

FOOTBALL, GLOBALISATION AND LOCAL IDENTITY IN BRAZIL

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Abstract:

This paper seeks to reflect on globalisation and local identity in Brazilian football. We present the strength of the local base as the unique feature of the Brazilian example in the adoption of football, in order to be able to discuss just how important this particular aspect was in the shape that football took, and how the “modernizing” forces of globalisation are reshaping it nowadays. Under pressure from market forces we can see a clash between tradition and modernity, between local identity and the trends towards globalisation.

Key-words: globalisation – football – Brazil - local identity.

Introduction

Although football possesses its own well-known attractions which justify its irrefutable claim to be a world game, we agree with Joan-Eugeni Sánchez (1992:295), for whom many times the success of a diffusion process of any particular innovation depends more on its social and territorial origins than on its supposed intrinsic advantages. Summing up, British global supremacy at the end of the 19th century was essential to the spread of football¹. In this context, about the diffusion of modern sports, Allen Guttman (1994:173) points out that this is basically a flow from centre to periphery. It is not a mere coincidence that England and the United States (the imperial powers of the 19th and 20th centuries) are the only countries whose main sports were not created overseas: football, rugby and cricket among the English, American football,

basketball and baseball in the USA. These are indications of the clearness of geographical bases in the sporting phenomenon.

In summary, the British empire's enormous geographical area allowed the broad diffusion of "football" information, but it is our opinion that its effective adoption in each country depended upon local factors, so that only a geographically based approach can take into account the different rates of adoption of this innovation in the world's many different regions. In the case of Brazil, we will see how territorial configuration and dynamics created a distinct format regarding the shape that football took, a format that is currently under pressure from market forces. A clash between tradition and modernity, between local identity and the trends towards globalisation.

The text is divided into three segments. At the beginning we present the unique features of the Brazilian example in the adoption of football, in order to be able to show later on just how important this particular aspect (the strength of the local base) was in the shape that football took, and how the "modernizing" forces of globalisation are reshaping it nowadays. Lastly, we reflect on globalisation and local identity in Brazilian football.

I. Territory and adoption of football in Brazil: a unique case

Le Havre in France, Genoa in Italy and Rotterdam in Holland. Bilbao in Spain and Bremen in Germany. Belem in Brazil, Callao in Peru and Valparaíso in Chile, without mentioning the well-known cases of Montevideo and Buenos Aires. There are many cases of port cities which, starting with an informal exhibition by British sailors,

came into early contact with football, in almost all cases before any other town or city in their respective countries.

Therefore we know that dealing with the spread of football requires verification of the presence of the English, and there can be no doubt that Brazil was included within the net of this great 19th century empire. According to countless historical registers² the constant presence of British ships in connection with the construction at that time of railroads and various other installations by British in Brazil, led to contact with a number of English social-cultural practices, one of which was football. However, a more accurate examination allows us to note some peculiarities in the Brazilian case.

In general terms, what has been disseminated has been the superficial evaluation that Brazil is just another example of the classic process of the introduction and diffusion of football; in other words that it entered via the major ports and then spread out afterwards across the country³. However, the existence of various ports far from each other and the spatial dispersion of English investments across Brazil produced an unusual picture, very different to that observed in Argentina, Chile and Uruguay. Contrary to what was stated by Janet Lever (1983:64), when she proposed that there had been a common model throughout South America, in Brazil we are unable to find a single location within Brazilian territory from where football, while it was still a novelty, spread out across the country, although we acknowledge Sao Paulo's dominant role in the adoption process⁴. Thus we can state that it is not a typical case, but one in which football penetrated Brazilian territory virtually simultaneously through various points which were unconnected (but which had links with overseas), as independent incursions in the overall movement of diffusion⁵.

The reasons for this peculiarity lie in the form that the colonial system took in Brazil, starting in 1500, when Portuguese caravels first landed here. Portugal lacked resources in terms of materials and manpower to deal with such a huge territory (more than 8.5 million km²) and could only undertake small-scale focused incursions of exploration into its main colony. Based on the traditional agro-exporter model, it developed a number of “islands” of primary production that flowed out through one of the various ports along the length of the Brazilian coastline.

