

Racism and Xenophobia in Spanish Football: Facts, Reactions and Policies

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ABSTRACT

Contrary to what is sometimes supposed, racism is not a phenomenon of the past. In fact, it is one of the major challenges of the present and future in Europe and Spain. Besides providing an incomparable sense of belonging, football stadiums are also an excellent platform to express racist and xenophobic attitudes and behaviours. In Spain, for years many players have suffered abuse and insults, although it is black and ethnic minority players who receive the most harassment. Thus, the problem of racism has increased recently in Spanish football, as shown by the emission of monkey noises toward black players and the use of racist slogans and symbols in the stadiums.

This paper analyses the forms of racism and xenophobia in Spanish football, as well as the actions promoted and carried out by various institutions and agents to prevent and reduce these types of behaviour. The aim of this paper is to make a contribution based on figures and reflections on the types of racism and xenophobia in the world of football in Spain. The article is divided into three major parts. The first reviews some concepts of the scientific study of racism and xenophobia, placing them in the context of Spanish football. The second contains an overview of racism in European football and describes the situation in Spain, providing some empirical data about its incidence in recent years. The third and final section presents a classification and analysis of different antiracist reactions, actions and initiatives carried out recently in Spain with the aim of combating racism in Spanish football.

KEYWORDS

racism, xenophobia, football, Spain, sociology of sport

1. Introduction

The behaviour of the fans in football stadiums comprises a collective phenomenon that has received attention since the beginning of the 20th century. The feeling of dissolution of one's personal identity – in terms of moral control – and the creation of an emotional inertia of a collective nature produce a sensation of tacit agreement that reduces the activity of the inhibitory mechanisms and acts as a framework for legitimizing racist and xenophobic behaviours that would probably never be

exhibited on an individual level. Thus, there is a lessening of the moral self-control of the fans, accompanied by an emotional contagion that, at times, can lead to violent or racist behaviours.

In Spain, for more than a decade now, many football players have been the victims of verbal aggression, xenophobic chants and denigrating gestures, although black and ethnic minority players suffer these to a disproportionate degree. These types of incidents are not a novelty in Spanish stadiums. However, during the past five years they have begun to cause concern in broad sectors of society and acquire greater relevance in public opinion for two reasons. The first has to do with the socio-demographic conditions that currently characterize the country. The pronounced increase in immigration has meant that, in less than a decade, Spain has changed from a country of emigration to one of immigration¹ new make-up of Spanish society, which strongly contrasts with the greater homogeneity of previous periods, is the framework within which the communication media, NGOs, public administrations and researchers have increased their level of sensitivity and started to pay more attention to racist and xenophobic behaviours. Racism is a phenomenon that currently exists in European societies, and it constitutes one of the great challenges of their present and future. As Wieviorka has pointed out, whatever the future evolution is, it is likely that European societies will be tempted more and more by racism (1995).

Secondly, what could be considered the culminating point of these incidents (the events that occurred in reaction to the words of the Spanish coach, Luís Aragonés, during a training session of the Spanish national team in October of 2004) had a great international impact. The coach's comments drew strong criticism from the European press and even transcended the sports world to provoke the public disapproval of the British Prime Minister, who asked the Spanish government and the highest authorities in the world of football to take steps to avoid new episodes of racism in Spanish stadiums. The facts were the following: on 6th of October 2004, a journalist who was covering the practice session of the Spanish football team during their preparation for the game between Spain and Belgium (in the first phase of the 2006 World Cup) overheard the Spanish coach, Luís Aragonés, haranguing the Spanish player Reyes, who plays for Arsenal. Aragonés used a disrespectful phrase with racist connotations about Reyes' teammate, the black French player Thierry Henry. His exact words were: "Tell the black guy, I'm better than you! Black piece of shit, I'm better than you!" The event, which initially went unnoticed in Spanish society, had an enormous impact in England, where numerous news media repeated this news item and condemned the words of the Spanish coach, even criticizing the fact that the Spanish Football Federation had not fired him immediately. The next day the news item appeared in all the national media. Weeks later, at a friendly game between Spain and England in Santiago Bernabéu stadium in Madrid, many spectators launched racist insults at the black players on the English team. It was obvious that this was not an incident involving members of radical groups, as more than half the spectators who attended the game participated in the incident (around eighty percent according to the numbers published in the Spanish press). From that moment on, Spanish football received intense criticism and condemnation. FIFA handed the Spanish Football Federation a 65,000 Euro fine. In the following days, on some Spanish football fields racist insults were heard, and the news media reported them. These events, moreover, occurred at a time when the European Council requested that the governments of the countries in the European Union increase their efforts to stop what some news media had already defined as a new wave of xenophobia and anti-Semitism. The social alarm had been sounded. Racism in football had become a political problem in Spain.

