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Football and National Identity: A Triangle of Spain's Regional Attitudes

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Football and National Identity

A Triangle of Spain's Regional Attitudes

Jaelin Kinney

SIT Spain: Policy, Law, and Regional Autonomy in Europe

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Abstract

The last century of Spanish history has been characterized by entrenched division between Spain and its regional communities. The Basque Country, Catalonia, and Spanish central government all remain divided on Spain's status as a plurinational State. Today, Spanish football has become a direct representation of this dilemma, an ethno-regional arena for intense competition between Spain's prominent nationalities: Basque, Catalan, and Spanish. With differing stances on independence and the state of Spain, these regions have used their football clubs as a representation of their regional identities.

In this paper, I will analyze the identities of Spain's top three football clubs: FC Barcelona, Real Madrid, and Spain. I will then demonstrate how the actions and behaviors of these clubs' reveal the perceptions each region holds of themselves and each other.

Sources of Information

The dissertation relies on a number of sources, majority of those being modern articles and scholarly journals. In using articles within a relevancy of two to three years, the information provided is up-to-date and aligns with modern times. I also on the University of Deusto's school database, JSTOR, in finding the proper research needed to construct my thesis. Additionally, I used the research and findings of Mariann Vaczi Basque Research Associate Mariann Vaczi in her novel *Soccer, Culture, and Society in Spain: An Anthropology of Basque fandom*. Finally, I spoke with two former members of the Athletic association, both of whom shared their personal experiences with the club and their relations to other Spanish clubs.

INTRODUCTION

Origins

Spanish football's origins date back to the end of the nineteenth century, as a result of British economic expansion. Records indicate that the sport was first played in 1897, in a Huelva mining factory (Goig, 2018). The game, however, didn't gain popularity until its arrival in the industrious Basque Country. Following a friendly match between Basque and British workers in 1894, residents immediately fell in love with the sport. Soon after, with the help of British foreigners, Athletic Bilbao became the first major club created in 1898, following the creations of FC Barcelona in 1899 and Real Madrid in 1902 (MacClancy, James, & Allen, 2007). A year after Real Madrid's establishment, the Spanish Championship was consolidated, following the establishment of *La Liga* in 1928 (Goig, 2018). These would be the first steps towards the competitive context that would eventually become shaped by Spain's regions.

During the 1920s and 30s, football was a tool of identity representation for Spain's autonomous regions. Sociologist Eric Dunning explains that prior to football's arrival in Spain, collective representation could not appear in pre-industrialized regions because they lacked structural cohesion. There was no national union, transport and communication were limited, and there were no laws in common. As a result, it was impossible for fans from distant places to unite together (Rojo-Labaen, 2017). It wasn't until the existence of football clubs that these regions found a vehicle for promoting their ideological attitudes, thereby creating communities with Spain's provinces (Kelly, 2019). During this period, rivalries were defined mainly by geographical proximity—intercity and provincial rivalries.

Franco Football

The roots of Spain's regional-ideological rivalries were planted during the Franco regime. During this period, the Basque and Catalan football clubs of FC Barcelona and Athletic Bilbao were subject to

complete Hispanicization (Vaczi, 2015). The Spanish dictator sought to construct a homogenous national identity by repressing Spain's cultural diversity. The dictator recognized that Spanish football had become the hegemonic sport. With such strong hegemony, however, Spain's nationalities—and the love for their respective clubs—could pose a threat to his dictatorship. Bilbao-based Fangalist commentator Jacinto Miquelarena explained the importance of football to the State:

Sports have the capacity to found a nationality, and to reduce an old empire to microscopic segments.

There is the “love for the club,” ... and there is or there can be the “love of the great patriotic idea”...

a state that exploits the great torrent of sport will be a powerful State. (p. 155)

During his regime, Franco took measures to establish football as an agent of Spanish nationalism. He did so by expanding complete state control over all aspects of football. He eradicated minority languages, banned the use of national flags in games, and required all clubs to Castillianize their names. He also controlled club leadership, and made sure presidents were close to his regime. As a result, Franco reduced the presence of Basque and Catalan identities in the Spanish football scene during the 40s and 50s (Vaczi, 2015).

However, when Spain made its transition into democracy following Franco's death, ideological and political dispositions intensified. Having been oppressed during the Franco regime, Basque and Catalan nationalists found that football was the most useful tool in promoting their political wills (Tuñón & Brey, 2012). Psychologists Robert Schatz and Howard Lavine assert that national symbols promote national identification by providing members with a manifest object of identification—a tangible representation of the group. These national symbols come to represent groups across time; they crystalize the group's past into a historic entity (2007). As such, these clubs crystalized into the identities and histories of their respective regions. Athletic Bilbao became a symbol of Basque identity and pride. FC Barcelona turned

into a beacon of Catalan nationalism (Tuñón & Brey, 2012). Real Madrid was never officially recognized as the Spanish national team. However, the club's endowment of the crown from King Alfonso XIII and its interactions with Franco established the club as a representation of the Spanish central government (Kelly, 2019).

Political Context Today

Today, Spain finds itself in an ideological crisis. The question of Spain's status as either homogenous or multinational has led to tensions between the Spanish central government and Spain's peripheral region. At the forefront of the metaphorical debate against the Spanish government is Catalonia, a region struggling to gain its independence from Spain. The Socialist Party of Catalonia (PSC) proposed the recognition of Catalonia as a nation and Spain as a plurinational State. Explaining that "Catalonia and the rest of Spain are plural and diverse," the PSC has advocated for the need to reframe the Spanish Constitution—the very document that prevents Spain's autonomous regions from gaining independence ("The PSC proposes...", 2019, para. 2). Under the Spanish Constitution, the status of a "nation" remains reserved only for Spain (Spanish Constitution, Preliminary, Art. II). This, therefore, prevents Catalonia and Spain's "nationalities" from becoming fully independent, suggesting that Spain is a homogenous State and not a multinational one. This conflict between unity and diversity is acted out in the Spanish football arena today. In this ethno-territorial arena, Spanish, Basque, and Catalan nationalists have become agents of their clubs, who have "aligned in a competitive-antagonistic relationship over the symbolic and political capital of mobilizing power through soccer" (Vaczi, 2015, p. 150). Club identity and regional rivalries reflect the ideal values of which Spain's major nationalities understand themselves and perceive each other.

