

Simon Martin, *Football and Fascism: The National Game Under Mussolini* (Oxford: Berg, 2005), ISBN 1859737005

Sport is an often overlooked aspect in the construction of nationality and nationalism. Despite E. J. Hobsbawm's observation that 'the imagined community of millions seems more real as a team of eleven named people' the role sport takes is under-researched.¹ In *Football and Fascism* Martin shows the complex relationship between the fascist regime in Italy and football. In doing so, he not only illuminates an under-researched area of fascism, but makes a welcome contribution to the research into sport and the formation of national identity. This is not to say that that Martin's work is solely focused on nationalism; he also demonstrates how Mussolini utilised the powerful symbolism of sport, Fascism and Ancient Rome to instil a potent image of Fascist Italy both at home and abroad.

The history of what is now the modern state of Italy began in the nineteenth century when the nation-builders of the *Risorgimento* sought to unite the peninsula. Prior to this the geographical area was filled with a collection of city-states encapsulating many forms of political administration ranging from Republic and Monarch to Oligarchy and Papacy. The challenge to unification ultimately led to extensive nationalism under the leadership of the Fascist Benito Mussolini. Mussolini utilised many tools to inspire national identity, including the symbols of Ancient Rome and extensive trans-national communication networks, but sport became a central tenet to his vision. Although he attempted to use other more 'dignified' sports such as fencing and boxing, he came to realise that football had the means to reach a wider audience.

Mussolini's approach entailed utilising history, language and geography to permeate the national and cultural politics of the time. Fascists argued that the origin of the game was *Calcio Fiorentino*, the mediaeval game played in Florence, which contrasted with the previous notion that it had been brought to Italy by English sailors. Ultimately, the word *calcio* was adopted for the sport, in opposition to most international derivatives of football. Furthermore, Mussolini created a national body to administer the sport and consolidated the regional leagues into a national league. Serie A was created and showed

¹ E. J. Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism Since 1780: Programme, Myth, Reality*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), p. 143.

football fans the extent of Italy's boundaries. Trieste became part of Italy in the post-World War I settlement and its inclusion in the newly formed league reinforced the fact that it was now part of Italy. The recently formed international competitions also provided an apposite opportunity to demonstrate Italy's image at home and abroad. The Italian national team won Olympic gold in 1928 and, six years later, Italy hosted the second World Cup, unsurprisingly winning at home, and then retained the title in France in 1938.

In our post-industrial age with permeable borders and increased migration it is sobering to see the same tropes surfacing as during the fascist regime. In 2004 the former Celtic and West Ham striker, Paolo Di Canio of Lazio blasted the Italian authorities for picking Mauro Camoranesi, an Argentine with Italian grandparents, for the Italian squad. Di Canio's criticism was somewhat ironic since he is a renowned admirer of Mussolini, and his idol employed the same tactic to ensure Italian domination in international football throughout the 1930s. Martin highlights the use of *oriundi* (first generation Italians from South America) in the 1934 World Cup to garner propaganda for the regime. So much importance was placed on winning the tournament that descendants of Italian migrants in South America were re-naturalised to ensure the best players were playing for the national team.

Central to Martin's research are the case studies of Bologna and Florence. Although this approach overlooks the success and role of clubs in the two industrial cities, such as Torino, Juventus, Milan and Internazionale (renamed *Ambrosiana* to remove the less nationalist sounding moniker), these studies show how fascism was used in regional areas to reinforce fascist identity. Martin also highlights the role of the local fascist parties in manipulating football. Local connections mattered. Not only was Mussolini born near Bologna, but the head of the Bologna Fascist Party was president of the newly formed league. Consequently, Bologna went on to win five league titles between 1929 and 1941. This success, as well as the newly built trans-*Apennine* railway linking the two cities, led Bologna and Florence to become rivals. In spite of severe nationalist policies, regional identities still came to the fore as is replicated today under the auspices of the European Union. This rivalry was not confined to affairs on the pitch, as the local communes instigated the construction of new stadia to symbolise their position. Martin does not reflect that these stadia could also become powerful symbols in a traditionally left wing

area of Italy, but they certainly do highlight the importance of the rival 'other' when constructing local identities.

Martin's study highlights the role sport and popular culture have had in shaping public opinions. Many of the themes addressed are analogous to contemporary society where identity formation is increasingly important as cultural identity, politics and global capital become inextricably linked. This argument is particularly apt in Italy today where the Prime Minister is also a media mogul and businessman who exploits football to enhance his image. Silvio Berlusconi owns AC Milan and utilises football rhetoric to politicise football and 'footballise' politics. Today, as in the days of fascism, football is intricately linked to Italian culture and through studies such as these, we can attempt to understand it.

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