In Brazil at the close of the 19th century, what you had in effect was the legacy of the colonial system, under which the different regions remained to all extents and purposes virtually isolated from each other (Santos, 1993). Clearly, this territorial configuration, which was still based on these “productive islands” of the agro-exporter model (Geiger, 1963; Singer, 1974), did not provide for the possibility of setting up an integrated urban network on a national scale. According to Milton Santos (1993:26), “Throughout the course of many centuries Brazil was a great archipelago made up of subspaces which evolved according to their own logic, dictated to a great extent by their relationship with the outside world”. Summing up, when football began its broad spread across the planet (1880-1900) in Brazil it found a territory that was both fragmented and one that had a tiny urban base: less than one tenth of the Brazilian population lived in towns in 1900.

Therefore, given this context of weak internal territorial connections, Rio de Janeiro and Sao Paulo were not really able to play the national metropolitan role they play today,⁶. This role only began to become clear in 1930, as a result of the vigour seen in the national territory integration policy and the advent of new forms of communication (such as broadcasting) coupled with the expansion of the transport

network. At that moment, many places remained isolated from the large Brazilian urban centres and continued the traditional localism. In the world of football this situation led to the appearance of local rivalries. At the same time, the major cities continued to be relatively isolated from one other with the result that the main football clashes took place at an inner-city level, rather than at an inter-city level, as was commonly seen in the European case. Regarding this local character in Brazilian football we will discuss the following.

II. The importance of place in the Brazilian football: tradition and conflicts

As geographers, we argue that the spread of and the shape of football in each country, obeys the restrictions on the shape and dynamics of each territory. In Spain for example, the first football championship was held in 1902, and it brought together six clubs the three most important Spanish cities (Madrid, Barcelona and Bilbao), thus in this way taking on right from the outset a national dimension (Mascarenhas, 2001). In Italy, clubs from Genoa (the port where football was introduced) and Turin (an important industrial centre), organized the first championship in 1898, with the city of Milan (Brera, 1975:20-8) being included two years later. Once again what we have here is a national dimension, of confrontation between important cities. In France, the first championship took place in 1894, and for the next five years was restricted to Paris clubs (Delaunay et al, 1982:20-9), gradually becoming a national competition. Countries such as Uruguay and Argentina, which to an even greater degree than France present an urban system which exhibits a high level of primacy (their respective capitals account for half the population of each country), right from the start realized that their

football competitions, despite the fact that they were limited to these cities, had a national character: the “nation” as it were fitted inside these cities.

As we have already seen, in Brazil territorial motives led to a different process with regard to the adoption of football, with this process being multi-polarized and having a strong local base with the result it would take many decades before a national championship could take place. Below, we will present a summary of the evolution of our football competitions, in order to demonstrate the extent to which localism has persisted.

The first football championships took place at the beginning of the 20th century, in Sao Paulo (1902) Bahia (1904) and Rio de Janeiro (1906). Although they were competitions that brought together teams from a single city, they called themselves “state championships”⁷. In the 1920s, the majority of Brazilian states already had their own championships, although these were almost always held in the state capital, due to the lack of an adequate transport network or of an insufficient market in the smaller cities or to the fact that football had not taken yet hold in the interior. This was the fragmented panorama of Brazilian football that existed throughout the first half of the 20th century.

1950 saw a small reaction against the local aspect that was ever-present in Brazilian football at that time. A regular tournament was begun between the main clubs in Rio de Janeiro and Sao Paulo. This however, merely covered Brazil’s two most important cities, whose physical proximity (450 km) combined with the traditional rivalry between them (a phenomenon that predated football), made this initiative possible. All the other Brazilian cities continued with their own championships that

covered a very small geographical area with the exception of Sao Paulo and Rio Grande do Sul⁸.

