



Peter Stankovic

Sport and Nationalism: The Shifting Meanings of Soccer in Slovenia

The different meanings attributed to the game of soccer in the recent decades in Slovenia are more than a reflection of the variable fortunes of Slovenian clubs and its national team. From this point of departure the author scrutinizes the most important shifts in the meaning of soccer in the country, arguing that these have more to do with existing relations of power between Slovenia's ethnic majority and minorities, rather than with the game itself. The radical devaluation of soccer in the period between the late 1960s and late 1990s, for instance, could be interpreted as a means of saving the emerging Slovenian nationalist discourse from its threatening inconsistencies, whilst also legitimizing the existing ethnic cleavages in the Slovenian society. By now, its implications for inter-ethnic relations in Slovenia are no less important: Although the national team was to a significant extent comprised of first – or second generation immigrants, the Slovenian nationalist discourse almost completely disregarded this fact, and appropriated their success as a sign of typically "Slovenian" vitality.

Sociology has undergone so many transformations in recent decades that it would be certainly quite difficult to find a common denominator of all these. And yet, it is hard not to notice that many of these transformations are in one way or another linked to sociologists' growing interest in the part of human society, which is basically related to the sphere of private life, leisure, consumption, popular culture, in short, to everything outside of the sphere of production. Reasons for this new focus vary of course but for the purposes of this paper it should suffice to say that it is probably linked to the growing importance of this sphere in the lives of many people, primarily in the sense that their identities seem to be less and less determined by their positions in the production process, and correspondingly, increasingly more with their leisure activities and consumerist choices. Besides that, there have been also several important changes in the academic environment of sociology precisely in this direction, which probably also contributed to the sociologists' increasing awareness of the importance of the sphere outside of their more traditional interests. Cultural studies, for instance, emerged as a new, exiting trans-disciplinary framework for academic research of popular culture, making a strong point in sense that any serious encounter with contemporary social reality cannot neglect the realities of consumerist spectacles in media-saturated postmodern societies.

In any case, when more systematic research of popular culture took place in sociology, it soon covered most heterogeneous segments of this broad field from most diverse perspectives. Sport, topic of this paper, is a good case in point. Theorists who are trying to grasp this phenomenon and to explain its increasing popularity produce many different interpretations, some appropriating already established theoretical traditions in sociology and applying them to the case of sport, others using more recent theoretical advances, not necessarily of strict sociological origin. Examples of the former

would be appropriations of certain standard arguments made by Marx, for instance that "sports have taken over the function in advanced capitalist societies that Marx believed religion fulfilled in the nineteenth century – 'an opiate of the masses'" (Jhally, 1989: 70), or frequent references made to the body of work Norbert Elias has produced, who claimed that reasons for increasing enjoyment in excitements and tensions engendered by physical contests lie in the fact that people in contemporary, "advanced" societies have to be able to maintain a fairly even and stable control over their more spontaneous and emotional impulses, meaning that the leisure sphere have to provide enclaves within which a controllable and enjoyable decontrolling of restraints on emotions is permitted. According to Elias, sport is in this respect a case in point par excellence (Elias and Dunning, 1986: 96). On the other hand, a good example of employment of more recent theoretical advances would be Sut Jhally's attempt to understand sports/media complex (as he calls it) by using the Richard Johnson's model of "circuit of culture" (compare: Jhally, 1989).

While these interpretative frameworks deliver useful analytical tools for understanding sport, I would like to approach the phenomenon from a slightly different angle. Basically, I would like to proceed from two points. The first one is that sport, just as any other human activity, is full of different *meanings*, and the second one that these meanings are as a rule related to different power struggles within societies. Let me elaborate shortly on these two points. In regards to the issue of meaning it should be stressed at the beginning that this does not refer so much to the obvious fact that sport, as we know it today, basically derives from its ancient Greek predecessor, which embodied rather particular values of that time and place (for example, adoration of trained body and physical strength, conviction that physical health and skill prove man's capacity for responsible positions in society etc. (compare: Miller and McHoul, 1998: 65), as to the fact that our relationship towards sport is always mediated through various meanings which we ascribe to our bodies, to the notions of health, competition, success, etc., which all in turn derive from wider interpretative frameworks existing in a particular culture. Trying to understand this complex dynamics is certainly far from easy, but on the other hand an attempt to discern ways in which different meanings are inscribed in sport is a rather promising point of departure for its study, since it enables us to understand how sport is related to various wider social processes, concerns, anxieties etc.