¹ On 1st January 2009, the population of Spain surpassed 46.6 million, of which 5.6 million were of foreign nationalities, that is, 12% of the total.

The purpose of this paper is to add to the study of racism and xenophobia in Spanish football taking into account recent contributions by other researchers and using them as points of departure (Durán and Jiménez 2006, Durán and Pardo 2008, Viñas 2006, Viñas and Spaaij 2006, Spaaij and Viñas 2005). The study presented here has two objectives: first, to offer a panoramic view of the incidence of racism in Spanish football based on the analysis of the main existing data, and; second, to present a classification of the main anti-racist initiatives prepared by the civil society, public administrations and other social agents. With these objectives in mind, the article is divided into three sections. In the first, some concepts from the scientific study of racism and xenophobia are reviewed and placed within the context of football. In the second section, based on a general view of racism in European football, the situation of Spanish football is examined more closely, looking at diverse data on its incidence in first and second division stadiums. The third section presents a classification of the different reactions, measures and initiatives carried out in Spain in the past few years with the purpose of combating racism in football.

2. The sociological analysis of racism in sport

Although the scientific study of racism has focused very infrequently on the world of sports, one of the areas with a certain tradition in European sociology has to do with the xenophobic and violent attitudes of the spectators (Maguire 1994, McArdle and Lewis 1997, Garland and Rowe 1999, Sage 2001). However, there are aspects that require a more in-depth examination, such as the behaviour and attitudes of a racist nature that take place in amateur sports events, the integration policies set into motion by those responsible for the sports management of clubs and associations, and the sports habits of ethnic minorities (Maguire 2004, Chiba 2004, Long Robinson and Spracklen 2005, Durán and Jiménez 2006).

There may be various reasons for these gaps. In the first place, there is a strong presumption about the inclusive potential of sports that idealizes it as a vehicle of social integration. It is implicitly assumed that sport, in all its manifestations, promotes social inclusion in such a way that it is always useful in the fight against social exclusion and racism. On the other hand, the success of some athletes belonging to ethnic minorities in certain elite sports modalities has become a hindrance to awareness of the problem of racism in sports. The social notoriety and professional prestige of these athletes manage to hide the quite different reality to which the majority of the black population or members of other ethnic minorities are exposed. The empirical evidence shows that sport is a dialectic reality that can act as a source of social integration, but also as a means of discrimination.

Second, racism in football is a complex phenomenon that manifests itself inconsistently throughout the game (Garland and Rowe 2001, p. 4). The capricious nature of expressions of racism within football grounds is perhaps most commonly demonstrated by those fans who racially abuse the black players who play for their opponents, yet cheer those who play for their own side. The goalkeeper for the RCD Español team during the 1980s, Thomas N’Kono from Cameroon, pointed out this aspect of racism in football in statements made recently during a congress on prevention and security in football stadiums. N’Kono, who is currently part of the technical team of the Español club, pointed out that the insults toward black football players from the rival team are made to lower their morale and make them nervous, and that it is not unusual for the people who commit these acts to ask the player for his autograph when they see him on the street (Viñas 2006, p. 273). As Back, Crabbe and Solomos (1998, p. 84) state: “racist abuse in grounds occurs in an intermittent fashion; racist epithets and slogans are invoked in specific contexts and serve particular functions such that a series of fixtures may pass without any racist activity whilst a fixture with a heightened atmosphere or the appropriate circumstances can produce an explosion of racist activity”. In fact, the contradictory nature

of racism in sports has made it difficult to grasp its true social magnitude. The existence of racism has even been denied by claiming that the incidents that usually appear to be manifestations of racism or xenophobia are really just acts of hooliganism or provocations whose relevance is diluted if one interprets them according to the *football code*.

Third, concern about racism in football is closely associated with the public's worry about the organized forms of violence related to it, as racist behaviour in football is generally seen as only one element in a broader group of anti-social behaviours that form the basis for the interest in vandalism in football (Back, Crabbe and Solomos 1999, p. 423). From this perspective, racism and xenophobia in football are an extension of the *hooligan* phenomenon; therefore, no distinction is made between the social processes that sustain the racist and xenophobic model and the *hooligan* behaviour (Back, Crabbe and Solomos 1999, p. 425). However, the nature of racism and xenophobia in football cannot be separated from the social context in which they develop. The racist slogans and racial insults that are heard in the stadiums are not just the work of certain groups of organized radicals. They reflect a degree of *basic racism* existing in society that is also manifested in football (Walvin 1986).

