

Awarded Citizenships and Fragile National Identities: A Study into Foreign Born Football Players Belonging and Identity

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Abstract

Football is often described to be a global game. This narrative is embodied through the Fédération Internationale de Football Association's (FIFA) World Cup tournament which consists of 32 national teams competing against each other for international glory. With FIFA being an international body, problems of global governance often spill over into its operations. The citizenship and identity of many players – often football royalty – has been a subject of many international tournaments. The problem this paper investigates is the fragile nature of national identity experienced by migrants focusing on the relationship of foreign-born or minority football players in the Men's game and their host national teams. This study's question considers how citizenship and national identity are structured and change towards certain migrants. This paper will make two central arguments: First, citizenship is likely to be granted to foreign-born football players and is motivated by nationalism. Second, the national belonging of the migrant football player in the broader public depends on the team's success. Two recent examples of final losses in the case of England and France show how nationality and belonging of minority players is attacked upon defeat.

Key Words: Citizenship, National Belonging, National, Nationalism, FIFA

Le football est souvent décrit comme un jeu mondial. Ce discours est incarné par le tournoi de la Coupe du monde de la Fédération internationale de football association (FIFA), qui voit s'affronter 32 équipes nationales pour la gloire internationale. La FIFA étant un organisme international, les problèmes de gouvernance mondiale se répercutent souvent sur ses activités. La citoyenneté et l'identité de nombreux joueurs - souvent des rois du football - ont fait l'objet de nombreux tournois internationaux. Le problème étudié dans ce document est la nature fragile de l'identité nationale vécue par les migrants, en se concentrant sur la relation entre les joueurs de football masculins nés à l'étranger ou appartenant à une minorité et leur équipe nationale d'accueil. La question de cette étude porte sur

la manière dont la citoyenneté et l'identité nationale sont structurées et évoluent à l'égard de certains migrants. Le présent document s'articule autour de deux arguments principaux : Premièrement, la citoyenneté est susceptible d'être accordée aux joueurs de football nés à l'étranger et est motivée par le nationalisme. Deuxièmement, l'appartenance nationale du joueur de football migrant dans le grand public dépend du succès de l'équipe. Deux exemples récents de défaites en finale dans le cas de l'Angleterre et de la France montrent comment la nationalité et l'appartenance des joueurs minoritaires sont attaquées en cas de défaite.

Mots clés : Citoyenneté, appartenance nationale, national, nationalisme, FIFA

Football is often described to be a global game. This narrative is embodied through the Fédération Internationale de Football Association's (FIFA) World Cup tournament which consists of 32 national teams competing against each other for international glory. With FIFA being an international body, problems of global governance often spill over into its operations. Particularly in relations to migration, with the most recent World Cup in Qatar having their preparations put under the microscope due to (mis)treatment of migrant workers. However, in addition to this, the citizenship and identity of many players – often football royalty – has been a subject of many international tournaments. FIFA maintains the authority to determine who, when, and under what conditions football players are eligible to play for a national team; However, FIFA has no control over who can acquire citizenship within a state (van Campenhout et al., 2018). That authority remains with the state. Nevertheless, international tournaments are increasingly seeing the countries competing being represented by players with “vague” connections to the badge on their chest (van Campenhout et al., 2019). This has raised debates about the representativeness of national teams and belonging to the nation of foreign-born players (van Campenhout et al., 2019). From this, van Campenhout et al. (2019) conclude that the World Cup has become more migratory with foreign-born players representing other countries being a common feature since the tournament's inception in the 1930s, additionally foreign-born players are increasingly representing national teams other than the one of their births, and countries of origin for foreign-born players has diversified overtime.