Research Methods and Ethics

Discourse analysis was the primary method used in conducting research for the dissertation. This included behavioral analysis—an examination of actors in the football arena and how their actions and statements reflected their political-ideological sentiments of their regions. Alongside behavioral analysis was the examination of symbols in the football arena. This is the analysis of flags and chants in the context of football, and how they helped crystalize a region's ideology and history into one manifest object, that object being the football club. Observation was also applied in the research methodology, as I took notice of the views and feelings felt by Athletic Bilbao supporters during football matches. While this observation did not take place in a live football arena, it was conducted through my interactions with the Basque local population.

Interviews were integral in the methodological process. For the study, I interviewed two former associates of the Athletic organization. One individual was former Athletic board member Yolanda Lázaro, who provided insight into the club's Basque associations beyond football. Through Lázaro, I learned that Athletic acts as more than a football club. It is a way of life for many in the Basque Country. Another individual I interviewed was 2004 Athletic president Fernando Lamikiz. Lamikiz's insight on Athletic gave me more insight on the Basque club's perceptions of its rivals FC Barcelona and Real Madrid. And more importantly, I came to better understand the dilemma surround Athletic's recruitment philosophy, and how it threatens the club's identity.

ATHLETIC BILBAO

Football was first introduced to the Basque Country in the early 1890s by British sailors and coalminers, who would occasionally play football wherever they could find free, flat ground. These games were the first sight of football for many Basque residents, although some had become familiar with the sport by reading about it in the newspapers or hearing about it from British-educated scholars. As football gained popularity in the Basque Country, locals and British expatriates started forming their own joint clubs. Notably, the region's most prominent club today: Athletic Bilbao (MacClancy, James, & Allen, 2007). Since its establishment in 1898, Athletic has won eight La Liga championships, 24 Copa Del Rey titles, and eighteen titles in its Regional Championships. Most importantly, Athletic remains one of three clubs who have never been relegated from the top division in La Liga (Gómez-Bantel, 2016).

Recruitment Philosophy

What makes Athletic's success impressive is its recruitment philosophy. Athletic Bilbao does not sign foreigners; it only accepts players of Basque origins. The roots of this philosophy date back to the early 1910s, with the ban on foreign players administered by the Spanish Football Federation. The professionalization of soccer a few years later opened up the international arena for Spanish soccer, allowing clubs to recruit freely from other countries. Despite this change, Athletic continued to recruit solely from its Basque provinces. Within the globalized Spanish football arena, Athletic stands as a symbol of resistance to a rapidly-changing soccer world. (Vaczi, 2015).

Although deep-rooted in the club's identity, the policy has changed over time. Initially, Athletic only recruited from the Bizkaia province, adhering strictly to a "blood purity" rule. It was during the Franco regime, in which Basque identity found itself severely oppressed, that Athletic changed its policy to include all provinces of the Basque Country. And since the 90s, the Athletic recruitment policy has

become a more open cultural definition of Basque identity. Today, one can qualify as a “Basque” athlete so long as he or she is born in the geographical area. And notwithstanding birthplace, an athlete may also qualify via cultural integration, or extended residence in the area (Tuñón & Brey, 2012).

The adjustments made to Athletic’s policy contradict the false assumptions made by hostile soccer fans, many of whom have claimed that Athletic’s agenda is “racist” and “xenophobic.” In an interview with former Athletic board member Yolanda Lázaro, Athletic’s philosophy is rooted in preventing foreign players from coming to the region solely for football purposes (Y. Lázaro, personal interview, December 3, 2019). This policy asserts that being a part of Athletic Bilbao is not a given; it must be earned. Those who demonstrate utmost loyalty and dedication to the team and its culture will be accepted members of the Athletic community—even if they are not born in the Basque Country.

This is the case for Athletic’s African-Basque player Iñaki Williams, who is the first Black goalscorer in history to play for the club. Williams’ parents immigrated to the Basque Country from Ghana. From there, he played for a Pamplona youth football club until being noticed by scouts. Today, Williams is a player whom many Basque fans respect because “they see reflected in [him] the sacrifice and effort to achieve a goal; that [he has] worked for everything [he has] achieved and that nobody gave [him] anything” (“Iñaki Williams...,” 2018, para. 4). Given the historical context of Athletic’s agenda, Iñaki symbolizes a change in Basque identity. What was once based off of blood is no longer the case today. Identifying as “Basque” is not a question of blood or family heritage. It is a matter of integration into and appreciation for the Basque Country. Regardless of birthplace, someone will always be “Basque” if they have been raised in that region for majority of their life.

Beyond the Philosophy

Lázaro explained that Athletic is linked to more than just its recruitment philosophy and football. The club is neither about teaching people how to play football, nor is it about how many championships Athletic can win. It's about instilling the values of Basque identity and culture in its supporters (Y. Lázaro, personal interview, December 3, 2019). Often, Athletic will highlight its regional affiliations by making public statements affirming their dedication to the Basque Country. On International Euskera Day, an event that seeks to raise awareness to the Basque language by encouraging people to speak it, Athletic made an official statement on their website in support of the occasion. According to Athletic's official website, Euskera is important because "it's part of our lives, because it unites us all, and because we must take care of the treasure that we have" (2019). Additionally, Juan Carlos Ercoreca and Jon Vázquez Eguskiza, president and general director of the Athletic Club, joined the Basque parliamentary delegation to present the Basque Social Pact on Migration—a pact that reinforces humanitarian response to migrant needs. Athletic's official statements reveal that the club stands as a representation of Basque culture as well as a support figure for migrants seeking life anew in the Basque Country. This support further builds upon Athletic's recruitment policy as one of Basque acculturation more so than genealogy. Having roots from a different country does not exclude someone from the Basque community.

