**Conference: "Soccer as a Global Phenomenon"**

**Event Report**

**Date:** April 14-16, 2016

**Location:** Tsai Auditorium, Harvard University, CGIS South, 1730 Cambridge Street, Cambridge, MA 02138

**Attendance:** Roughly 50 attendants per panel.

**Convenors:** Francesco Erspamer, Professor of Romance Languages and Literature; Cemal Kafadar, Vehbi Koç Professor of Turkish Studies, Department of History; and Mariano Siskind, Professor of Romance Languages and Literature – for the Weatherhead Initiative for Global History at Harvard University

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**Description:** The event opened on a welcome note by Professors Cemal Kafadar and Sven Beckert of Harvard University. The speakers introduced the panels and highlighted the relevance of a study of soccer and of sports for a deeper critical understanding of global history and of globalization. Soccer, an engine of globalization and a global industry in its own right, still derives much of its vitality from passions rooted in a sense of place and of community. The organizing theme of the conference is precisely this tension or modes of accommodation between the globalizing impulse and the tenacious appeal of local attachments, past and present, at the level of clubs, nations, regions, and continents.

The theme was explored in the context of six panels. The first two panels were chronologically defined and respectively dedicated to “Early History and Diffusion of the Game” and to “Soccer in the Age of Decolonization and Cold War.” To being with the first of these, charting the turn to professionalism in the sport and the rise of a meritocratic and modern outlook that freed soccer from British masculine Christianity, Professor Tony Collins of De Montfort University argued that there was nothing inevitable about the rise of soccer to globalism. Professor Thomas Adam of the University of Texas in turn discussed the intercultural transfer of soccer in the late nineteenth century, with a focus on the transmission from England to Germany and from England to Argentina. In both cases, the event was closely connected to educational reform and to the emphasis on self-determination – soccer being perceived as fostering agency disciplined by the need for cooperation. The first panel ended with Salmaan Mirza of Harvard University, whose work on soccer in the Ottoman Empire complicated the narrative about Christian and modernizing influences. Ottoman soccer was not necessarily a national culture –interest in the game rather came from a cosmopolitan Ottoman elite. Here soccer played into discourses of social reform, as an antidote to Oriental bodily weakness, and as an answer to larger political concerns about Ottoman decline. The comment was provided by Professor Maya Jasanoff of Harvard University, who raised the question of contingency in this history: what if Britain had not been the global hegemon? Why soccer not rugby? The answers highlighted the role of institutions and social class dynamics, the ingredients going into the rise of soccer being global hegemony, institutionalization, professionalization, and nations asserting modernity. Lest these factors overshadow the aesthetic aspect of soccer, the discussion also pointed to the emotions soccer can tap into, which wrap with civic ideology, nationalism, and modernity in a way rare to find in other walks of life. The discussion also took up the issue of gender: one of the chief motivating factors in the rise of soccer was to create a sphere that excludes women as of the 1890s and then again as part of backlash against women in the workforce after WWI.

Professor Robert Edelman of the University of California San Diego started off the second panel, which focused on the function of soccer in the Cold War era as a practice that both disrupted and reified political forces. The papers described western- and eastern-block countries using sports to show the domination of their ideologies but also as unique opportunities for exchange. Professor Todd Cleveland from the University of Arkansas showed the Portuguese national team using African players to whitewash its colonial nature, while the African players themselves viewed their stint as an opportunity for growth and learning. This interest convergence was also on display in the paper by Ingrid Bolivar Ramirez of the University of Wisconsin on the use of soccer by Latin-American authorities to pacify political dissent and foster intercultural exchange. These two papers also highlighted how sociopolitical factors of the day structured the blurring of national regional ethnic political identities, be it the new community arising from African players relocating to Portugal and projecting identities rooted in both places, or the Paraguayan and Colombian identities in constructed in Argentina. The paper by Temryss Xeli’tia Lane of UCLA took up the complicated question of national representation in the context of indigenous and national identity and decolonizing borders. After a comment by Professor Daren Graves of the Simmons School of Social Work, the panel addressed the tension in soccer as a possibility of emancipation but also simultaneously as a means of social control.

