Leinwather, 2013). However, this data is once again applicable only in the field of sports and may have been driven chiefly by sportive nationalism. The victorious 2014 German national team, in this way, presented an example of the "model minority," in which diversity was accepted as a means of national victory while not simultaneously being applied to integration and acceptance throughout society as a whole (Görge, 2021). Nonetheless, in the context of the 2010 and 2014 World Cups, the diverse makeup of the German national team undoubtedly increased the visibility of those not in the traditional in-group in a way

that bolstered positive perception of such minority individuals.

3.3. MESUT ÖZIL: THE MODEL MINORITY IN GERMAN FOOTBALL

The concept of the model minority, that is, immigrants or minority citizens who have successfully and visibly integrated themselves into mainstream society and the neoliberal economy using their diversity and hard work as a tool to contribute to society and the economy (Stehle & Weber, 2013), provides a powerful critical lens with which to view the diverse makeup of the German national team in the 2010 and 2014 World Cups and the ways in which that diversity may have been indicative of or impactful upon integration in German society. In the face of integration, the idea of Germanness has experienced pressure and been questioned, yet the model minority and the glittering promise of multiculturalism prove to be both effortlessly marketable and subsequently quite profitable in a neoliberal economy (Stehle & Weber, 2013). The model minority should not be championed, however, as an indication of widespread and effective integration. Rather, the trope yet again offers evidence of performative progress, as the success therein of the immigrant or those with recent immigrant heritage is measured only in terms of what they can give back to Germany (Stehle & Weber, 2013). Mesut Özil, a Muslim footballer of Turkish descent who played on the German national team from 2009 to 2018, is a prime example of the pitfalls of the model minority in German professional football. Distinctly from other professional German players of Turkish descent, Özil was actively engaged in discourse around national identity and German-Turkish relations from the beginning of his professional football career, vocally advocating for integration of immigrants in Germany (Görgen, 2021). At the beginning of his tenure with the national team, public perceptions of Özil were highly favorable, as he was contributing hugely to the success of the national team. However, throughout the 2010's, Özil's presence on the national team and visibility in the media exposed faultlines in German multiculturalism. Germany is a fairly secular society, and this in combination with the influx of refugees from Syria in the mid-2010s and rising anti-Islamic sentiment in Germany led to growing disapproval of the footballer in the media, whose pilgrimage to Mecca in 2016 and his public support of Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in 2018 were both voraciously discussed in the media, yielding a great deal of criticism for Özil (Görgen, 2021). The German national team is an explicit representation of German national identity in the twenty-first century, and the visibility of Özil's religious practice and loyalty to his Turkish heritage exposed the fact that national team players are expected to recognize the German state, not others, as their governing bodies, and to further loyally embody German cultural values. In this way, the case of Özil shows that the multiculturalism of the German national team encourages assimilation to, rather than integration within, the German ideal.

4. COMPETITION AND COMMUNITY-BUILDING THROUGH GERMAN FOOTBALL

Mesut Özil famously said, "I am German when we win, but I'm an immigrant when we lose" (Görgen, 2021). Football and the culture surrounding it present complicated manifestations of immigrant and minority identities within the construction of German national identity. Thus, the most explicit effects of football on integration in Germany can be examined through the presence of racism in the culture surrounding it, the prevalence of rightwing nationalist politics within many German football clubs, and the separation of ethnic groups within German society that results from ethnic football clubs acting as crucial social units around the country. Within these topics, the evidence suggests a largely negative impact of football culture upon integration efforts in Germany—mainly through the rein-

forcement of an “us vs. them” mentality along ethnic lines, although participation in ethnic football clubs has also allowed many immigrants and ethnically distinct groups to achieve increased social participation in Germany.

4.1. RACISM IN FOOTBALL

Organized sports present a critical tool by which people form their sense of belonging and collective identity, particularly through the manifestation of the constructs of ‘us’ and ‘them’ (Brunssen & Schüler-Springorum, 2021). In that vein, a part of football culture and the formation of community therein is the abuse and denigration of opposing teams and their fans, where competition serves as an excuse for attacks based on identity (Kassimeris, 2021). Racially motivated violence against immigrants spiked in Germany after the country’s unification, with German national team matches, particularly those played abroad, providing a stage for racist, nationalist, and antisemitic behavior throughout the 1990s (Brunssen & Schüler-Springorum, 2021). This normalization of racism and nationalism in the context of football sends a clear message to football fans who use racist language against their opponents inside and outside of the stadium, that they will not face severe consequences, if any at all, for such action, thus providing a pathway for racism to become reconstituted within German society (Markovits & Rensmann, 2010). Even more concerning, German football players with a migration background have been rejected by fans and right-wing extremists, becoming the targets of harassment and sometimes even racist demonstration (Capon, 2012). These examples show how football, while perceived as “non-political” and therefore not highly regulated in regard to racism and discriminatory behavior, allows social taboos to be breached and harmful prejudice against national out-groups to leach out into society outside of the stadium, hindering integration and multiculturalism in Germany on a large scale.