Despite this, reports of racial abuse and xenophobia are commonly placed towards minority players in international tournaments with players feeling as though they are nationals when victorious and foreigners in defeat. In this paper, I explore the puzzle that is the fragile nature of national identity experienced by migrants by focusing the relationship of foreign-born football players and their host national teams in the men's game. The question guiding this study considers how citizenship and national identity are structured and impact migrants. I make two central arguments: First, citizenship is likely to be granted to foreign-born football players and is motivated by nationalism. Second, the national belonging of foreign born or minority football players in the broader public is dependent on the

success of the team. I structure this article as follows: first, literature will investigate the discriminatory nature of citizenship and national identity with respect to unequal nation-states. Next, I review the migratory processes of international football stars and how these campaigns follow nationalistic tendencies. From this, I present examples of France and England to showcase how the national identity of foreign-born football players is dependent on success.

Hierarchical Citizenship within Migratory Movements:

To uncover the first claim of this paper that citizenship with respect to foreign-born football players is motivated by nationalism requires reviewing the structured nature of citizenship within the world of nation-states. Citizenship is a discriminatory institution in that as a citizen – or national – one enjoys privileges that are not available to non-citizens or non-nationals (Lui, 2004). Therefore, I suggest that the privilege of citizenship is subscribed to foreign-born footballers as they are symbols of national pride on the world stage.

Citizenship within modern democratic states has taken on a double meaning in that it denotes inclusion within a self-governing political community as well as signifies belonging within a specific national community (Castles, 2005). As a result, the citizen is also a national (Castles, 2005). While political citizenship is universal and inclusive, national belonging is often culturally specific and exclusive (Castles, 2005). This is attributed to the institutional structure of nation-states having most people being legally defined as citizens (Castles, 2005). Castles (2005) discusses the changing character of the nation-state and citizenship, focusing on how citizenship has been reshaped by new forms of international migration and how the meaning of citizenship has shifted away from universalism and equality to signify a position of unequal hierarchical order. For example, ethnic minorities and Indigenous peoples may have formal citizen rights, but are often excluded from the political and social fabric (Castles, 2005). This contradictory or hierarchical denotation of citizenship has been sharpened by globalization with unprecedented levels of cultural integration (Castles, 2005). Globalization has additionally transformed the kinds of migration in both sending and receiving countries – for example, technological advances allow migrants to maintain close links with their place of origin which has led to the

emergence of transnational communities (Castles, 2005). To this end, the post-Cold-War global order has led to the rise of a *hierarchical nation-state system* that is based on a singular superpower at its core (Castles, 2005). Similarly, this power of states is reflected by a hierarchy of rights and freedoms of each state's peoples—what Castles refers to as “hierarchical citizenship” (2005). Hierarchical citizenship puts forth that the possession of civil, social, and political rights of citizens is masked by a steep hierarchy. For example, a United States citizen enjoys a high set of formal rights, but there are exceptions to this rule with minorities facing discrimination and exclusion (Castles, 2005).

The obvious concern with the application of differentiated rights in societies is how it has led to perpetuating ethnic group differences and increased group inequalities rather than leading to equality for previously disadvantaged groups (Krasniqi, 2015). Gëzim Krasniqi investigates differentiated and hierarchical citizenship, particularly within the context of Kosovo. Krasniqi (2015) points out that despite the claim that liberalism provides universal citizenship and that the state is blind towards differences, various disadvantaged groups have been able to challenge the ethnic or cultural “neutrality” of liberal citizenship. Krasniqi additionally proposes of group-differentiated citizenship as a complement to the universal citizenship of liberal states. Differentiated citizenship advocates for the incorporation of members not as individuals, but as groups as an advancement for equality within liberal democracy (Krasniqi, 2015). There are cases whereby group-differentiated and multicultural policies have evened equality, however, they may also promote ethnic conflict, exacerbate division, and establish vested interest in group distinctions (Krasniqi, 2015). Otherwise put, the result may be an internally divided societies and states, where various groups enjoying a degree of rights and privileges within a pluralized differentiated citizenship (Krasniqi, 2015) – much like the status quo today.

