

Edward Trentzsch

Dr. Babb

LTAM 101

28 November 2017

Impact of sports on nationalism within Latin America

Considered to be the beating heart that pumps life into the natural world, Latin America is a remarkably complex region with a wide array of contrasts and paradoxes. Despite having indigenous societies that are relatively young when measured on a global scale, the standard of independent nationhood within Latin America is relatively old. Given this unique enigma and Latin America's incredible ethnic and linguistic diversity, the concept of nationalism within Latin America has been an influential movement that has followed a unique form of development when compared to the outside world. Due to its innate ability to evoke an overwhelmingly powerful feeling of collective pride and community, sports have always been used as an important vehicle for the potential prosperity of nationalism within Latin America. Similar to the unique paradoxes that encompass Latin American society and culture, the inextricably close link between sports and nationalism continues to be a significant connection with profound consequences throughout the metaphorical heart of the world.

Given Latin America's history of colonialization and the general inception of the state before the nation, the spread of nationalism throughout Latin America has been a highly uneven process. Unlike the other nations in the developed world that share a homogenous language and tangible culture, Latin America's plethora of diversity has made it difficult to cultivate the intense pride in national patriotism that nationalism exudes. As researcher Wes Miller notes, nationalism has been forced to take on a more distinctive form of progression in Latin America

considering that “the real difficulty posed by Latin America is not that it is wholly different from the implied norm but that everything partly applies. The conventional identifiers of nationalism are all present, but in complicated ways” (Miller 202). Although sometimes utilized by authoritarian regimes and oppressive dictators for political and military gain, the general transition to democratic policies within Latin America has allowed for the focus on nationalism to shift towards the importance of national identity (Miller). This modern perspective has even reinforced the importance placed on the core values found within a community, since “there remains a widespread tendency for many sectors of Latin American society to regard nationalism as a crucial defense against the encroachments of international capital and its avatars” (Miller 203).

Similar to the intense colonization and cultural exchange that has occurred throughout the history of Latin America, many of the dominant sports currently within Latin American society contain European or Anglo-American origins (Arbena, “Nationalism and Sport in Latin America, 1850–1990”). These widespread sports, such as soccer, boxing, rowing, cycling, tennis, golf, bullfighting, baseball, and basketball, are all staples of society within the Global North and can be considered products of cultural exportation. By deeply integrating and embracing these external sports into Latin American culture as a platform of national identity, sports in Latin America have also achieved a contradictory result in the pursuit of nationalism. Through the embracement of the popular entertainment from the outside world, sports can be viewed as a mechanism for the continuation of European and North American imperialism, considering how “the irony, then, is that while Latin American societies were gradually trying to strengthen nationalistic feelings, they were often doing so along with, and at times by means of the increasing presence of imported European culture” (Arbena, “Nationalism and Sport in Latin

America, 1850–1990” 222). Rather than forge a distinct national identity, sports have played a role in preserving the identity of oppressors from the past and the present.

As a result of the adaption of European and North American culture and sports into everyday life in Latin America, the legacies of these sports can be seen in platforms far greater than the sporting world. Whether it be an international spectacle or a local community event, the influence of sports on the construction of national identity has exponentially grown as the popularity of each sport has increased. As demonstrated by the role of imported European sports such as polo, sports have played an important role in defining socioeconomic boundaries, as evinced in Argentina through “among the Argentine wealthy elite, polo, sailing, golf and hockey are popular. Polo reflects Argentina’s reputation for superior horsemanship and highlights the grassy pampa as a unique feature in the country” (Costa and Mangan 169). The impact of sports in Latin America are also apparent in everyday life through customs that are fixtures of human interaction. Even something as commonplace as the interaction of language has been affected by the power of sports, considering how “In particular, imported sports vocabulary produced what some critics consider a corruptive effect, as foreign (especially English) words increasingly penetrated both written and spoken communication” (Arbena, “Nationalism and Sport in Latin America, 1850–1990” 222).

In addition to being affected by various social and economic conditions, the continuous ascendance of women in sports, particularly soccer, has left a lasting imprint on the perception of nationalism in Latin America. Considered to be the public face of sports within Latin America, soccer has traditionally been dominated by the male gender and used as a representation of traditional masculinity. This discriminatory view of conventional masculinity has also bled into the overall consciousness of national identity and pride, which regarded women’s soccer as a

threat since “opposition to women’s soccer related not only to the sport itself, but to the meaning of the sport and its role in constructing both nations and masculinity” (Fernández l’Hoeste et al. 55). However, as the gradual evolution and acceptance of women’s rights in Latin America has progressed and allowed for an increased presence of women participation in sports, the unfounded stigmas labeling women’s sports nationally unpatriotic or disloyal have slowly begun to fade (Fernández l’Hoeste et al.). While improvement is still necessary, the overall progress made on the sports landscape has shifted the attitude taken towards nationalism to a concept that should be from more than just the male point of view.