However, the analytical framework of this paper is not the issue of meaning as such, but rather its relationship with the question of power relations within the society. Here I refer to an argument, explicated by various critical theorists, that human societies are structured around the various social hierarchies (of class, gender, race, ethnicity etc.), and to the related observation that if we allow for this argument (it is difficult to see how one could not do so), we have to allow also for the related claim that the meanings we operate with are not some kind of "natural" meanings emerging out of the essences of things themselves, but rather historically contingent constructs legitimizing and naturalizing the existing distribution of social power. This is basically an argument explicated by many leftist intellectuals in various ways, from more crude claims about the pervasive influence of ideology, which prevents people to see their "objective" interests, to more sophisticated, post-Gramscian arguments about the hegemonic discourse, which necessarily invokes a totalizing reduction of the infinite play of the meaning (compare: Torfing, 1999: 114). While I do not think that struggles over meanings are the only concern of sociologists, it nevertheless seems to me that attempts to understand

the dynamics of these processes promise to deliver interesting insights into the nature of our social environment, so I will apply this general analytical framework to a specific case, the history of shifting meanings of soccer in Slovenia. Looking at the dramatic changes of symbolic connotations of this game in recent decades in Slovenia, one cannot resist wondering whether these are really just a reflection of changing fortunes of Slovenian clubs and, later, of its national team. I shall argue that these changes, instead, reflect the existing relations of power in Slovenia, more precisely, the relations of power between its ethnic majority and various minorities. But before I elaborate on these issues, let us take a short look at the history of soccer in Slovenia and try to see how exactly the meanings attached to this game changed through the decades.

The shifting meanings of a game

Basically, there are three periods in Slovenia's more recent history, which have produced distinctly different meanings of the game of soccer. The first one spans roughly from the first decades of the 20th century, when the game was introduced in the country, to the late 1960s. The main characteristic of this period is that the meanings of soccer in Slovenia varied very little from those it had or still has in basically any other European country (or, as we will see, in any other of former Yugoslavian republics). Soccer was understood as popular entertainment, which enables the spectacle of physical capacities as well as of technical skills of the players, that is, as a game which is fun to play and fun to watch. It is difficult to judge in retrospect, but it probably could be argued that if soccer was not the most popular sport at the time in Slovenia, than it certainly was at least one of the most popular ones (compare: Batagelj: 2002).¹

Things changed quite dramatically, though. In the late 1960s and even more in the 1970s, soccer became increasingly unpopular, not only in a sense that fewer and fewer spectators turned up for the matches and that youngsters started to join other kinds of sports, but also in a sense that soccer became literally a synonym for a game which does little else than stimulate the lowest of human instincts (anger, hate, mindful passion, quasi-orgasmic joy when a goal is scored, etc.). According to this new popular discourse, what else could be expected from the game in which 22 fanatics run after a piece of round leather for 90 minutes? Correspondingly, the players also quickly lost most of their previous good esteem, and in the eyes of the majority of Slovenians² gained an unenviable reputation of being an archetype of "stupidity".

This situation lasted roughly until the second half of the 1990s, when, somehow in line with the incredible successes of the Slovenian national team³ (and, in one season, of local club Maribor), soccer acquired a whole new set of meanings. As successful performances of the Slovenian team during the qualifications for Euro 2000 and the tournament itself culminated, only to be continued at the World Cup 2002 qualifications, in Slovenia soccer became a completely different game: once small and reluctant groups of soccer supporters grew into armies of devoted and fanatical fans, soccer regained its previously lost media attention (compare: Plesec and Doupona – Topiã, 20002, 17), players suddenly became not only instant national heroes, but also highly respected sportsmen, received by the president of the republic and interviewed by the most distinguished national journals. Not to mention the more than euphoric celebration after the successful play-off against Romania, which allowed Slovenia to qualify for the 2002 world cup, when tens of thousands of Slovenians rushed to the airport to welcome the national team returning from Bucharest, causing a complete traffic collapse, and the fact that next morning no fewer than 17 trucks had to be employed to take away the garbage (mostly

broken glass) from a square in Ljubljana where the most attended public broadcasting of the game had been organized. In short, in the late 1990s soccer not only regained its previously lost reputation; it actually achieved an unprecedented popularity verging on becoming the most important point of national identification.

Most likely, given the relatively unsuccessful appearance of Slovenian national side at the World Cup 2002 finals itself, the fourth period with new meanings of soccer will follow soon, but at the time of writing the paper it is simply too early to tell anything certain about this. Accordingly, I will limit my discussion to the analysis of the three periods mentioned above.

In this context, the question, which begs to be raised, is apparent: how could these rather dramatic changes of the meaning of soccer be interpreted? The most obvious possibility is to argue that these changes only reflect the changing fortunes of Slovenia's national team and its most important clubs. After all, it is quite common in sporting events that when competitors perform well, attention arises correspondingly. However, as much as this factor may have played a significant role, things are not that simple. For example, while the revival of soccer's popularity in the late 1990s could be attributed in many respects to the successful performances of the national team, the dramatic loss of popularity and reputation of this game in Slovenia only a couple of decades earlier did not reflect the changes in successes of local clubs.⁴ These were not particularly successful neither before the radical decrease of the game's popularity during the 1970s, nor after that time (until the second half of the 1990s, at least). It seems that something more was involved.