I suggest that this division can occur between migrant groups as well. Similar to Castles' (2005) power of states reflecting hierarchy of rights and freedoms of each state's peoples, Wallerstein's (2004) world system theory contains a three-level-hierarchy of states: core, periphery, semi-periphery (Krasniqi, 2015). This suggests that some

groups form the core of the political system, while others are in the periphery or semi-periphery. Within the current nation-state system, this distinction in relation to migration would group foreign-born football players in the core vs migrant labourers in the periphery or semi-periphery. Krasniqi (2015) finds that the mixing of group-differentiation within the liberal state ideal in post-war Kosovo resulted in a hierarchical citizenship regime. This instance of group-differentiation can deepen group differences and divisions, ultimately establishing uneven citizenship (Krasniqi, 2015). Despite the legally enshrined principle of equality some communities in Kosovo occupy the core of the polity and society, while others are pushed to the periphery or semi-periphery (Krasniqi, 2015). To this end, citizenship is an ongoing process that is constructed historically with institutions primarily focusing on group belonging (Ng'weno & Aloo, 2019). I suggest that this has extended into international migration with groups of migrants – such as football players – experiencing different rights and privileges.

National Identity

The previous section identifies citizenship as a crucial marker of membership in a world of fluid boundaries (Cadler et al., 2010). This suggests that the institution of citizenship distinguishes between people based on members and outsiders by establishing a boundary around the community (Cadler et al., 2010). The access of this membership – or citizenship – can be acquired in two distinct ways: birth and migration. Citizenship by birth is either *jus soli* being born within state territory or *jus sanguinis* born to a parent who is already a citizen (Cadler et al., 2010). Citizenship by migration is often determined through relationship with a citizen (marriage) or by length of stay (Cadler et al., 2010). However, the migratory process of citizenship still requires crossing several complex spaces before coming a citizen – one of which is access to national identity (Cadler et al., 2010).

The boundary of national identity concerns the extent to which migrants become integrated into the nation (Cadler et al., 2010). Citizenship, in theory, is founded on the idea of a shared national identity that stabilizes its members, promotes social cohesion, stimulates democratic participation, and motivates citizens to

sacrifice for social justice demands (Cadler et al., 2010). The political reality is that migration has created a variety of sources of identity, making mutual recognition complex and problematic (Cadler et al., 2010). Otherwise put, the boundary of national identity can be either formally blocked by the state or informally by the hostility of resident populations (Cadler et al., 2010). I argue that the formal acceptance of national identity is placed on foreign-born footballers by the state for nationalistic purposes – World Cup success – additionally, the informal placement of national identity from resident nationals is dependent on the success of the squad.

FIFA, Citizenship, and Migration:

The 2018 FIFA Men's World Cup in Russia saw 84 football players compete for national teams outside of their country of origin (van Campenhout et al., 2019). This was the second highest World Cup with foreign-born footballers representing their host nations after the 2014 competition in Brazil (van Campenhout et al., 2019). In 2022, the World Cup in Qatar saw about 10% of players representing nations as foreign-born (Santamaria & Fusco, 2022).

Citizenship within FIFA

Historically, citizenship refers to the legal entitlement of membership to a country based on either *jus soli* (right of soil) or *jus sanguinis* (right of blood) (van Campenhout et al., 2019). In addition to this, citizenship can be acquired later in life through naturalization such as by marriage (*jus matrimonii*) or residence in a country (*jus domicilii*) (van Campenhout et al., 2019). In response to this, FIFA attempted to ensure national teams were symbols of nationalism and in 1962 introduced the following eligibility restrictions: “any person holding permanent nationality that is not dependent on residence in a certain country is eligible to play for the representative teams of the association of their country” (van Campenhout et al., 2019). However, in 2004, a growing number of players reported dual nationality, which forced FIFA to adjust this restriction. The new eligibility policy that followed was based on a “clear connection between footballers and the country they represent” (van Campenhout et al., 2019).