Finally, in 1959 there appeared a nationwide competition, the Brazil Cup. However, it was restricted to clubs that were champions in just a handful of Brazilian states, in order to keep the costs down of an event that was not particularly interesting to a society that was essentially interested in local rivalries. We need to stress that the chief motive behind this initiative was totally unconnected with the world of Brazilian football; to fill the places offered every year for the newly created (in 1960) Libertadores Cup.

In 1967, against a politically repressive background and with total manipulation of patriotic feelings, the government financed the building of huge stadiums and promoted a tournament (to take the place of the “Rio – Sao Paulo” one mentioned earlier), which would later become the future national championship. Initially a total of 15 clubs took part, coming from five cities concentrated in the southeast of Brazil, which is the country’s most developed region. The following year saw the addition of the two clubs which had won the championships in the two most important cities in the country’s northeast, a region which although poor has a large population. Finally, in 1971, at the height of the military dictatorship (and financed by it, on account of the high operational costs due to the immense distances) and in the wake of the definitive conquest of the Jules Rimet gold trophy, there appeared the National Championship, to take the place of the Brazil Cup in terms of deciding which Brazilian teams would take part in the Libertadores Cup.

The dictatorship lasted until 1984, and as a result of political manoeuvring many smaller cities and clubs joined the championship, which grew to include more

than ninety teams. An economically unsustainable set-up, especially during a decade that witnessed the modernization of European football (Italian football, mainly), caused an unprecedented exodus of Brazilian players to Europe. In 1987 empty stadiums and unprofitable competitions produced the “first” large-scale indication of the discontent by the major clubs. This elite of Brazilian football created the “Club of Thirteen”, an organization that held an independent championship, against the wishes of the Brazilian Football Confederation, bringing together just its select members⁹.

In 1989, the extinct Brazil Cup “resurfaced”, following the European model, with two simultaneous national competitions each having a different format. The tournament started off slowly initially just including the champions and runners-up from each of the state competitions, in the same way as the former Brazil Cup, which had existed between 1959 and 1968. However, from 1996 onwards it began regularly inviting the major clubs, thus meeting their demand for more matches with each other or with other major South-American clubs¹⁰. Since that time this competition has included 64 teams, using the well-known format of direct knockout matches.

The second half of the 1990s saw a series of changes in the organization of Brazilian football, all in the extra-local sense. On the local scene, state championships declined in importance as a result of measures that released the large clubs from the initial stages, in order that they could concentrate their efforts on the newer, more profitable competitions at the regional, national and international level, as we will demonstrate below.

In 1997 the former Rio – Sao Paulo tournament (1950 to 1966) was restarted thus guaranteeing the large clubs in these cities lucrative matches. The model was then copied across the whole of Brazil. Starting in 1999 and 2000 all the regions began to

have similar championships, bringing together just the main clubs, and this led to bankruptcies among the small clubs. These competitions determine the teams that will participate in the Champions Cup, which was created in 2000, a sort of well-paid short duration national championship that offers one of the new slots for the Libertadores Cup.

In 1998 the Mercosur Cup made its first appearance, **organised by a great media enterprise. South America since then had two continental competitions**, with this latter one being totally market driven, as participation was by invitation only and this in turn was directly related to the profitability of each club. Thus the same clubs always take part, with rare exceptions disguised as being on account of “technical merit”, in order to regenerate the event’s attraction, but always selecting teams with large numbers of supporters, in other words teams that are economically viable.

Even the traditional Libertadores Cup is changing; starting in 1999 countries such as Argentina and Brazil began to have at least twice as many slots as their neighbours (up until then, each South-American country had the same two places, notwithstanding the huge difference in the technical level between them) thus guaranteeing the competition a greater appeal and increased profitability. Since 1960 the Libertadores Cup had always brought together 21 clubs but this has now been increased to 32 participants in line with the commercial spirit of expansion of international competitions, which are so valued by the TV networks¹¹. The unprecedented and inexplicable inclusion of Mexican clubs (the country is linked to CONCACAF) also shows the wish to make the event a more lucrative affair, and clearly takes into account the fact that Mexico has an immense consumer market.