4.2. RIGHTWING POLITICS ON AND OFF THE FIELD

Some empirical evidence around the formation and proliferation of identity-based groups in football suggests that football culture can provide fertile ground for the resurgence of far-right nationalist groups in Germany. This is most evident in the formation of local football teams by far-right groups in some parts of Germany which exclude ethnic football clubs or non-like-minded individuals and teams from tournaments and other sporting events. These clubs use football to conduct political recruitment and function as a pathway for the far right to integrate itself into the center of German society (Markovits & Rensmann, 2010). However, it should be noted that this remains true mostly at local and amateur levels of German football, as in recent years the presence of such right-wing extremism has abated significantly in Germany’s top professional leagues (Markovits & Rensmann, 2010). Still, while football at the national level is not associated with the resurgence of the radical right, it is crucial to recognize the effect that the sport can have on a local level across the country in reinforcing social divisions on the basis of identity and allowing certain political ideologies to proliferate within society.

4.3. ETHNIC FOOTBALL CLUBS

Ethnic football clubs or “heritage clubs” have long played a significant role in German social integration, with the share of single-ethnicity teams in local German leagues doubling between 1985 and 1997, and 80% of Germans with Turkish heritage reporting a preference for clubs with Turkish affiliation (W., 2018). This popularity of amateur football among minority groups as a way of self-organizing into ethnic communities is singular to football, as migrant clubs play a very minor role in most other sports in Germany (Brunssen

& Schüler-Springorum, 2021). The effects of this phenomenon on integration in Germany are multifold, with research indicating both positive and negative outcomes. Self-organized migrant sports clubs have been shown to increase social involvement and integration for minority communities in Germany, allowing individuals who may not have been so easily accepted as members of other clubs to integrate into the sports system, thus yielding further social integration for those groups and individuals. Involvement in organized football leagues has also been correlated with an increase in the acquisition of integration-promoting skills in communicative, social, and mental areas for those identified as immigrants or as coming from an immigrant background (Brunssen & Schüler-Springorum, 2021). At the same time, however, ethnic football clubs are a form of self-organization that can amplify divides and tensions between minority groups and autochthonous Germans. This is further compounded by the fact that racist insults are more likely to transpire between football fans of different clubs when the clubs are more ethnically and racially homogeneous, that is, when racist insults do not apply to any players on the team of the person who expresses them (Brunssen & Schüler-Springorum, 2021). Overall, the integration benefits of ethnic football clubs seemed outweighed by the fact that it is a largely exclusive overarching social context which necessitates their existence in the first place.

5. CONCLUSION

The effects of football on integration have been widely under-acknowledged in Germany, although they are significant. Overall, my research shows that football has had a significant effect on integration and multicultural efforts in Germany over the past two decades, but that it has largely been a negative one. Football has been intimately intertwined with the reconstruction of German national identity since the end of World War II and continues as such to this day, causing the sport to have the power to yield significant impact on the social and political realities of the country. Yet, football is still seen by many in Germany as being a fundamentally “non-political” sphere. Furthermore, in the twenty-first century the German national team has been used intermittently as a political tool to promote the country’s multicultural nature, indeed boosting the visibility of immigrants within German society at times, while at other points the national team has generated widespread media discourse which is counterproductive to German multiculturalism. Economic motivations such as consumer tastes for diversity or changes in international transfer system regulations have periodically led to increased integration within the sport, but those increases in integration have not been widely reflected in German society as a whole. At the local and national levels, football culture has allowed for the perpetuation and normalization of racism in German society, which actively counteracts integration efforts.

However, it is also evident from my research that football has the power to potentially enact positive change upon German integration in the future. Most of the negative effects of football on integration in Germany can be attributed to the widespread misconception that it is a “non-political” social sphere, and thus it is imperative first and foremost that officials in the DFB and Bundesliga in conjunction with German politicians recognize football as the political entity it is and begin to hold citizens accountable for the ways in which they treat each other in regard to the sport and competition. With changes to regulation, social accountability, and media representation, football has the potential in Germany to constitute a powerful force for positive social change.

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