Sport as a marker of difference

Discussing sports, Pierre Bourdieu claims that this is one of the spheres of human activity where different class relations are not only played out, but actually legitimized and naturalized through various strategies of "symbolic violence". To substantiate his claim, Bourdieu (1995) offers many different arguments and examples, including his explanation of differences between the ways of engaging in sports between workers on the one hand, and members of the middle and upper classes, on the other. While workers engage in sports basically only when they are young, as a means of spontaneous squandering of excess of physical (and sexual) energy, "bourgeois" sports are practiced for physical maintenance and social profit, far beyond youth (Bourdieu, 1995: 353). The point is that engaging in sports beyond the entry into adulthood serves to emphasize that members of the middle and upper classes do not have physically demanding jobs, but rather more prestigious, intellectual ones, which, among other benefits, allow for spare time and physical energy which are needed for healthy recreation. Bourdieu is actually quite thorough in his claims about the nature of sport as a means of expressing class distinctions. For instance, he even argues that the very *origins* of sport, as we know it today, could be explained basically in terms of class relations. For instance, folk games were reorganized by elites in 19th century Britain according to an aristocratic philosophy of amateurism, that is, sports became a

disinterested practice, a finality without end, analogous to artistic practice, but even more suitable than art for affirming the manly virtues of future leaders: sport was conceived as a training in courage and manliness, "forming the character" and inculcating the "will to win", which is the mark of the true leader, but a will to win within the rules. The latter is "fair

play", conceived as an aristocratic disposition utterly opposed to the plebeian pursuit of victory at all costs (Bourdieu, 1995: 343).

Despite Bourdieu's rather narrow focus on the class dimensions of sports, which makes at least some of his arguments quite inappropriate for analysis of Slovenian situation, his basic insistence on the importance of understanding the relations of power behind various leisure activities is, nevertheless, a more than useful point of departure for our purposes. Namely, if looked at from this broader perspective, the shifting meanings of soccer in Slovenia turn out to be exactly what Bourdieu has said: a means of naturalizing the uneven distribution of social power between different social groups. The only difference with respect to Bourdieu's arguments is that the relations of power, which matter in this specific case, are not those of class, but of ethnicity. This is due to the fact that differences between social classes were in Slovenia during the era of socialism (as probably in any other former socialist country) substantially diminished, while ethnic divisions, officially non-existent in a supposedly conflict-free socialist society, not only remained intact, but actually provided a source for the most important social antagonisms as the era of socialism drew to its end (culminating in the re-emergence of a euphoric nationalism in the late 1980s and the declaration of Slovenia's independence). To understand how ethnic divisions provided the basis for the shifting meanings of soccer we must review the ethnic situation in Slovenia.

After the dissolution of Austro-Hungary at the end of WW I in 1918, Slovenians and Croats (until then two subordinated nations in this multi-national empire), joined the Serbs (member of the winning alliance) to form a new state, Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenians (in 1929 renamed Yugoslavia), under the leadership of the Serbian king.⁵ Although Slovenians felt at the beginning that their national identity was secure in this alliance with other southern Slav nations, their fears (to a significant extent based on relative smallness of this nation – it never had more than 2 million inhabitants), started to grow again when the Serbs made sure that they controlled most of the power in this new state.

While things changed after the WW II, when communists under the charismatic leadership of Tito (half Croat, half Slovenian) took power, granting a relatively high degree of autonomy to all nations due to the federal nature of the state, Slovenian dissatisfaction with living in Yugoslavia started to grow stronger again in the late 1960s and 1970, basically for two reasons. The first one concerns Slovenia's uniqueness in Yugoslavia in economic terms. As the most northwestern of the former federal republics, Slovenia historically more than any other former republic participated in the process of modernization (in Western Europe) and was, therefore, economically the most advanced one. The problem arose when Slovenians became increasingly convinced that living with other southern Slav nations only inhibits further economic growth. The compulsory institution of aiding less developed republics' through regular donations of a part of the annual GDP, for example, did little to prevent such suspicions among many Slovenians. Second, as economically the most advanced republic, Slovenia also attracted many immigrants from other Yugoslav regions⁶, whose increasing presence helped revive older Slovenian concerns for their fragile national identity. Combination of these two factors gradually revived Slovenian nationalism, which culminated in 1991 with the declaration of independence.

But as nationalist sentiments gradually grew in Slovenia since late 1960s and 1970s, they simply could not be expressed in politics, not only because in socialist country national problems were supposed to be transcended (according to Marx, nationalism is nothing but a bourgeois ideology), but also because federal and socialist Yugoslavia was comprised of many estranged nationalities, which forced the communist rulers to eliminate from official politics all traces of a nationalist discourse.⁷ However, nationalism found its way of expressing itself in other areas of social life: in culture, economy, religion, and, last but not least, in sports.

Before examining this development more precisely, I would like to stress that I do not want to say here that nationalism as some pre-existing essence simply found its expression in sports in times when it had no or very limited access to politics, but rather that Slovenian national identity, is nothing but a contingent, historically specific, and relational construct (see: Woodward, 1997), which only emerged through various symbolic negotiations across different areas of public life in more recent history. In fact, the case of Slovenian nationalism could be presented as a quite good example of the transitional and historically contingent nature of national identities.

More specifically, Slovenian national identity turns out to be nothing "eternal", neither in terms of how old Slovenian national "self-awareness" actually is, nor in terms of what actually comprises the essence of "Slovenia-ness". In respect to the former it should be pointed out that Slovenian nationalist sentiments basically originate in liberal intellectual circles active around 1800, which suggests that this is a rather new phenomenon; but the historical, contingent and relational nature of Slovenian national identity becomes boldly apparent only in terms of the latter, the question of the supposed essence of "Slovenia-ness". When the Slovenian national movement sought independence from the Austrian (later Austro-Hungarian) empire in the 19th century, "Slovenia-ness" was essentially understood by Slovenians in terms of their Slavic (and not Germanic) origins, which should allow them living with other "brotherly" Slavic nations (which actually happened after 1918 in Yugoslavia). But when Slovenians grew dissatisfied with living together with other southern Slav nations in the second half of the 20th century, the Slovenian national "essence" quickly changed in the eyes of Slovenians, acquiring several new qualities, most of them linked to features stereotypically known as "Austrian" (a sense for order, work, cleanliness, responsibility, etc.).