As demonstrated by the thousands of flag wielding and anthem roaring fans who proudly gather to watch their nation take part in an international sporting event, the participation and occasional hosting of sporting events on the global stage has transitioned into a crucial component for the production of national pride. Latin America has played host to numerous important sporting spectacles, including the men’s FIFA World Cup, the Olympics, and the FIBA Basketball World Cup. As evinced with the landmark 1968 Olympic Games held in Mexico City, Mexico, these sporting events are momentous opportunities that allow the nation to “In sum, the objective was to show Mexico at its best, both to enhance image and pride as an end in itself, but clearly also to open channels for more trade, investment, and tourism” (Arbena, “Sport, Development, and Mexican Nationalism, 1920-1970” 359). However, given the abundant economic and political incentive behind these grand competitions, the fervent desire for a nationalistic sporting event can be scapegoated and manipulated for a bureaucratic benefit. No situation exemplifies this more than the 2014 FIFA World Cup in Brazil, when billions of dollars were squandered by the impecunious Brazilian government to host the glamorous tournament,

although in reality the oppressed Brazilian population faced pressing issues that far outweighed the need for national pride (Antunes).

Although the use of sports within Latin America can be attributed to an improvement in regional development and national morale, the overall ramifications created from sports have played a somewhat limited role on altering the tangible aspects of national identity (Arbena, “Nationalism and Sport in Latin America, 1850–1990”). After acknowledging the contributions of sports towards the widespread sense of nationalism, writer Joseph L. Arbena concludes “but that sport has contributed significantly and uniquely to the construction of national identity and cohesiveness - to the building of 'nations' - seems questionable in any long-term context” (Arbena, “Nationalism and Sport in Latin America, 1850–1990” 232). Similar to a bandage covering up a surface wound, the genuine dedication towards the power of sports can be utilized only as a temporary remedy towards the failures of the region. Rather than address the task of building a national foundation alone, sports are often used in tandem with other social or political spheres to elicit change (Arbena, “Nationalism and Sport in Latin America, 1850–1990”).

Given sport’s infectious simplicity and its natural ability to evoke the imagination from both it’s participants and spectators, there is no wonder why so many children throughout Latin America carry dreams about becoming the next Diego Maradona or Mariano Rivera, larger than life figures who symbolize both their sport and their nation. Through various international events and social struggles, the fanatical passion which encompasses these sports has been utilized in a way to generate a sense of national pride and identity. However, the devotion to foreign Anglo sports has also proved to be counterproductive towards the creation of a unique national image culture. Despite its many contributions, the concept of sports has failed to impact the principle of nationalism in a way that reaches beneath the surface.

Works Cited

- Antunes, Anderson. *How The 2014 FIFA World Cup Became The Worst Publicity Stunt In History*. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/andersonantunes/2014/05/27/how-the-2014-fifa-world-cup-became-the-worse-publicity-stunt-in-history/#5bc886f42b2f>. Accessed 27 Nov. 2017.
- Arbena, Joseph L. "Nationalism and Sport in Latin America, 1850–1990: The Paradox of Promoting and Performing 'European' Sports." *The International Journal of the History of Sport*, vol. 12, no. 2, Aug. 1995, pp. 220–38. *Taylor and Francis+NEJM*, doi:10.1080/09523369508713904.
- . "Sport, Development, and Mexican Nationalism, 1920-1970." *Journal of Sport History*, vol. 18, no. 3, 1991, pp. 350–64.
- Costa, Lamartine, and J. A. |. Mangan. *Sport in Latin American Society : Past and Present*. F. Cass, 2002.
- Fernández l'Hoeste, Héctor, et al. *Sports and Nationalism in Latin/o America*. First edition., Palgrave Macmillan, 2015.
- Miller, Nicola. "The Historiography of Nationalism and National Identity in Latin America." *Nations and Nationalism*, vol. 12, no. 2, Apr. 2006, pp. 201–21. *Wiley Online Library*, doi:10.1111/j.1469-8129.2006.00237.x.