Athletic further shows its dedication to the community through its commitment to the Basque diaspora. According to Raphael Tsavkko Garcia, the term *diaspora* can be defined as ".a population dispersed from its homeland, with collective memory and idealization of the homeland, as well as a strong ethnic consciousness and solidarity..." (2004, p. 6). To escape the violence and political oppression of the Spanish Civil War, hundreds of thousands of Basque refugees migrated to America. Their central objective was to construct an imagined, yet isolated, Basque Country. Under Basque

nationalist ideals, migrants came to believe that “isolation” and maintaining genetic roots were essential to creating a newfound Basque Country. However, the second wave of Diaspora refugees, many of whom identified as left-wing nationalists with ETA roots, broke this notion. They made connections with local political groups and spoke of a nation less in terms of race or blood, but more so as a political and social construction built upon independence. This resulted in the establishment of an imagined transnational Basque community—one in which its members saw themselves as part of a global Basque ethnic community (Tsavkko Garcia, 2004).

In support for this global community, Athletic has maintained strong relations with Basque-Americans by playing games in Boise, Idaho. In 2015, Athletic played a friendly match against Mexico’s Club Tijuana in Boise State’s stadium, with over 21,000 fans in attendance. Further plans have been made to play another match in 2020, with the goal of playing a match every five years during Boise’s *Jaialdi* festival. Additionally, the proceeds of Athletic’s games will go towards Boise State’s Basque Studies program (Lycklama, 2019). The relationship between Athletic club and Athletic fans in the U.S. ensures support from not only Basques at home, but also from those abroad. The club’s active involvement in the Basque community, therefore, reinforces its Basque symbol through global relations.

Athletic has come to stand for something beyond its identity. Underlying this surface-level representation, Athletic symbolizes Basque resistance to a changing world. The club holds utmost loyalty to its Basque supporters by adhering to a full squad of eleven Basque players. In exchange, supporters remain loyal to the club because it has strong ties to Basque identity. When asked if Athletic should keep its recruitment policy or change it to avoid relegation, 87.5% of fans chose to keep the policy despite the risks (F. Lamikiz, personal interview, December 3, 2019). This is because, as Yolanda Lázaro explained, the people know the players. Athletic’s players are not seen as celebrities. To many Basques, they are

ordinary people—fellowmen that they perceive as regional heroes (Y. Lázaro, personal interview, December 3, 2019). As such, people treasure the strong sense of Basque community that is created by Athletic, rather than the championships that are won by the club. With the support of Basque individuals from all over the world, Athletic stands as symbol of Basque resistance and excellence—a manifestation of something that is no longer in the world today.

FC BARCELONA

Following Athletic's establishment, FC Barcelona, modernly nicknamed "Barça," was founded in 1899 by a Swiss football enthusiast named Joan Gamper (Tuñón & Brey, 2012). Ever since its foundation, FC Barcelona has remained a successful club in La Liga, amassing 26 league championships, 30 Copa Del Rey titles, and five titles in the UEFA's European Cup. Like Athletic, Barça is another dominant club that has never been relegated from the first division. And in the same vein as Athletic, it is also recognized as the symbol of its region—one of strong Catalan nationalism. However, FC's Catalan identity is far different from that of Athletic's Basque character.

Barça Internationalism

FC Barcelona is a highly international club, boasting some of the best foreign talent in the world. Barça's spirit of globalization stems from the vision of its creator Joan Gamper. Gamper aimed to create an organization that was open to everyone, regardless of their origins. He dreamed of a club that "served as a means of social integration, in which everyone could speak their mind" ("Official Website of FC Barcelona," n.d.). Following in Gamper's spirit, the club has recruited foreign athletes since its origins in the early 20th century. In its use of foreign athletes to aid the club's success, FC Barcelona has had several successful eras in its history. The first successful era began after the club's poor performance in the 1960s.

Plagued by several losing streaks during this time, Barça decided to sign Dutch midfielder Johan Cruyff, who brought a positive impact to the team both on the field and from the sidelines. Cruyff's intelligent style of play and superb technique helped the club win its first La Liga title during the 1973/74 season—the first title the club has won since its downfall in the 60s. Cruyff later returned as a manager in the 1990s, helping Barcelona win their first European cup alongside four consecutive La Liga titles. Under Cruyff's winning mentality and football philosophy, FC Barcelona regained its global reputation as a powerhouse in La Liga by the late 1990s (Murray, 2010).

Today, FC Barcelona continues to remain in the limelight, especially with the help of Brazilian midfielder Ronaldinho and the Argentinian forward Lionel Messi. As some of the best players in the world, Ronaldinho and Messi have helped the club win several titles. Between the two athletes, FC Barcelona has won ten La Liga championships, four Champions league titles, and three FIFA club world cups, among many of the other titles won ("Official Website of FC Barcelona," n.d.). Today, Messi has become the face of FC Barcelona for millions around the world, who are in awe of his achievements and impressive style of play despite his small stature. Having talented foreign players on the team—and displaying them as the faces of the club—consolidate Barça's globalized identity. In contrast to Athletic, FC Barcelona represents stronger acceptance to changing times. The club's desire to place non-Catalan athletes in the spotlight shows the world that they are, as Hamper had hoped, a vehicle of social integration that demonstrates its internationalism via foreign recruitment.