What we see here is, therefore, a very nice example of the relational nature of national identities: Slovenian identity, as understood in the Slovenian national discourse, does not derive from some trans-historical essence of Slovenians as such, but rather something which is determined by historically contingent relations of identifications and differentiations. When trying to distance themselves from other southern Slav nations in the former Yugoslavia, Slovenians constructed an identity, which was not only substantially different from the earlier one (Slovenia-ness as a variant of a common southern Slav identity), but it was also strikingly similar to the one they tried to distance themselves from not even a century ago. Thus, what we have here is not some trans-historical essence of Slovenian national identity, but rather an example proving that the only "eternal" thing in identities is their contingent, ever-changing nature.

So, how exactly was the new Slovenian identity constructed and what was the role of soccer? When Slovenian nationalism was revived in the late 1960s and 1970s, the supposedly eternal essence of Slovenia-ness was newly

constructed, to a significant through various symbolic gestures, which were employed to emphasize the difference between Slovenians and other nations comprising socialist Yugoslavia. I would argue that the most important symbolic gesture in this respect was the construction of a new Slovenian national identity basically in terms (or more precisely, symbols) of just one particular Slovenian region, *Gorenjska*. This might sound unusual, but, in fact, it is not. One only has to bear in mind that the peculiarities of this region – with respect to other Slovenian regions – in quite plain and condensed manner symbolize the peculiarities of Slovenia as a whole in Yugoslavia: it is one of the most northern regions in Slovenia, it is economically most advanced, its towns are clean and neat, inhabited by hard-working people who do not like to spend time doing anything not really practical, its countryside is dominated by beautiful mountains and, last but not least, here originates Slovenian ethno-pop music. In other words, since *Gorenjska* represents in Slovenia everything Slovenia represented in Yugoslavia (the most northern, most economically advanced republic, whose scenery is dominated by the Alps, populated by hard-working people, etc.), its stereotyped signs (diligence, cleanness, tidiness, economic well-being, mountains, etc.) became a focal point of organizing the content of new "Slovenian-ness" (irrespective that this content is in rather striking contrast to the one serving as a backbone for Slovenian nationalism in the 19th century).

And this is where sports finally come in. Since *Gorenjska* is a predominantly mountainous, alpine region, sports, which were traditionally practiced here, are basically alpine winter sports (ice hockey, alpine skiing, ski-jumps, mountaineering, climbing, etc.). When Slovenian nationalism entered a period of its intense revival in the late 1960s and 1970s, sporting activities traditionally practiced only in this region (with a notable exception of mountaineering, which was quite popular even before⁸) therefore suddenly became something each Slovenian should engage in. In a very short period alpine sports became incredibly popular, consequently not only did Slovenians lose much of their interest in other sports⁹, but the sheer quantity of Slovenians engaging in these alpine sports produced several excellent sportsmen and women, who achieved remarkable successes on the international competitive level, which only served to fuel further Slovenian attachment to alpine sports.

In other words, Slovenian fascination with winter sports is not something natural or coincidental, but rather an important part of the historically specific articulation of Slovenian nationalism. Without access to official politics, Slovenian nationalist sentiments found their way in many other areas of public life; sports, because of its wide popular appeal in modern societies, is one of the most important ones. What mattered in this context is not only the usefulness of winter sports as a means of accentuating Slovenian *peculiarity* in Yugoslavia, (these sports were never present at any substantial degree in any other former republic – at least until that time), thus legitimizing firstly reluctant, but soon ever more determined claims of Slovenians for independence, but also that these sports proved to be very useful as a means of emphasizing supposed Slovenian *superiority* with respect to other nations of socialist Yugoslavia. As any other nationalist discourse, the Slovenian one was full of presumptions about the nation's superiority.

This last observation is important: it does not only explain the meaning of alpine sports for Slovenians at the time (something like living proof of their supposed superiority), it also helps us understand the dramatic decrease of soccer's popularity. One of the most common features of a nationalist discourse is that it is based on the processes of marking the difference (Woodward, 1997:

9), and that one of the most emphasized elements of this difference is a supposed superiority of a particular national identity with respect to identities it is constructed against (usually other nations). Therefore, it should be understood that to preserve the consistency of the Slovenian nationalist discourse, the troubling fact of never having been really good at soccer had to be eliminated. Obviously, this could not be resolved "pluralistically", admitting that each nation is good in some sports, since it would only contradict the nationalist assumption about Slovenian superiority. What has happened, therefore, was a simple evasion of the problem through dramatic alteration of the meaning of soccer. Consequently, soccer in Slovenia acquired a set of extremely pejorative meanings in the 1970s, most of them deriving from the supposed essential "stupidity" of the game.