Helleu (2007) verified the same process in European context, at the same time. In 1999/2000, the profitable Champions League was amplified, from 24 to 32 clubs. But just the countries with more economic power were benefited with this change: France, Germany, Italy, Spain, England and Netherlands. These countries now have each one four clubs in this prestigious championship.

Since the begging of the 21st century, Brazilian football has showing better organization, appreciating the National Championship and the technical merit of clubs, in despite of their power market. In this senses, regional competitions like Rio-São Paulo and others were extinguished. *The same process can be verified in continental scale. The Mercosur Cup was banished in 2002, in order to a new continental competition take place, the South American Cup, organised by Conmebol.*

In despite of the new organisation, Brazilian football local scale competitions are still in bad economic conditions. São Paulo sate local championship is an exception, due its economic power. The majority of local competitions in Brazil is completely unprofitable. So, without financial resources these local clubs tend to obtain bad performance, and with bad performance they tend to lose prestige and fans. How local identity survives in this context?

III. As a conclusion mode: between globalisation and local identity

Place has been studied as a counterpoint to the deterritorializing process of globalisation, as for instance in Marc Augé (1993), when accentuating the identity related character of the place in light of the world's lack of individuality. Although the cultural dimension also stands out, the geographer David Harvey (1996:295) affirms

that place is a combination of physical and social structures that have the power of permanence on the land. Thinking about a political economy of the construction of the place under capitalism, he raises the question “how places get erected as permanences within the flux and flow of capital circulation”. If on the one hand we agree that globalisation does not result in the world becoming uniform, on the other hand we have to admit that various places are affected by it. The question is to know how and to what extent this influence of the global order can be seen in the place, and how it reacts in specific terms.

The current stage of globalisation impacts on various aspects of social life, and can be studied using the perspective offered by Harvey (1990), of one more round of space-time compression: information technologies and global networks accelerate the movement of the world and compress it, having a deep effect on our local experience. And the greater the place’s degree of extroversion (on account of the networks and global connections that come into contact with it), the more complex is the redefinition of local identities. Our concern is precisely reflecting on what the fan has been feeling, in light of the intense process of change that is taking place within Brazilian football. A process that we interpret as being a growing degree of extroversion of the traditional local base, brought about by the new instrumental rationality that is reorganizing football on a global scale.

Within Brazilian territory, for decades the weakness (or even disappearance) of clubs in small cities has been noticeable, on account of the growing influence (as a result of mass means of communication and national integration) of clubs located in the country’s principal cities, which are Rio de Janeiro and Sao Paulo. Even in the medium sized towns and regional capitals, we can see a clear growth in local adhesion to the

reduced group of clubs that make up the elite of Brazilian soccer. At the present time a further round of space-time compression seems to be going on: a process that is beginning to have a serious affect on some of these large traditional clubs, precisely those clubs which have smaller numbers of fans. Some analyses assume that the internationalisation of competitions is likely to reduce yet further the number of Brazilian clubs that are economically viable.

Cities with 3 million inhabitants such as the above-mentioned Belo Horizonte and Porto Alegre, where for more than half a century local rivalry has been feeding its very own cosmology (as if these cities were emotionally divided into two antagonistic halves), for market-based reasons are regarded by economists as being incapable of maintaining two large clubs. Basing their arguments on capitalist instrumental reasoning, they advise that a single local club (similar to the European and North American model taken as the standard of a lucrative organization) would be more powerful and better able “to sell” the city’s image both within Brazil and more importantly to the rest of the world.

However, in our opinion such propositions seem totally inadequate in light of the strong tradition of our local base. It should be noted that when clubs from the same city take part in national or international competitions, at the level of the ordinary citizen we see a continuous parallel dispute, because what really interests the fan is to know which of the teams is better placed. And he not only applauds the victories of his club but also the defeats of his local rival.