Catalan Identity

What is most striking about FC Barcelona is its balance between foreign talent and "home-grown" athletes. While Barça's squad is highly multiethnic, it still has its share of Catalan players—many of whom are highly vocal about Catalonia's political interests. Gerard Piqué, a successful Catalan athlete on

the Barça squad, firmly tweeted his support for Catalonia's independence in the midst of the 2017 Catalan independence referendum (Piqué, 2017). Former Barça player Oleguer Perea was openly involved in left-wing politics and expressed sympathies for Catalan nationalist causes—all while actively playing for FC Barcelona. During his career, however, he rejected the opportunity to compete in the World Cup on Spain's national team, stating that “what the Spanish national team represented caused a sense of rejection in [him]” (Oleguer, 2019, para. 2). Xavi Hernández, a retired Catalan football player, also expressed his nationalist sympathies during his career with Barça. In 2013, Hernández received criticism when he implied his lack of devotion to the team because of his unconcealed support for Catalan nationalist ideals (Vaczi, 2015). Having vocal Catalan players in the club maintains Barça's Catalan identity. The Catalan's relation to FC Barcelona remains strong because there are still players on the team who share their sentiments (Gómez-Bantel, 2016). As such, Barcelona consolidates its cosmopolitan, bourgeois character by maintaining a balance between internationalization via overseas recruitment, and localization by emphasizing the club as a symbol of Catalan identity (Vaczi, 2015).

In its representation of Catalan identity, FC Barcelona has remained firm in its support for the region. The club has avoided any allusions to backing Catalonia's secession from Spain. However, they do support Catalonia's right to self-determination and democracy. When Catalonia's 2017 referendum was denied by the central government on the ground that it was illegal, protests erupted throughout the region (Greenfield, 2017). Amid the protests, Barça made its stance in the independence movement clear. Barça's game with Las Palmas was scheduled for the same day as the vote, and the club knew that it was inevitably going to play a role in the conflict. Despite La Liga's decision to proceed with the game on that day, Barça held their game behind closed doors, in a stadium of no spectators (West, 2017).

“Més que un club”— More than a Club

It is clear, then, that Barcelona follows its historical motto: “*Més que un club*” (“Official Website of FC Barcelona,” n.d.). Barça could have remained neutral in the conflicts. However, doing so would only contradict its commitment to liberty, justice, and human rights. As such, the club decided to take a stance for what was just—that being Catalonia’s right to a democratic process in proposing its independence referendums. Barça has always stood by the vision of its founder Joan Hamper. It is through his emphasis on social equality and globalization that FC Barcelona’s organization has found a way to remain committed to its fans without claiming full support for an independent Catalonia. Similar to its own squad—a balance between foreign and home-grown talent—the club manages to maintain a perfect balance between political support and political exclusion. It is through Barça’s balance that it has consolidated its strong Catalan identity as an internationalized safe haven for Catalans to express their political attitudes.

ATHLETIC-BARÇA RELATIOS

There are a few similarities between the clubs of Athletic and Barça. Both clubs claim to reject engagement with regional politics, although their actions have shown support for the sentiments of their supporters. They each hold shared leadership with the economic-nationalist local elite. And some of their best contributors link football to pro-Basque and Catalan identities (Vaczi, 2015). There’s no question, then, that Basque and Catalan nationalities are interwoven into the clubs’ identities.

However, Athletic and Barça represent strikingly different portrayals of their nationalist characters. Barça is an international, avant-garde Catalan character. The Catalan club embraces a changing world through its relations with other countries. Through its overseas football academies, Barça’s philosophical

values are rooted into the minds of its supporters at an early age. FC Barcelona has a number of schools around the world, in countries such as the United States, India, and China. Its objective is to teach youth athletes the fundamentals of football while instilling in them the values of respect, teamwork, and humility (“Official Website of Barcelona,” n.d.). Barça further maintains its global reputation by participating in the International Champions Cup, wherein the club competes against teams from all over the world. Among a few of these teams include England’s Manchester United, the Inter Milan of Italy, and the New York Red Bulls. FC Barcelona shows that Catalan identity is a balance between nationalism and globalism. Although it is a strong Catalan character, the region remains open in its relations with other countries.

Contrast this to Athletic Bilbao, whose identity rests in its closure to internationalization through a Basque-exclusive recruitment philosophy. Yolanda Lázaro explained that there is much emphasis placed on the Basque Country’s youth football academies. Unlike FC Barcelona, Athletic does not spend a sizable part of its income on purchasing talent. Instead, since 1971, it has spent much of its money on the youth programs of the Basque region. Under these programs, children receive years of intense training from famed ex-players and managers (MacClancy, James, & Allen). This policy of cultivating local talent is often referred to as *la cantera*, or “the quarry.” This quarry is a major reason for why people are able to easily identify with the club. For this means that supporter are watching the fierce efforts of locals, and young Basque children know that if they display the ability and skill they may dream of being considered by the club. By strictly adhering to *la cantera*, Athletic is a representation of Basque perseverance—the pride of its people in maintaining its own unique traditions while having success.

La cantera, however, has placed Athletic’s identity in jeopardy. It is quite possible that Athletic could become a globalized club in the future, similar to that of FC Barcelona. In an interview with former

Athletic president Fernando Lamikiz, the club's recruitment philosophy could be its own downfall in La Liga. At the beginning of 2019, Athletic faced the risk of relegation from the first division, standing in 17th place out of twenty teams. Despite having over €200 million in reserves alongside access to another €90 million, Athletic cannot spend a penny on recruiting foreign talent (Panja, 2019).