This solution to the problem threatening the consistency of the Slovenian nationalist discourse at the time is actually quite interesting (though probably not unique): it shows how incredibly pragmatic a nationalist discourse can be. In the name of marking the difference, the history and tradition of Slovenian soccer was all but forgotten in a matter of few years. But if we return to Bourdieu's arguments, we should note that the importance of this shift of meanings of soccer lies not only in fact that it contributed significantly to the articulation of a new Slovenian nationalism. One of the consequences of this shift, certainly not entirely unintentional, is also that it contributed to the fixation and naturalization of the relations of power between ethnic groups inside of Slovenia, more specifically, relations between "true" Slovenians and immigrants from other Yugoslav republics. The latter were attracted by Slovenia's relative economic prosperity and at the beginning they were received by Slovenians quite well (basically in accordance with the official socialist ideology of "brotherhood and unity"). However, as their numbers in Slovenia increased (reaching about 10 per cent of the population at the peak of their immigration in the 1980s), the attitudes of many Slovenians changed. Slovenians, suspected that a substantial immigration from other federal republics threatened their cultural uniqueness in Yugoslavia, and in response they produced a new nationalism, one essentially based on pronouncing the differences between themselves and the "Southerners" (as the immigrants were also called¹⁰) As much as the rise of Slovenian nationalism could be understandable in this context, it also produced certain problematic effects, most obvious among them various forms of exclusion of immigrants from other republics. In fact, immigrants were actually never discriminated against in any systematic or official manner (until Slovenia's secession in 1991 it would have been quite impossible), but widespread prejudice and chauvinist stereotypes arising from this new nationalist discourse,¹¹ nevertheless, helped produce and sustain several real social divisions, which put immigrants to disadvantageous positions in many respects.

The role of soccer should be understood in this context: its degraded status was not only a consistent within the Slovenian nationalist discourse, but also a successful symbol of legitimizing and naturalizing of the existing inequalities between "natives" and immigrants. Playing soccer in leisure time, watching it on television, attending matches, or decorating cars with small flags of clubs for instance, were practices of immigrants who were convinced that they were doing something the whole world was doing, thus, understanding their love for the game also as a sign of their cosmopolitanism. Actually, however, what happened in Slovenia at that time is that these activities only fueled the conviction of many Slovenians that the immigrants were not as "civilized" as they were, and that, a "different" treatment of immigrants is not necessarily entirely inappropriate. As the results of the research carried out by Plesec and

Topic – Doupona suggest (see: Plesec and Topic – Doupona, 2002, 51), certain rather bold "physical" dimensions of soccer helped when it was appropriated as a sign of cultural backwardness (the signifier "physical" acquires its meaning as an opposite of "psychological" or "intellectual"), but since this slightly "rude" "physical" element of soccer seems unproblematic in countries where soccer is appreciated, it is obvious that the pejorative meanings of soccer in Slovenia do not derive from some supposedly "stupid" essence of the game, but rather from its function in the nationalist discourse as one of the focal points of marking and sustaining the differences between Slovenians and immigrants.

No matter how well these changed meanings of soccer functioned inside of Slovenian nationalist discourse, and no matter how desirable their practical effects (reproduction and legitimization of the symbolic and practical exclusions of immigrants) were for many Slovenians, the fact remains that this appropriation of the meaning of soccer was based on a troubling and unresolved contradiction. Namely, the Slovenian nationalist discourse appropriated soccer as a signifier of cultural backwardness, that is as a negative proof of Slovenia's cultural superiority with respect to other Yugoslav regions (dismissed in Slovenia as nothing but an uncivilized "Balkan"). However, since soccer originates and remains extremely popular exactly in those countries Slovenians idolize and think they essentially belong to (Europe – in a sense of the "civilized" West), there seems to be a substantial inconsistency at work. How did the Slovenian nationalist discourse cope with it?

The return of the forgotten son

At first sight it would seem that at least until the second half of the 1990s the Slovenian nationalist discourse was never really troubled by the contradiction between Slovenia's essential "European-ness" and soccer's popularity in (Western) Europe. Soccer in Slovenia was predominantly forgotten and devalued, functioning as kind of cultural reservation where immigrants, workers and other groups from the margins of society, wasted their energy. This neglect of the contradiction in one of the symbolic centers of the nationalist discourse is quite interesting – it highlights again how endlessly pragmatic nationalist discourses can be.

However, when the Slovenian national soccer team started to perform quite successfully in the late 1990s, and when soccer correspondingly started to attract increasing attention, it became clear that evading the contradiction had never been something really convincing, at least for many Slovenians. Euphoric outbursts of soccer fanaticism, which followed the national team's success, prove that no matter how pragmatic, the nationalist discourse could be really convincing even for the proudest members of a nation only if it could be legitimized through important symbolic focal points, which have at least some substantial *inter*-national recognition. The devaluation of soccer in the 1970s in Slovenia was very useful as one of the means of producing contemporary Slovenian nationalism; however, since it was meaningful to Slovenians only and since it consequently lacked at least some wider reference or recognition, it soon became obvious not only that this was just a temporal solution, but also that it the convincingness of the Slovenian nationalist discourse was to survive, other symbols must be introduced. It would have been interesting to see which ones, however, given the unexpected success of the Slovenian national soccer team, it turned out that other symbols were not needed. Instead, soccer retained its important position in the construction of a national mythology, but this time with entirely different connotations (e. g., Slovenian soccer as proof of the

incredible vitality of a small nation, its homogeneity, cooperation, solidarity, etc.).