The continuous weakening of state championships, as has already been commented on is motivated by interests of profit on the part of the television networks because the target public is always greater when the game involves clubs from different

cities and even more so when it involves clubs from different countries. However, this is not the point of view of the ordinary fan for whom, historically, the greatness and mythological strength of his club was built on local rivals. A degree of extroversion, which in reality has been bothering us since the beginning of the 1980s, at which time the national squad ceased to be made up of players who played in Brazilian football, on account of the export of talents which has grown ever since that time, depriving us of the regular interaction with these players that is vital in nourishing their status as idols.

A growing emptiness can be witnessed in Brazilian football stadiums, especially in the major cities. Globalising instrumental logic has been prevailing over local tradition, profoundly changing the structure of football, and has been trying to reduce the fan to a mere consumer. To what extent local identity will resist or will undergo major modifications is something that only time will tell.

Notes:

¹ I draw attention to the fact that more than 1/3 of those who emigrated from Europe between 1850 and 1890 came from the British Isles (Said, 1995). And that, taking into account the so-called "informal empire", that which consisted of states which although independent, were economically subordinate to England, at the end of the 19th century in reality "maybe 1/3 of the planet was British in economic and cultural terms" (Hobsbawm, 1988:111).

² In the state of Paraná, in the south of Brazil the person regarded as being responsible for the introduction of football is the Englishman Charles Wright, who worked there during the building of a railroad. In Fortaleza, in Brazil's northeast, the first officially recognized football match was the challenge made by the local youth to the English team of the Gaz Company. In Salvador, in Bahia, the first club champion that took place in 1905 was made up entirely of Englishmen.

³ This evaluation is a recurring theme in foreign publications about Brazilian football. A critical evaluation of the works of the North-American sociologist Janet Lever and of other "foreign Brazil specialists", given new findings regarding the spread of football in Brazil, can be found in Mascarenhas (1999; 2002, mimeo).

⁴ We can verify a much simpler process in countries such as Uruguay and Argentina, where by the end of the 19th century the whole country was polarized around a single port city, which in both cases was also the capital of the republic. In other words, Buenos Aires and Montevideo enjoyed a substantial capacity to penetrate the interior of their national territories via the railway network that radiated outwards from these cities. (Mascarenhas, 2001).

⁵ (Mascarenhas, 1998). I noted a similar process in Spain, the object of study when I was at the University of Barcelona (Mascarenhas, 2001(b)). However, the majority of countries tend to exhibit a simplified model of the introduction of football, with it being easy to identify that place which was the first to acquire the innovation. In most countries, this place was the most active port connected to England: Genoa in Italy, Le Havre in France, Valparaiso in Chile, Buenos Aires, Montevideo etc.

⁶ In this context, our principal cities "commanded just a fraction of national territory, their so-called zones of influence" (Santos, 1993:89).

⁷ Since 1889, Brazil has been a federal republic, like the United States of America, divided into 26 states (territorial units with their own government).

⁸ The state of Rio Grande do Sul was studied in my doctoral thesis (Mascarenhas, 2001), on account of its particular characteristics within the Brazilian context: a championship bringing together many cities, with a wide geographical coverage, a phenomenon related to its urban network and other characteristics of the territory.

⁹ The following year, the national championship reduced the number of participants, satisfying the request of the Club of Thirteen, and avoiding greater problems (Helal, 1997). These thirteen clubs have more than ¾ of the Brazilian economy of football (Próni, 2000:230).

¹⁰ Boosted by the media, and the financial return with TV transmission rights, the Libertadores Cup acquired unprecedented importance in Brazil, which as a result radically improved its technical performance: winning 6 of the competitions held in this decade, compared with just two during the 1960s (exceptionally, thanks to Santos), 1 in the 1970s and 2 in the 1980s. Clubs began wanting to take part in this competition, which had formerly been undervalued and looked upon as violent, dishonest and economically of little interest: in 1966, 1969 and 1979, Brazilian clubs refused to take part in this competition alleging financial loss.

¹¹ Another example of the increase in extra-local scale is that of the FIFA world club championship the first of which took place in January 2000. We could also point to the greatly enlarged qualifying stages for the 2002 World Cup.

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