With a limited recruiting pool, Athletic must find a way to replace the young talent that decides to leave. In the last few years, Athletic has lost players to bigger clubs similar to FC Barcelona, who were willing to offer higher paychecks. Notably, Athletic lost defensive midfielder Ander Herrera in 2014 to Manchester United. Defender Aymeric Laporte later joined Manchester City under a €65-million contract, becoming the club's costliest acquisition. And Chelsea made Kepa Arrizabalaga the most expensive goalkeeper in the world after acquiring the player for €80 million (Panja, 2019). According to Lamikiz, Athletic must overpay its current athletes in order for them to remain with the club. And indeed, Athletic pays some of the highest football salaries in Spain, with an average annual salary for a first-team player being four million euros. Additionally, Athletic's *la cantera* has become a liability for the club. To maintain its policy, Athletic has to look toward its young talent early-on because they truly need them.

This leaves Athletic in a dangerous predicament regarding its identity. Twice a year, Athletic provides a survey to its supporters asking if the club should keep its recruitment agenda. With the most recent 2019 survey, it was revealed that 87.5% of Athletic's supporters preferred to keep the policy despite the repercussions that could come with it. Lamikiz questioned the legitimacy of this survey, as he believed that these most of these supporters were lying. The former president explained that Athletic shares a unique achievement with FC Barcelona and Real Madrid as one of the three teams that has not been relegated. Achieving this feat solely with Basque athletes gives Athletic supporters pride and faith in their Basque culture. If Athletic were to be demoted, the strength and pride underlying its Basqueness

would be lost. Lamikiz stated that Real Sociedad of San Sebastián, Athletic's regional rivals, once adhered to the same policy. However, they changed its policy due to the fact that Athletic took all of the best local talent. Now, Athletic is facing the same dilemma—adhering to a strict philosophy in the face to losing its best talent to Spain's major clubs. In light of this dilemma, Lamikiz then, questions the integrity of Athletic's identity. If Athletic is dropped down to the second division, then the club's Basque character may become less prominent. Essentially, Basque identity in the football arena would no longer be the same.

“Real” Antagonists

Despite the apparent differences in identity, both FC Barcelona and Athletic Bilbao bear ideological hostility to Real Madrid. More so than rivals, Athletic and Barça are allies: two flag-bearing communities that collude in booing symbols of the Spanish state (Vaczi, 2015). Historically, both clubs were subjects of oppression under Franco's dictatorship. With all aspects of their cultures either illegalized or erased, Basque and Catalan nationalists found that football was the most useful tool in promoting their political will. This Ethno-political association to regional clubs was intensified following Spain's transition into democracy (Tuñón & Brey, 2012). In the modern football arena, we have seen an increasing symmetry of power relations, in which the supporters of Athletic and Barça will openly express their political sentiments against the Spanish central government. The result is “a hybrid meta-narrative of soccer in Spain...the co-existence of various tones and voices within a single arena” (Vaczi, 2015, p. 155).

This hybrid of narratives in Spanish football has led to open confrontation between Spain's peripheral nationalities and the central government. In the 2009 King's Cup final, FC Barcelona faced off against Athletic Bilbao in one of the most politically controversial matches in the history of the trophy. As the Spanish national anthem was played through the loudspeakers, over 55,000 Basque and Catalan fans

whistled and booed the anthem so intensely that it could not be heard (Rodríguez Ortega, 2016). Three years later, the clubs qualified for the King's Cup again, this time held in Madrid. In a controversial move, the Madrid Court of Justice approved the demonstration of Pro-Spain, neo-facist Fangalist organizations in Madrid on the same day. To make its stance against peripheral nationalism evident, the president of the Comunidad de Madrid province declared that the final would be suspended should the Spanish national anthem be whistled once again (Vaczi, 2015).

The 2015 King's Cup witnessed yet another Athletic-Barça match. And Spanish authorities took extensive measures to prevent nationalist sentiments from being involved in future matches. The State Commission against Violence, Racism, Xenophobia, and Intolerance in Sport fined Barça 66,000 euros for its actions in the game, and fined Bilbao a lower amount of 18,000. Additionally, the presence of Catalan flags—marked as the de facto symbol of Catalan independence—led to the central government administering a hefty fine of 123,000 euros on the Royal Spanish Football Federation, for their part in Barça's behavior (Bull, 2015). The central government's actions make it clear that it opposes any and all forms of nationalist sentiments from the Basque and Catalan fans. As such, it established itself by both clubs as the “antagonistic” character that must be beaten. Athletic and Barça both see this Spanish antagonistic character represented by the one major club that has seemingly been supported by Spanish central powers throughout its history—Real Madrid.

Real Madrid

Originally named “Madrid FC,” the club later changed its name in 1920 to Real Madrid, when Spain's King Alfonso XIII conferred to it the title of *Real*, or Spanish for “royal” (Kelly, 2019). That same year also marked the start of the club's rise to prominence in La Liga. In its history, Real Madrid has won

thirteen European Cup championships, 33 La Liga championships, nineteen Copa Del Rey titles, and was recognized by FIFA as the best club of the 20th century (“Real Madrid,” n.d.). Like its rivals FC Barcelona and Athletic Bilbao, Real Madrid is the third club that has never been relegated from the first division. And as these two clubs stand as symbols of regional identity, Madrid also serves as a symbol of Spanish nationalism and unity for its regional supporters. Underlying this nationalist identity, however, is Real Madrid’s tangible manifestation as the Spanish government. Its past associations with Francisco Franco, and its current support from Spanish nationalists, have marked Real Madrid as the club of Spanish centralism.