One question to be raised: what are the political implications of this second shift of the meanings of soccer in Slovenia? As we have seen, the shift in the 1970s could be understood in political terms as a regressive one – it only served to reproduce the inequalities between an ethnic majority and minority in the country. But could the same hegemonic implications be found in this second shift?

This time situation seems to be more ambiguous. To understand the more complex implications of contemporary soccer in Slovenia, a very important detail should be pointed out first: many members of the Slovenian national team, who have performed splendidly since the late 1990s, are immigrants, or, more often, second-generation immigrants from other former Yugoslav regions (about one half of the current team members are of recent immigrant origin¹² – a proportion exceeding substantially the proportion of people of recent immigrant origin in Slovenia). This detail is important since it draws attention to another fascinating inconsistency in the nationalist discourse. The (national) team, which has contributed so much to the continuation of Slovenian nationalism since the late 1990s, is actually a team comprised to a significant extent of exactly those, *against* whom contemporary Slovenian nationalism was actually aimed. This inconsistency is not interesting in purely theoretical terms; it is actually very funny to see euphoric supporters of the Slovenian national team chanting assertively on matches, "*Mi, Slovenci!*" ("We, Slovenians!"), when at least one half of a team, which gives rise to such outbursts of national pride, is not only of apparent non-Slovenian origin, but is even comprised of those who are strongly detested by Slovenian nationalists.¹³

So, how could be all this interpreted? Obviously, in the context of the apparent paradoxes and inconsistencies attached to the recent revival of soccer in Slovenia, the political implications are far from simple. On the one hand, it should be noted that the fact that many immigrants have contributed substantially to the success of Slovenian soccer, did produce at least some softening of the widespread prejudices against them among a Slovenian majority. Therefore, the revival of soccer in Slovenia could be interpreted, at least to an extent, as a positive development, in a sense that the Slovenian national team today offers an important vision of a different form of Slovenia-ness: one, which is open and tolerant, and where people have no problems because of different cultural, ethnic, or class, backgrounds. Unfortunately, in spite of many suggestions in this direction (compare: Plesec and Topič – Doupona, 2002: 103), it seems that the ethnic hybrid of the Slovenian national team is read in this way predominantly only by those, who were never prejudiced (basically the better educated, younger, and urban strata of society).

On the other hand, there are several dimensions the recent revival of soccer in Slovenia, which could be interpreted as nothing more than a slightly modified continuation of ethnic inequalities in Slovenian society. It was argued by influential Slovenian anthropologist, Vesna V. Godina, for example, that the fact that first or second generation immigrants gained a certain symbolic appreciation in the eyes of Slovenians because of their contribution to the success of national team, only serves to reproduce their marginalization in Slovenian society in the sense that it reproduces the imperative for them, that if they want to be treated like "normal" or "good" Slovenians, they must prove themselves by performing special deeds – something not required for "true"

Slovenians.

Further, one can point out an interesting feature of Slovenians coping with the inconsistent Slovenian-ness (in the traditional sense) in the Slovenian national team is that this inconsistency is more or less deliberately overlooked: it is something simply rarely mentioned or talked about. Moreover when the names of players appear on TV screens, they are, as a rule, written in their Slovenian version, which changes Croat, Bosnian, Serbian and Montenegrin postfixes (-ic or -vic in surnames – one of the crucial signifiers of the "southern" origin) into domesticated ones (-ic or -vic). Given the fact that the names of "Western" sportsmen and sportswomen playing in Slovenia (for example, in local basketball teams) are never changed in a similar fashion, although some letters in their names may not be in Slovenian alphabet (just as the letter c is not), it might be argued that this is an important detail. The practice points to the pragmatic lack of interest in or respect for the culture and peculiarities of immigrants from other federal republics in the former Yugoslavia, at a moment when the substantial presence of immigrants threatens the nationalist appropriation of the success of the Slovenian national soccer team.

Moving onto more speculative terrain, it is also difficult to overlook the subtle nuances of the reproduction of ethnic divisions inscribed in the contemporary Slovenian discourse about soccer. It is quite common, for instance, that Slovenian sports commentators and layman alike explain the success of their national team basically in terms of *"hard work"*. The reason for success, their argument goes, is that Slovenian players have compensated their lack of technical skills with their readiness to "work hard" during the entire game, giving 110 per cent every single moment. What strikes here is the ease with which the complexity of the Slovenian national team's game is reduced to an interpretation, which is nothing but an extension of the logic of the existing Slovenian nationalist discourse. Namely, as we have seen above, one of the essential signifiers employed in the Slovenian nationalist discourse in the 1970s to mark the difference between Slovenians and other nations in Yugoslavia, has been exactly the notion of "hard work". This notion was important not only because it tied Slovenian cultural peculiarities in Yugoslavia to the idea of Slovenia's supposed essential "European-ness" (which was in Slovenia often understood exactly in terms like this – in sharp contrast to the Balkan, which was basically equated with "laziness"), but also because it provided a rational explanation of Slovenian fears that they were economically exploited (in a sense they were the only ones working hard in the former state – others just enjoyed the fruits of their commitment to work).