The theme of Panel 3 was “Globalization and Soccer.” It mainly addressed the relation between the history of soccer and the history of globalization. The panel opened with a mini-keynote by Professors Richard Giulianotti and Roland Robertson of the universities of Loughborough and Pittsburg, respectively, whose work was cited by most of the applicants to the conference. Robertson insisted on the cultural dimension of globalization, largely neglected in accounts thereof, as it entails a mixture of global and local scales. Giulianotti argued for the profound utility of the notion of “glocalization” – signifying the complex interdependencies between the local and the global – in historical and anthropological terms, and showed how the concept may be useful to a history of soccer. Professor Heidi Voskuhl of the University of Pennsylvania addressed the global and gender dimensions in soccer and their mediation in film. Tarek Abu Hussein of Harvard University discussed the global and local significance of a visit by Pele, the global face of the sport, to Beirut, Lebanon. On the global level, the visit came in the context of the Cold War as well as the Cola wars. On the local level, the invitation was extended in the context of rivalries between local political factions for the purpose of fundraising and recognition. Professor Agbenyega Adedze of Illinois State University presented the iconography of soccer on African stamps, linking each of the sport and the postage stamp to the phenomenon of globalization, and finally Luis Guilherme Porto Rocha of the University of Sao Paulo discussed the role of a transnational elite in tying the fates of Brazilian foreign policy in the Cold War to the election of a FIFA president. The comment was offered by Professor Mariano Siskind of Harvard University.

Building on the theme of globalization, the fourth panel treated of “Migration: South to North and North to South.” Professor Sine Agregaard of Aarhus University in Denmark studied the recruitment of African women to Scandinavian clubs, Paul Darby of Ulster University wrote about the immobility constraining players in soccer academies in Ghana, and Can Evren of Duke considered the Europeanization of soccer from Europe’s periphery. The discussant professor Stephen Ortega of Simmons College compared the three papers by resorting to postcolonial themes decentering Europe and highlighting the significance of imagination as a driver or motivation for migratory processes.

Panel 5 was entitled “Soccer’s Place in Urban Space.” It was opened by Public Works Studio in the persons of Abir Saksouk-Sasso and Nadine Bekdache, who discussed the communal making of informal soccer fields in Beirut by youth defying the language of property in the face of a government-backed real-estate sector’s encroachment on shared places in the city. Similar dynamics are at play in the case of a new stadium built in Mexico’s Monterrey, discussed by Heron Gomez of the National Autonomous University of Mexico. Professor Devanathan Pathasarathy of the Indian Institute of Technology traced the connections between soccer and class in the cities of Mumbai, Singapore, and Bangkok. The connections of place and local popular culture as they impact young soccer players in Africa were the subject of two papers by Tarminder Kaur of the University of the Free State in South Africa and Professor Olutayo Adesina of the University of Ibadan, Nigeria. The comment was offered by Professor Judith Grant Long of the University of Michigan.

Finally, the last panel was dedicated to the politics of fandom. As per the paper by Professor Tamar Rapoport of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem and Daniel Regev of Tel-Aviv University, soccer clubs in Israel stand for liberal and anti-liberal political stances. Dispute over the representation of the city of Shanghai by rival clubs was discussed by Professor Yannan Ding of Shanghai Jiao Tong University. As discussed by Yagmur Nuhrat of Istanbul Bilgi University, fans stood for ethical stances on the structure of the sport in Istanbul. Professor Pablo Alabarces of the University of Buenos Aires mined soccer cheers by clubs in Argentina and Brazil to unearth entrenched political tensions. And finally, writer Nick Davidson portrayed the fans of St. Pauli as anarchist-leaning local activism against capitalist globalization. The comment by Professor Francesco Erspamer of Harvard University reflected on the consequences of an academic study of the sport and the possibilities of preserving the aesthetic dimension in the face of institutionalization, commercialization, and scholarly scrutiny. The discussion that followed also debated the impact of sport tourism and virtual social networks on soccer fandom.

Both Thursday and Friday nights were marked by a dinner for conference participants at the Charles Hotel in Cambridge. The dinners featured presentations about Olympiacos soccer club and its activities in the support of Syrian refugees in Greece. Leslie Osborne delivered a first Keynote on Thursday, raising the issue of the US national soccer team for women, who are currently struggling to be paid equally with the men, although they have recently performed better in the international arena and effectively generate more revenue. Friday night, the attendants were moved by the account of soccer great Christian Karembeu, who told the story of his growing up in New Caledonia and the vital role of the island’s spirit, and the support of his family, in his success. Karembeu speech was a reminder of just how truly global and diverse soccer is.