Nonetheless, despite these ruling football players connections with squads seem to be increasingly based in ((great) grand-) parental heritage, loyalty to clubs in domestic league (residence), or by way of marriage, rather than by birth (van Campenhout et al., 2019). Further, this points to the marketization of citizenship because of national governments involvement in fast-tracking citizenship to notable athletes – footballers among them (van Campenhout et al., 2019). Therefore, since FIFA has no eligibility in national citizenship procedures the migration histories and national citizenship policies of states has influence on the volume and diversity of foreign-born players that make up national squads in international tournaments (van Campenhout et al., 2019).

Wider Context of Football Migration

The commercialization of the footballer phenomena has led to a growing inflow of foreign-born players into domestic competition, particularly across Europe's top five leagues: English Premier League, Spanish La Liga, Italian Serie A, German Bundesliga, and French Ligue 1 (van Campenhout et al., 2018). This presence was initially restricted by national governments; however, it is now a norm that footballers move internationally for work – a form of labour migration (van Campenhout et al., 2018). This trend has transitioned from domestic to national club competition as players become eligible for citizenship abroad and represent the best nation during events such as the World Cup (van Campenhout et al., 2018).

The context of international football is different and more controversial than migration to compete in domestic leagues, as players can choose and, in some cases, do opt to switch their nationality and represent national teams around the world. One of the most controversial examples came in 2014 when Brazilian-born striker Diego Costa represented the Spanish National team after being eligible for Spanish citizenship through naturalization based on residency from playing in the Spanish domestic league – primarily for Atlético Madrid (van Campenhout et al., 2018). The controversial nature of this option is that the national teams is a symbolic representation of states (van Campenhout et al., 2018). Players, inevitably become associated with this national identity through representation.

Further, there appears imbalance between FIFA's eligibility regulations and countries national policies, leading to inequalities between a national team's pool of eligible players (van Campenhout et al., 2018). In other words, national policies on migration and citizenship control the influence of foreign-born players in national teams. For example, Japan and South Korea are stricter in providing citizenship to migrants, whereas countries like Canada and Australia are more open (van Campenhout et al., 2018). These national policies reflect the number of migrant footballers' national teams can pull from (van Campenhout et al., 2018). However, the complex nature of citizenship acquisition within FIFA's guidelines suggest analysis must go beyond birth destinations.

Migratory data might become adjusted for historical changes in boundaries, bloodline connections, and colonial relations (van Campenhout et al., 2018). In other words, global migration patterns and colonial/post-colonial identities help contextualize debates on citizenship and national identity in relation to migrant footballers (Oonk, 2020).

First, global migration patterns consider diaspora networks. Diasporic national football teams involve "the mother country" being active in recruiting attractive football players born in a foreign country with a connection to this motherland (Oonk, 2020). Two examples emerge as prominent: Italy in 1934 and Morocco in 2018. In both cases the motherland played an active role in recruiting players from its diaspora. In 1934, the Italian National team was victorious, and this success involved five players from the diaspora, not born in Italy, but in Argentina and Brazil (Oonk, 2020). Their recruitment was heavily influenced by the Prime Minister and National Fascist Party leader Benito Mussolini who encouraged the players to honour the Italian nation (Oonk, 2020). Referred to as "oriundi" – imported Italians – they reflected the Italian diaspora by speaking Italian and having two grand-parents born in Italy (Oonk, 2020). The Moroccan Football Federation actively recruited from their European diaspora, helping them qualify for the 2018 World Cup with 17 of 23 players being foreign-born (Oonk, 2020). Eight were from France, five from the Netherlands, two born in Spain, and the final two from both Canada and Belgium (Oonk, 2020). In total 20 of the 23 had dual citizenship

and could have played elsewhere (Oonk, 2020) suggesting that the efforts of the federation were key in convincing the players to play for Morocco.

Another distinction refers to how colonial and post-colonial realities reflect representation and suggests that colonial activities have exploited football talents. Talented players of the colonial periphery strived to play at the centre of the empire to improve their chance of playing in World Cup competition (Oonk, 2020). Portugal and France become clear examples of this. Portugal, by way of incorporating colonial players to national teams, and France, through colonial migrants (children of) emerging into the national team and French identity (Oonk, 2020).