A problem is simply the fact that while the success of the Slovenian national team actually derives to a significant extent from the team's readiness to "work hard" all the time, it is far from being the only cause. It would probably be more adequate to say that success derives from the felicitous balance of a "northern", "hard working" spirit and a "southern", "creative" element instead. This may be difficult to prove, but I suppose that most soccer fans would agree that soccer played in more northern countries (England, Scotland, Germany, or Scandinavia) is basically fast, simple, disciplined and physically very demanding, while soccer played in the south (South America, Spain, Portugal, Italy, or Turkey) is slower, but much more imaginative, full of unexpected moves, inspirational dribblings, and short passes (compare: Boñia, 2002). The "southern way" of soccer does not demand as much "physical work" as the northern one, but superb technique usually compensates for it. But if one accepts this analytical division of "southern" and "northern" soccer, it quickly becomes apparent that the interpretation of the success of Slovenian soccer in

terms of "hard work" is not only inaccurate, but also politically problematic. Namely, as much as there is a substantial "northern" ("hard working", physically demanding) element in Slovenian soccer, there is also a strong "southern" play element present. The latter is basically played by "southern" (how appropriately), first or second generation immigrants in the team (most notably by the undisputed inspiration of most of the team's recent success, playmaker Zlatko Zahovič). To say that the success of Slovenian national team essentially derives from the team's "hard working" attitude is, therefore, to neglect not only the "creative", "southern" element in Slovenian play, but also the very presence of the "southerners" in the team, or at least to deny that they make any substantial contribution to the game. Which leads us to the recognition that the Slovenian nationalist discourse manages to reproduce its consistency even when confronted with such substantially disturbing facts as the apparent hybrid nature of its celebrated team.

To conclude: sport is never only a game. There are too many meanings attached to it, and these meanings are too often appropriated in different mythologies (in a Barthesian sense). Accordingly, one promising way of analyzing the implications of the role of sports in everyday life is to point out these attached meanings and to show how exactly are they used in different mythologies and with which practical consequences.

The shifting meanings (and their various appropriations) of soccer in Slovenia have been presented as an obvious case. Beginning with the devaluation of the game in the 1970s, the latter could be understood as a practical solution to the threatening inconsistency of the Slovenian nationalist discourse at the time, thus contributing to the reproduction of ethnic cleavages in the Slovenian society. The euphoric revival of soccer in late 1990s has much more ambiguous practical implications. There are some features of this revival, which suggest that it could be understood as an emancipatory shift, leading to the diminishing of inter-ethnic tensions and divisions, but other features suggest exactly the opposite. Accordingly, it is tempting to conclude that the political dimensions of the revival are ambivalent. Now, as much as this observation is undoubtedly true, is this really everything that could be said in this respect?

Probably not. As much as the struggle over the meanings of soccer is intensive in contemporary Slovenia, and as much as the implications of the struggle have various effects, it seems that in the end, there are very few, if any, substantial practical effects in the second shift in the meaning of soccer in Slovenia. Those with prejudices against "southerners" before the late 1990s, simply kept them after the success of the Slovenian national soccer team, while those who had rejected, or at least distanced themselves much earlier from the nationalist revival in recent decades, interpreted the hybrid nature of the Slovenian national soccer team accordingly: as a possibility for abandoning the xenophobic nationalist discourse. Or to put this slightly differently, in spite of the occasional bitterness of the clashes around the meanings of soccer and the Slovenian national team in recent years, it is difficult to identify any substantial changes in the relations of power between a Slovenian ethnic majority and various minorities (at least as a consequence of this shift). Thus, soccer, in the second shift, functions quite differently, not as much as a vehicle for a certain "real" changes in the Slovenian social structure (as the first shift did – it participated in articulation of the contemporary Slovenian national identity and in the marginalization of recent economic immigrants), but rather as a site where different, conflicting visions of Slovenia-ness are being played out. Roughly speaking, these are two: on the one hand is a conservative, more

or less a xenophobic vision of Slovenia as self-sufficient, ethnically clean entity, and on the other hand is a more open, tolerant, inclusive vision, which does not presuppose ethnic purity as a necessary prerequisite for this country's coping with the challenges of a post-modern reality. Of course, the meanings of soccer are not the only site where these symbolic clashes are played out in Slovenia, however, it is one of the most important ones, especially if we bear in mind that other sites (e.g., politics and culture) are not so close to a layman's experience.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Batagelj, B. 2002. "Zacetki ljubljanskega nogometa (II)" ("Beginnings of soccer in Ljubljana (II)"). *Ljubljana*, no 1, pages 57–58.
- Bourdieu, P. 1995. "How Can One Be a Sports Fan?" In: During, S. (ed.). *The Cultural Studies Reader*. London: Routledge.
- Bozie, F. 2002. "Zlatko went home. Selektor in zvezdnik" (Zlatko went home. A coach and a star). *Delo, Sobota priloga*, vol. XLIV, no 130, p. 10.
- Elias, N. and Dunning, E. 1986. *Quest for Excitement: Sport in the Civilizing Process*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
- Jhally, S. 1989. "Cultural Studies and the Sports/Media Complex". In: Wenner, L. (ed.). *Media, Sports and Society*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Kurowski, D. 2002. "Full marks for Engel". World Cup 2002. In: *World Soccer*, vol. 42, no 6, p. 35.
- Miller, T. and McHoul, A. 1998. *Popular Culture and Everyday Life*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Plesec, M. and Doupona – Topic, M. 2002. *Nogomet in družba. Preporod nogometa v Sloveniji (Soccer and Society. Soccer Revival in Slovenia)*. Ljubljana: Zavod za sport Slovenije.
- Torring, J. 1999. *New Theories of Discourse. Laclau, Mouffe and Zizek*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Woodward, K. 1997. "Concepts of identity and difference". In: Woodward, K. (ed.). *Identity and Difference*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