Franco’s Team

The roots of Real Madrid’s centralist character were planted during the Franco regime. Although the club was never officially institutionalized as Franco’s football club, it seemed that the dictator held Real Madrid as a favorite (Tuñón & Brey, 2012). Two historical events during this period solidified Real Madrid’s centralist identity. One event occurred in the 1943 Copa Del Generalísimo, in which Barça suffered one of its worst defeats in El Clásico history. FC Barcelona won the first leg match of the semi-finals, having defeated Real Madrid in a 3-0 victory. On the day of the second leg match, however, the central government ensured that the atmosphere of Real’s Chamartín stadium would be filled with hostility from nationalist and fascist supporters alike (Kelly, 2019). In addition, Spain’s director of state security visited the Barça dressing room before the start of the match. With a questionably loaded weapon in his possession, he quietly indicated to the Barça team that they needed to let Real Madrid win the match. This, combined with a hostile environment, led to Real Madrid’s 11-1 victory over FC Barcelona (Murray, 2010).

Given his ideology, there is no doubt that Franco wanted to see the long-term success of Real Madrid. For him, the club served as “a convenient counterweight to Barcelona and everything the Catalan club stood for...” (Kelly, 2019, para. 26). If there was to be a dominant force in Spanish football, Franco wanted it to be Spanish unity rather than Catalan separatism. Under Franco’s refusal to accept Barça as the dominant force, Madrid’s central-nationalist identity was formed.

Afredo Di Stefano

The second event followed ten years later, with the signing of Argentinian star Alfredo Di Stefano—a player who would forever change the course and identity of Real Madrid football. Having suffered a 19-year championship drought, Real Madrid was in dire need for new talent. In spring of 1952, Real Madrid witnessed the breathtaking play of the Argentinian forward, when he played in a friendly match against Spanish football clubs. From that point, FC Barcelona and Real Madrid were engaged in a race to sign the Argentinian star (West, 2014). Initially, Barcelona seemed to have the lead in recruiting Di Stefano, as they were deeply invested in negotiations for his signing. However, negotiations were complicated. Di Stefano’s registration rights were still under claim by the Argentine club River Plate, whom he had illegally left for Columbia three years prior (Murray, 2010). Barça’s sole negotiations with River Plate—and its failure to acknowledge the Di Stefano’s current Millonarios club in the process—led to Barça’s inability to sign Di Stefano. The Millonarios eventually backed out of the deal, refusing to sign Di Stefano over to the Catalan club.

The Spanish Football Federation (RFEF) intervened when Barça allowed Di Stefano to play a few friendly matches northern Spain, against Millonarios’ rejection. The RFEF refused to sanction Barça’s transfer, on the grounds that the Millonarios did not agree to the decision. Barça stood firm in their position that they had an agreement with River Plate, the true legal owners of Di Stefano’s registration

(West, 2014). In the midst of this controversy, Real Madrid decided to negotiate a contract with the Millonarios, leading to an impasse in who would receive the star. The RFEF decided to have the two clubs share Di Stefano, as he would play for Barça and Real Madrid in alternating years (Murray, 2010). Exasperated and frustrated over the actions of a Madrid-based system, Barça suspiciously “destroyed” their contract, freeing Di Stefano to play for Real Madrid permanently (West, 2014). Recognized as Real Madrid’s best player in history, the Argentinian helped Real Madrid win eight La Liga championships and five European Cup championships.

However, Di Stefano’s contract dealing also cemented the club’s association with the Spanish government. Following his debut with Real Madrid in 1953, speculations arose about Franco’s involvement in the star’s purchase. The dictator’s animosity towards FC Barcelona, and the RFEF’s reluctance to sign Di Stefano’s over to Barça, led many fans to believe that they were shafted by government interference. With the government’s favoritism apparent, Real Madrid later became known as the “Regime Team” (West, 2014). This identity association with Franco cemented the club’s identity as a centralist figurehead during the Franco regime.

Real Madrid’s ties with Franco began to linger by the 1980s. But by this decade, relations between football and society were already categorized by a plurinational Spain. Real Madrid’s prior identity gave way to a “more plural and complex scenario” in the context of Spanish football (Goig, 2007, p. 61). Its identity bore witness to its own dismantlement in the 1990s, becoming the grounds on which new identities were built. Madrid adopted a new identity according to the political sentiments of the Basque and Catalan regions. And Real Madrid’s central-nationalist perspective, these peripheral regions adopted new identities that differed greatly from their former. This dynamic interchanging of identities can be best understood in analyzing La Liga’s major rivalries: El Viejo Clásico and El Clásico.

EL VIEJO CLÁSICO

Before the infamous El Clásico derby, Athletic and Real Madrid had the most intense rivalry in the Spanish football league. Often referred to as El Viejo Clásico, or “The Old Classic,” both clubs were dominant forces in the early 20th century, winning seven La Liga championships between them since the derby’s origins in 1929. While it remains greatly overshadowed by the dominant El Clásico today, El Viejo Clásico serves as the perfect reflection of Basque-Spanish relations.

Post-Franco Football and the ETA

Following the death of Francisco Franco, the atmosphere for Real Madrid’s arrival in the San Mames Stadium was very hostile. Political connotations were apparent in the Basque arena, as ETA banners were flown throughout the stadium as a subtle challenge to Real Madrid’s representation of centralized power (Fitzpatrick, 2018). *Euskadi ta Askatasuna*, translated as “Basque Homeland and Freedom,” was a Basque, radical left-wing terrorist group. Founded in 1959 in response to heavy oppression under the Franco regime, ETA strongly pursued the independence of a Basque homeland (Whitfield, 2015). What originally started as ideological discussions and gradual escalation of propaganda turned into violence and armed conflict with Spanish forces. Between 1968 and 2011, ETA killed approximately 840 people, injured 2,500 more, and was responsible for 80 kidnappings. The ratification of the Spanish Constitution in 1978—which granted the Basque Country with the autonomy they had once enjoyed before the Civil War—marked the decline of ETA’s popularity (Garcia, 2018).