The dominant theme of this new *basic racism* is no longer biological inheritance, but rather the fundamental nature of the cultural differences. Thus, this type of racism, at first glance, does not postulate the superiority of certain groups with regard to others. Instead, it emphasizes the harmfulness of the disappearance of borders, and the incompatibility of the different ways of life and traditions. As Wieviorka points out, the logic incorporated into this new racism is a logic of pure differentiation, that tends to reject social contacts and relations, tends to resort to the image of the radical exterior of the human groups considered, which in their limits have no common space in which to form any relation, racist or otherwise. Thus, the new racism would be legitimized less by invoking an inequality of races than by the idea of certain basic and incompatible cultural, national, religious and ethnic specifics (Wieviorka 1995, p. 33).

From this perspective, although the protagonists of the majority of incidents of a racist and xenophobic nature are radical fans, there is evidence that other types of racist manifestations are often ignored. These expressions of racism can be grouped into three categories (Durán and Jiménez 2006, p. 71-72). The first is *institutional racism*, which is produced when the norms, agreements and practices applied within the sports organization have discriminatory effects, giving rise to low levels of participation and attention to minorities. The second category is *impulsive racism*, which stems from frustration, insecurity, lack of knowledge and, in many cases, lack of understanding. The third category is *instrumental racism*, whose manifestations, although also for racist reasons, are mainly intended to intimidate the players on the other team and provoke their fans.

With regard to the first type, *institutional racism*, it must be borne in mind that expressions of racism and xenophobia in football stadiums are more public and more easily identified than the institutionalized and semi-institutionalized forms that have tended to characterize the professional football culture (Williams 1992). These institutionalized forms of racism and xenophobia generally have a more hidden and not necessarily intentional nature. They have become implanted in the routine operations and functioning of the organizations, and they imply the integration of racism in daily situations with both the institutional and impulsive practices that activate underlying relations of power. As far as *impulsive racism* is concerned, these are racist and xenophobic behaviours stemming from frustration and insecurity, derived from the existence of a perception that the massive arrival of immigrants will endanger the Spanish identity, as well as the jobs of many Spanish people. Football demonstrates what could eventually happen in society as a whole, as it constitutes a space where it is easier to express this impulsive racism. Finally, *instrumental racism* refers to a type of behaviour that shows the contradictory and inconsistent nature of racism in Spanish football. This type of racism is

observed when a team's fans make fun of black players on the other team as a way to distract them, but accept those black players who play on their own team. At times, the racist fans insult their own players, although in general they accept them as long as they play well and help their team to win. Thus, there is a network of complex negotiations around the identities of the club and its forms of collective belonging that can establish the inclusion and exclusion model through which some black fans are admitted as integrated members, while other minority groups of rival black fans and players are vilified and rejected as foreigners (Back, Crabbe and Solomos 1999, p. 437).

The study presented here refers to the racist manifestations existing in Spanish football that are found within the categories of *impulsive and instrumental racism*. Compared to the normative and organizational analyses that would be necessary to study *institutional racism*, the two forms of racism dealt with here can be approached through the analysis of the football-related behaviours and cultures of the Spanish fans, which are precisely the aspects described in this investigation.

3. Racism in Spanish football

Until only a few years ago, racism was considered an issue that had been overcome in European football. However, the incidents that have occurred recently in various stadiums show that the reality is quite different, as a recent study of this problem in eight countries of the European Union concluded (Van Sterkenburg, Janssens and Rijnen 2005). In reality, the anti-Semitic chants, the emission of monkey noises toward black football players, who are also thrown peanuts and bananas, and even the use of racist symbols and slogans more commonly employed by extreme right wing groups, show that the problem exists in the majority of European countries, especially in Spain and Belgium, countries where the situation has more alarming characteristics. The differences between the various countries with regard to the phases of development and attention paid to the problem of racism in football are relevant. They depend on the existing differences in the development and economic situation of the country, as well as the general flow of immigration and the entrance of black or other ethnic minority players in professional football. For these reasons, according to the aforementioned study, in England, for example, they began to hear the first racist chants in the 1970s and 1980s, while in Germany, France, Italy and Holland, racist behaviours reached their highest level during the 1980s and 1990s. For the same reasons, the phenomenon is much more recent in Spain and Belgium.