-
- ¹ In 1964, for instance, there were 19.994 tickets sold on a local derby between Olimpija and Maribor, a figure quite unimaginable even today (Plesec and Doupona – Topic, 2002: 49)
- ² This is basically my subjective impression – it is impossible to cite some evidence for this, since there were no researches made on this topic at the time. This is probably due to the fact that this new discourse on soccer seemed so "natural" for majority of Slovenians that no one ever thought of analyzing it. However, there was a research conducted by Plesec and Topic – Doupona in 1998, which points, in spite of the fact that this was already a period when Slovenians' attitudes towards soccer were changing, exactly to this kind of meanings (see: Plesec and Topic – Doupona, 2002, 51).
- ³ Considering the smallness of the country, which has less than 2 millions of inhabitants, and perhaps even more importantly, a relatively small proportion of registered players (by European standards, at least).
- ⁴ There was no Slovenian national team at the time – Slovenia declared its independence from Yugoslavia only in 1991.
- ⁵ This state was actually comprised also of Bosnian Muslims, Macedonians, Montenegrins and many ethnic minorities, but all these were at the time not recognized as constituent nations.
- ⁶ Most of them came from Bosnia and Herzegovina, but certainly not all of them. Irrespective

of their origins *all* immigrants were soon labeled as "Bosnians" (*bosanci*), which indicates not only typical disrespect for the immigrant cultures in Slovenia ("they are all the same"), but also the latent disregard of them: Bosnians were in former Yugoslavia stereotypically portrayed as "stupid, which means that the term "Bosnian, as employed in Slovenia, didn't actually refer to the people coming from Bosnia, but rather to somebody (supposedly because of his non-Slovenian origin) stupid.

- ⁷ For example, to prevent outbursts of different latent antagonisms between different nations, the Yugoslav communist party introduced a far-reaching version of the anti-nationalist, artificial "pan-Yugoslav" ideology, best exemplified by what was probably the most important official slogan of the time, "brotherhood and unity", or, on more practical level, simply suppressed party elites in the federal republics if these grew too overtly nationalistic.
- ⁸ Roughly since the late 19th century. Interestingly, the popularity of mountaineering in Slovenia is closely related to nationalism, too, but in this case to "early" Slovenian nationalism, the one directed against Germans: as Slovenians tried to challenge German domination in the Austro-Hungarian empire, they started to compete with them in various areas of life, including mountaineering. Namely, as Germans living in what is now Slovenia followed the example of their compatriots in Germany and Austria, who, inspired by ideas of German romanticism, started to worship nature, and in this spirit, also to climb mountains, Slovenians responded and soon begun mountaineering with even greater passion. This passion and related conviction of many Slovenians that there is some essential connection between Slovenia-ness and mountaineering remained present well beyond the end of WWI, when most of Germans left, to the present day.
- ⁹ A research by Jost et al. shows, for instance, that in 1998, just before the revival of its popularity, soccer was only the twelfth of the most popular sports in the country (Jost et al. in: Plesec and Doupona – Topic, 2002, 17).
- ¹⁰ This is one of the least dismissive terms used by Slovenians at the time.
- ¹¹ The sites of this discourse were many, ranging from popular stereotypes to 'official' interpretations of history, but as it usually happens, the most vivid incarnations of prejudices were jokes. Here Bosnians were equated with total stupidity, Montenegrins with endless laziness... For example: Q: What is the Montenegrin best performance in race on 100 meters? A: 60 meters.
- ¹² For example: Zlatko Zahovic, Moamer Vugdalic, Zoni Novak, Milenko Acimovic, Senad Tiganj, Goran Sankovic, Amir Karic, Zoran Pavlovic, Marko Simeunovic, etc. For those who are not familiar with such details: the non-Slovenian, former Yugoslav origin of these players can be easily recognized in recurrent postfixes – ic and –vic in their surnames.
- ¹³ Again, this is not necessarily a Slovenian peculiarity – something similar has just happened recently in Poland. Here, black striker Emmanuel Olisadebe (born in Nigeria, granted Polish citizenship in July 2000) has contributed substantially to the successful performance of this country's national team in World Cup 2002 qualifications (he was Poland's top scorer in the campaign), helping to increase Polish national pride. But this is in terms of the conventional Polish nationalist discourse more than strange: with his very dark skin he seem to be, especially when surrounded by his pale-white teammates, anything but Polish.

Published 2003-03-12
 Original in English
 Contribution by Balcanis
 © Balcanis
 © Eurozine