This also marked the apparent polarity in Basque identity, in which nationalists felt betrayed by those who had accepted autonomy over full independence. To break the popular consensus on autonomy and provoke a response from Spanish authorities once again, the ETA proceeded to attack politicians and government officials who opposed Basque independence. Rather than gaining support from the Basque

population, the terrorist group struck fear in the hearts of many in society. As reflected in Figure 1, ETA's attacks pressured many Basques to seek negotiations with the terrorists, although the majority would only do so under the condition that it ceased its violent behaviors. This shows that the Basque Country perceived ETA as an enemy more so than an ally seeking Basque independence.

Figure 1: Opinion on Negotiations with the ETA, 1996-2014 (%)

	1996	1999	2002	2005	2008	2011	2014
Never	11	7	14	18	16	19	12
If ETA ceases violence	42	39	39	50	49	43	45
Always	34	45	37	27	33	34	40
No response	13	9	10	5	2	4	3

Source: Euskobarómetro, temporary series.

Figure 2: Freedom in discussing Basque Country's politics, 1997-2014 (%)

	1997	1999	2002	2005	2008	2011	2014	2017
With everybody	35	36	34	34	35	46	54	51
With some people	40	41	44	40	43	37	33	38
With almost nobody	16	13	12	19	14	10	9	11
With nobody	8	8	9	6	7	6	3	0
No response	1	2	1	1	1	1	1	0

Source: Euskobarómetro, temporary series.

Figure 2 demonstrates the fear that prevented many Basques from discussing politics. It wasn't until the ETA's official ceasefire in 2011 that the Basque felt more open discussing politics, with an approximately half the population feeling more comfortable doing by 2014. Although the Basque Country's identity is far removed from any associations with the ETA, the impacts of the terrorist group still linger in Basque perceptions. These lingering ideals manifest themselves in how Athletic sees Real

Madrid. Most Basque fans today still see the club as a manifestation of Spanish centralism—a figure that radically promotes Spanish homogeneity by overlooking the autonomous communities.

Real Madrid: A Global Marketing Machine

This centralist view has developed since the 1990s. Former Athletic president Fernando Lamikiz stated that the association with Real Madrid to Francoism and the central government is not as strong as it was during the late 20th century. This is because Real Madrid has become a global marketing machine, focused on acquiring the world's best players to maintain its position in the league (F. Lamikiz, personal interview, December 3, 2019). Real Madrid's globalist identity can be best understood through its own president Florentino Pérez.

Both a power-driven businessman and careful diplomat, Pérez has become known as the “boss” of Real Madrid. Coming into presidency in 2000, Pérez was immediately tasked with resolving the club's debt of €300 million. To resolve this debt, the club's training ground was sold to city and regional authorities for a sum of €500 million (Nash, 2004). This not only resolved Real Madrid's financial burden, but left more than enough for Pérez to enact his “Galácticos” policy. In this policy, Pérez proceeded to create a five-man squad composed of the world's best athletes. Among these athletes included English midfielder David Beckham, former Barça midfielder Luís Figo, and widely known forward Cristiano Ronaldo. This resulted in a six-year period of success, with Real Madrid winning two La Liga championships and two Champions League titles (Alameda, 2018). Since his debut in 2000, Florentino Pérez has become one of the most powerful men in the country. With connections to government officials of Partido Popular, a party of the right-wing Spanish elites, Pérez always has strong government support for his actions. This entails that Real Madrid will always have some degree of favoritism from the government elite, considering that its president has such strong connections.

With Pérez in control, Real Madrid has adopted an identity far separated from its centralist one. In the 2017 season, Real Madrid generated record revenue of \$895.5 million (El Hassan, 2019). And before La Liga's transfer window opened in 2019, Real Madrid had already spent an astonishing \$340 million on five non-EU players (McMahon, 2019). With a slew of foreign players in its squad, Real Madrid has recruited very few "home-grown" athletes, with the number of academy players reaching the first team decreasing over time. In comparison to Barcelona's nine, Real Madrid only had six academy players for its 2019 squad (Calderón, 2019).

With Real Madrid's lucrative spending on foreign talent, most Athletic supporters have come to see the club as a global marketing phenomenon. According to Fernando Lamikiz, most supporters find it hard to hate Real Madrid because it no longer represents Spanish identity (F. Lamikiz, personal interview, December 3, 2019). Because the team is a multinational squad, with its stars being foreign athletes such as Cristiano Ronaldo, it is no longer a bastion of Spanish nationalism. Unlike FC Barcelona, Real Madrid has no players who share the same nationalist sentiments as its fans. As such, the club is disliked for reasons than before when Real Madrid was considered "Franco's team" (Fitzpatrick, 2018). For Athletic fans today, Real Madrid is one of the two obstacles standing in its path to a La Liga championship. Their rivalry is rooted more in its desire to defeat a successful club.

Athletic: A "Spanish" Club

Athletic's view of Real Madrid has changed, but its recruitment philosophy has not. This adherence to a Basque-only football team has gained the sympathies of a few Real Madrid supporters. These supporters believe that Athletic is the most "Spanish" football club because it only recruits "Spanish" players. Therefore, a Spanish nationalist can hold opposition against sentiments of Basque separatism and still remain an Athletic supporter. This Spanish label dates back to Hispanicization during the Franco

regime, when dictator tolerated, respected, and even liked Athletic's philosophy. The philosophy was welcomed by Franco because it was a manifestation of his purist agenda; it could always be labeled as "Spanish." Spain could always turn to the Basque Country for local heroes to use for its Spanish national team, or *La Furia Española* (Vaczi, 2015). In the modern arena, we witness this subtle labeling of the Athletic team from a few Real Madrid supporters who still possess lingering Francoist sentiments in their perception of the Basque club. This minority however is overshadowed by the majority who ambivalently see Athletic as the Basque rival—a community far separate from what Spain truly represents. They do not understand Basque identity, and therefore see the club as a symbol of Spain's unknown.