This section presents the main data on the racist incidents recorded in first and second division league games in Spanish football during the 2004/05 and 2005/06 seasons. The only research study that has addressed this topic was published recently by Javier Durán and Rodrigo Pardo (2008). The analysis offered by these researchers deals with the first and second division Spanish football league games during the 2004/05 and 2005/06 seasons, and it is based on the following sources: the minutes of the National Commission Against Violence in Sport Events; the quarterly reports prepared by the National Office of Sports of the General Police Directorate (which are elaborated from the second quarter of 2005, after the signing of the Protocol for actions against Racism, Xenophobia and Intolerance in Football); and the minutes prepared by the referees. Given that this analysis was made based on secondary sources, it is likely that the number of racist incidents that occurred in Spanish football was actually higher because, as the authors themselves point out, the Observatory on Violence, Racism, Xenophobia and Intolerance in Sport has uncovered direct evidence, and also by means of the news media, of racist incidents (monkey noises and the exhibition of neo-Nazi symbols) produced in Spanish football stadiums that were not included in the sources used to carry out the data analysis.

According to the analyses performed by these investigators, in the 2004/05 and 2005/06 seasons there were, respectively, 23 and 24 racist incidents in the games of the two highest divisions of Spanish football (Durán and Pardo 2008, p. 87-88). Of the 23 incidents in the 2004/05 season, 20 were recorded in the first division and 3 in the second. In the following season, there were 18 in the first division and 6 in the second. Another interesting piece of data offered by Durán and Pardo (2008: 87) refers to the type of racist incidents registered in the Spanish football stadiums, which can be divided into two large categories: on the one hand, the use of racist and xenophobic symbols (flags, posters, t-shirts and stickers); and on the other, the use of racist behaviours and insults (aggressions, monkey noises and banana throwing). During the 2004/05 season, there were 7 incidents with 'racist symbols' (out of 23), while in the 2005/06 season, their number decreased to 3 (out of 24). On the other hand, there were 16 'racist behaviours and insults' in the 2004/05 season, and they increased to 21 in the following season.

Referring globally to the 47 racist incidents recorded in the two highest divisions of Spanish football during the 2004/05 and 2005/06 seasons, Durán and Pardo (2008, p. 91) point out that 8 of them involved fewer than 5 people; one involved 60; another 150; 2 involved between 500 and 1,000 people; another 2 between 2,000 and 3,000 people; 5 involved a greater number of people; another 5 an undetermined number; and in 23 cases the number does not appear. Finally, with regard to the study by Durán and Pardo (2008), mention should also be made of the data offered in relation to whether those involved in the racist incidents belonged to extreme right wing groups. In this regard, of the 47 incidents that occurred during the two seasons together, there is an official record of the involvement of ultra groups in 12 of them (6 in the 2004/05 season and 6 in the 2005/06 season). In 12 others, the sources used by the investigators highlight the participation of people who did not belong to any ultra group (one case in the first season analyzed and eleven cases in the second); and in the remaining 23 cases, there is no record, or this aspect is unknown.

Although the data presented above refer only to professional football, some sources have stated that the situation in non-professional settings could be much worse than in the professional one. According to testimonies gathered by Viñas and Spaaij (2006, p. 67), even though it has not received enough attention from the news media or from those who study football, racism is a reality in *amateur* football that could be greatly contributing to the reduction in the representation of players from ethnic minorities in professional football, thus restricting the progression of these players into higher categories.

4. Anti-racist initiatives and reactions in Spanish football

The social context referred to in the previous section is the space in which responses to the racism and xenophobia in Spain should reside. This final section discusses the two main routes through which attempts have been made to combat the problem of racism in Spanish football. The first involves the main anti-racist campaigns carried out by civil society, led by associations, NGOs, groups of fans, football players and multi-national companies from the world of football. The second refers to the response by the Spanish government, which specifically consists of elaborating a *Protocol of actions against Racism, Xenophobia and Intolerance in Football*.

4.1. Anti-racist campaigns and civil society

Apart from the measures and initiatives set in motion by governmental agencies, it is important to start by mentioning the involvement of other social actors. A relevant role has been

played by non-governmental organizations such as: *SOS Racism*, which since the year 2005 have included a special section about the diffusion of neo-Nazi ideology in football; and the *Movimiento contra la Intolerancia (Movement against Intolerance)*, which in some issues of its quarterly *Raxen Report on racism and xenophobia in Spain* carried out an analysis of the actions of radical organizations in Spain. Along the same lines, anti-racist initiatives have been developed by some groups of radical fans who have become concerned about this problem. These are campaigns against racism and xenophobia in football organized by radical groups with an anti-fascist ideology, such as, for example, the Basque collectives *Herri Norte Taldea* and *Abertzale Sur*, both supporters of Athletic de Bilbao. These two groups cooperated with *SOS Racism* in organizing a demonstration against racism, xenophobia and violence in football, using the slogan “Up with immigrants and down with racism”. The radical group *Osasuna Indar Gorri* also organized a “Day against Racism” that included a multi-cultural concert and the unfolding in the old Sadar Stadium of a poster with the saying “Everyone against Racism”. The proliferation of these diverse initiatives means that social scientists will need to evaluate their efficacy. Although there have been several investigations into the extent of racism within the game, there has been little academic analysis of the effectiveness of football’s anti-racist strategies.