In the 1950s, the Portuguese dictator Antonio de Oliveira Salazar wanted to show that the civilization missions in the colonies were a success. In an attempt to do so, he introduced colonial football talents into the national team (Oonk, 2020). At that time, Portugal lost 5-1 to arch-rival Spain and 9-1 to Austria and in Salazar's eyes, drastic changes were necessary, and incorporating colonial talent into the national team was a successful formula for him to bind the nation and increasing the chances of winning (Oonk, 2020). Eusébio da Silva Ferreria – one of the star colonial projects – would later declare that he was the de facto slave of Salazar, being completely dependent on him for his passport and travels, revealing another exceptional perspective on the relation among state, citizenship, and nationality (Oonk, 2020). Additionally, France took advantage of former colonial relations particularly with the World Champion squads of 1998 and 2018 being considered the most diverse teams to play in the World Cup (Oonk, 2020). From this, ideals of migration, diversity, and national identity became the heart of the public debate in France, as exemplified in the documentary 'Les Blues' (in 2010); 'Black, blanc, beur' ('black, white, Arab') was a major theme in the film and later became a slogan for the national team, which was not just 'diverse' but, particularly postcolonial (Oonk, 2020). In relation to the post-colonial reality of the 2018 squad, fresh off World Cup victory, popular South African comedian on American television, Trevor Noah, suggested that the World Champion French team was made up of African born players and he congratulated the African team on

winning the world championship, cheering in the studio, “Africa has won, Africa is world champion.” Oonk explains:

[Noah exclaimed “[I know that France has won, but I also recognize my African brother in the French team[“]. He explained that the African background of the players on the French national team made it possible for many African fans to identify with France. His performance was strongly criticized by the French ambassador to the United States, Gerard Araud. According to Araud, Noah had deprived the French team of French identity by referring to their African descent (Oonk, 2020).

This together calls in the idea of nation building and origins of the nation-state. Ernest Gellner and Benedict Anderson developed two contrasting theories to understand the emerging “nation states” in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. According to Gellner, nationalism is a necessary consequence of Europe’s transformation from an agrarian economy to an industrial capitalist society (Oonk, 2020). Alternatively, Benedict Anderson identifies the invention of print, the demise of religion, and the weakening of dynastic power as the key social and historical causes that explain the emergence of larger nation states (Oonk, 2020). This established the possibility for states to introduce a unifying language through their legal and educational systems establishing larger ‘imagined communities’ (Oonk, 2020). The idea of shared nationhood, according to Anderson, became an alternative justification of political power (Oonk, 2020). Elites and the media negotiate the terms of belonging and identity and consider common concepts within this discourse including “the imagined community,” “banal nationality” and “invented traditions” (Oonk, 2020). However, “no matter how ‘banal’ or ‘invented’ that identity may be, it is at the same time so powerful and real that some opinion leaders have argued that international football matches sometimes involve a war minus the shooting” – suggesting that nationalism gives shape to soccer loyalties (Oonk, 2020, p. 1050).

To this end, taken together these sections show how citizenship and national identity are structured along nationalistic narratives in relation to foreign-born soccer players. States are prone to use their institutional structure of citizenship and grant status for foreign-born

players to represent the nation on the world's stage. Further, this granting of citizenship is not only nationalistic, but also hierarchical, as foreign-born footballers are associated with the national identity of the state by representing the national team within international tournaments. This in turn makes foreign-born footballers not only citizens, but nationals as well. However, the next section will go on to showcase how this national identity is often only accepted in the public when players and teams are successful.

Fragile Identities in Defeat

I now turn my focus on how the national identity of the migrant or minority footballer is subject to change. I argue that the national belonging of the migrant or minority football player in the broader public is dependent on the success of the national team. This has been displayed in the finals of the last two international tournaments (Euro 2020 and World Cup 2022). The minority players of the losing team (England and France) have faced racist and xenophobic comments from the public.