In another vein, it is important to mention those football players, coaches and directors of clubs who have either publicly disapproved of the insults toward black or other ethnic minority players, or have even become involved in campaigns against racist and xenophobic attitudes. In this sense, football players like Samuel Eto’o (FC Barcelona), Felix Ettien (Levante UD) and Mohamed Sissoko (Valencia CF) have expressed their displeasure at the insults they have received in the stadiums, and they have asked the institutions to take action against expressions of racism. On the other hand, it must be highlighted that some clubs, especially FC Barcelona and Real Madrid, have made public statements against racism. Moreover, some quite famous football players, such as Ronaldinho, Thierry Henry and Roberto Carlos, have joined together under the slogan “Say that’s enough to racism!” in a television commercial widely broadcast by several television channels during the retransmission of football games. Also involving the support of some famous football players, reference should be made to the initiative of a famous brand of sports clothing that promoted the sale of black and white bracelets as part of the campaign “Stand Up, Speak Up” initiated by the Thierry Henry and Nike. The campaign was supported by players from various countries. It was designed to increase solidarity and respect and combat racism in football, so that the profits from the sale of the bracelets were donated to anti-racist organizations.

4.2. The governmental response to racism in football

With regard to the governmental response to racism in Spanish football, on 22nd December 2004 the *Observatory of Racism and Violence in Sport* was established in light of the impact in the news media and society of the aforementioned events of the previous months. The main purpose of this body is to fight against racism, xenophobia, violence and intolerance in the different sports contexts, and defend the ethical values of sports, especially intercultural integration through sports. Likewise, this unit aims to foment and orient the defence and protection of the rights of those citizens who find themselves discriminated against in practicing sports. As far as its composition is concerned, the Observatory is headed by a person proposed by the Superior Council on Sports and the Interior Ministry, and it is made up of representatives of public and private institutions designated by these organisms.

Among the initial actions taken by the Observatory, the most significant one was the preparation of a *Protocol for action against Racism, Xenophobia and Intolerance in Football*, which

the maximum representatives of Spanish football signed in a public act at the headquarters of the Superior Council on Sports on 18th March 2005. Based on this commitment, the signers of the Observatory demanded the fulfilment of three types of measures. First, “measures of prevention and protection of the physical and moral integrity of the victims of racist, xenophobic and intolerant acts in the ambit of sports”, one of which was the *Guide to actions against racism in football* and an *Action Plan against racism* with internal disciplinary measures and measures to promote awareness and sensitivity of personnel, as well as actions directed toward prohibiting, eradicating and preventing the diffusion of messages, symbols and slogans with racist, xenophobic or intolerant content. Second, the *Protocol* includes “measures to locate and control participants in racist, xenophobic, intolerant and violent incidents in football”, as a way to complement preventive actions with the location and sanctioning of the offenders by implementing a *specific intervention plan to prevent and repress outbreaks of racism, xenophobia and intolerance in professional football*. Finally, the protocol also includes a series of measures involving the repression and sanctioning of racist, xenophobic, intolerant and violent incidents in football.

5. Conclusions

Although racist and xenophobic behaviours are not a novelty in Spanish football, the attention that has been paid to this phenomenon by the press in recent years is new. It is important, however, to keep in mind the complexity and versatility of the phenomenon and to avoid the reigning tendency to consider racism as a behaviour exclusive to organized radical groups. The forms of racism in Spanish football are diverse, including visible manifestations (monkey noises and exhibition of neo-Nazi symbols), but also other more subtle expressions. What is emerging now is a new type of racism that is not based on biological differences, but instead on cultural traits. This article has shown that racist and xenophobic behaviours comprise a social reality in first and second division Spanish football stadiums. On the other hand, although the available data inevitably refer to the most visible part of the phenomenon, they show that it is not exclusive to the actions of organized radical groups.

During the coming years, the fight against racism and xenophobia will require the continuous effort of the various participants involved in the world of football, as well as an evaluation of the efficacy of the diverse initiatives set in motion during the past few years, both those of a governmental nature and those emerging from the civil society.

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