England: Euro 2020

In July of 2021 – after being delayed for a year due to COVID-19 – Italy and England faced off in the Euro 2020 final. The game was decided on penalties, with Italy winning 3-2 after three English players missed crucial penalties. Jaden Sancho, Marcus Rashford, and Bukayo Saka were the players that missed and, in the days that followed, experienced waves of racist abuse online (Hassan & Adam, 2021). The three players all were born in England with migrant parents from Trinidad and Tobago (Sancho), St. Kitts and Nevis (Rashford), and Nigeria (Saka). The aftermath of the abuse these players received saw actors such as Prime Minister at the time Boris Johnson and Prince William – President of England's football Association – condemn the hateful comments towards the players (Hassan & Adam, 2021). Additionally, England Manager Gareth Southgate suggested that the abuse was “unforgivable” especially as the team has “been a beacon of light in bringing people together, in people being able to relate to the national team, and the national team stands for everybody” (Hassan & Adam, 2021).

This culture amongst English football fans been a common occurrence with other players such as Raheem Sterling – who was born in Jamaica – having faced racial abuse from the crowd and media (Hassan & Adam, 2021). This has left some who follow the team suggesting that English fans are “relying on Black English footballers to bring them glory as if they were their servants, then turning on them as soon as they fell short of their dreams” (Hassan & Adam, 2021). This example and quote show how racial abuse undermines the identity of English nationals when minority players miss crucial chances on the international stage.

France: World Cup 2022

In December of 2022, France lost to Argentina 4-2 on penalties. This similarity to the Euro 2020 final goes beyond the match and into the aftermath, as three French players were targeted with racial abuse (Hill, 2022). Kingsley Coman, Aurélin Tchouméni, and Randel Kolo Muani were subject to racial abuse following the loss (Hill, 2022). Coman was born in Paris, France to parents from Guadelupe, Tchouméni was born in Rouen, France and is of Cameroonian descent, Kolo Muani was born in Bondy, France and is of Congolese descent. This example additionally shows a case where a domestically born player's identity and value within the nation or community becomes questioned and attacked after a loss.

These abuses are far too common in the sport labelled “the beautiful game” with questions of nationality towards players in defeat disproportionately targeting minority players. This is not a new occurrence, but rather, a decades long issue. However, with increased online presence these abuses are more present within the public eye. Further, the two examples in this section together showcased how in defeat the placement of national identity from resident populations is often stripped.

Conclusion

As the attractiveness of football continues to stretch across the globe and the sport maintains its title as the global game, problems of global governance continue to be associated with its structure. Particularly in relation to migration with citizenship and national

identity having been subjects of international tournaments for decades. As a result, I considered how citizenship and national identity are structured and change towards certain players by focusing on foreign born and minority football players in the men's game.

The two central arguments of this paper are that: first, citizenship is likely to be granted to foreign-born football players and is motivated by nationalism. Second, the national belonging of the migrant football player in the broader public is dependent on the success of the team. These arguments are reflected in the literature by displaying the hierarchical nature of citizenship as an institution. States are prone to use their institutional structure of citizenship and grant status for foreign-born players to represent the nation on the world's stage.

Further, this granting of citizenship is not only nationalistic, but also hierarchical, as foreign-born footballers are associated with the national identity of the state by representing the national team within international tournaments. However, the second portion suggests that this national identity or belonging for the player by the public is dependent on success as the informal placement of national identity comes from resident nationals. Two recent examples of final losses in the case of England and France demonstrate how the nationality and belonging of minority players is attacked upon defeat with racist and xenophobic comments being directed to players with migrant roots. To this end, with dual citizenship being a commonality for many footballers world-wide and with many minority players on top teams experiencing racism and xenophobia, it raises the question as to whether more players will turn to play for their country of origin in future tournaments.

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