It is clear that Athletic-Real Madrid perceptions still have political undertones. But regardless, the derby is not as politically charged as it once had been. Today, the derby is a clash between two different models. As a symbol of Basque resistance to a changing world, Athletic stands as the juxtaposition to a globalized Real Madrid, far separated from its ties to Spanish identity today. As Lamikiz best framed it, the derby is a battle between the central versus "something that is a little different" (F. Lamikiz, personal interview, December 3, 2019). Lamikiz reserved the peripheral label for the club that stands strongly for its region's independence and identity. For years, the Catalan FC Barcelona has remained the fierce rival of Real Madrid in one of the most globally recognized derbies: El Clásico.

El Clásico

El Clásico officially overtook its older counterpart in 2011. This began when Johan Cruyff took over as the Barça manager in 1988, leading the club to win four league titles on the bounce in the early 1990s. With FC Barcelona winning more championships over time, Athletic Bilbao begun to fade domestically,

having failed to win a La Liga title since 1984 (Fitzpatrick, 2018). From its humble origins in the early decade, El Clásico has developed into more than just a football game.

Today, it is a global spectacle that unites together two powerhouse clubs of lucrative revenue and success. The two clubs rank consistently as the wealthiest clubs in the world, with Real Madrid and FC Barcelona generating a total revenue of €750.9 and €690.4 million in their 2017/18 seasons respectively (El Hassan, 2019). A spring 2017 report from sports marketing consultant Amir Somoggi analyzes the economic impact of these two clubs from the previous year. Figure 3 shows that in 2016, FC Barcelona and Real Madrid combined amassed total revenue of €1.24 billion, as a result of increases in broadcasting, commercial good sales, and ticket sales. This whopping revenue resulted in a 0.11% increase in Spain's GDP. As Somoggi concludes, for every €1,000 produced by the Spanish economy, about €1.11 came from Real Madrid and FC Barcelona (2017).

CONSOLIDATED REVENUES- REAL MADRID + FC BARCELONA VS. SPANISH GDP- € MILLIONS

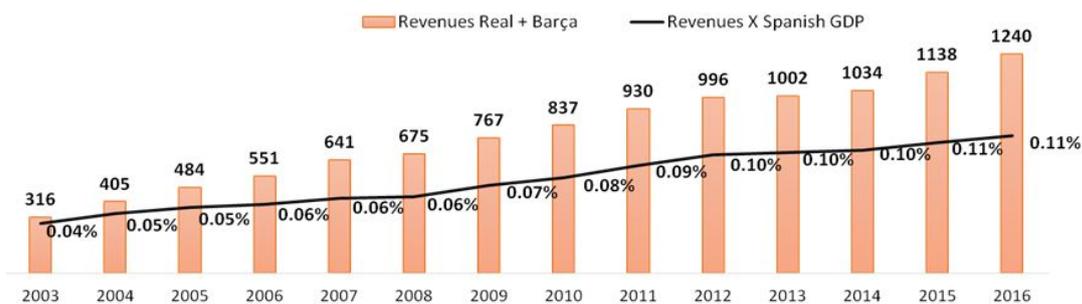


Figure 3. Consolidated revenues, FC Barcelona and Real Madrid to aid with Spain GDP. From “Real Madrid vs. FC Barcelona Report—Spring 2017” by Amir Somoggi, 2017, <https://www.sbibarcelona.com/newsdetails/index/321>. Copyright 2017.

With nearly 100 million watching this derby yearly, El Clásico has expanded beyond the perimeters of Spain and into the lives of soccer enthusiasts worldwide. This gives a global viewpoint to the external politics surrounding the derby itself.

Origins of Catalonia's Independence Movement

Just as the derby has expanded beyond the borders of La Liga, so too has the ideological-political confrontation between Real Madrid and FC Barcelona. El Clásico has become a representation of the growing tensions between Catalans seeking independence and the Spanish nationalists who oppose it. This began with the question of Catalonia's powers under autonomy. For years, the region of Catalonia has remained one of Spain's wealthiest and most productive regions. It enjoyed a great deal of autonomy until the Franco regime, in which the region's identity and powers were repressed. When Franco died, Catalonia was once again granted its autonomy under a new, democratic Spain ("Catalonia's bid...", 2019). However, the right to declare itself a "nation" was reserved only for the Spanish State. The implicit wording of Article II in the 1978 Spanish Constitution defines Spain and its regions as the following:

The Constitution is based on the indissoluble unity of the Spanish nation, the common and indivisible country of all Spaniards; it [recognizes] and guarantees the right to autonomy of the nationalities and regions of which it is composed, and the solidarity amongst them all (Spanish Constitution, Preliminary, Art. II)

The right to nation namesake was not extended to the Basque Country or Catalonia. While the existence of ETA in the Basque Country dissuaded many from pursuing full independence, Catalan's desires for secession intensified over the years. The 2008 financial crash resulted in Spain dealing heavy public spending cuts to Catalonia. This only fueled the Catalan's resentment towards the central government, thereby fueling their determination to separate from greater Spain. This regional conflict sets the context for the FC Barcelona-Real Madrid rivalry today. Unlike the external politics surrounding the derby, the competitive nature of sports "takes places in ideal conditions; an artificially created equality of chances"

(Vaczi, 2015, p. 151). In this equal playing field, FC Barcelona's and Real Madrid's athletes and supporters are agents of the field, demonstrating regional attitudes through their own behaviors.

Catalan Separatists versus Spanish Nationalists

Since 2009, club identity has been crystalized by the attitudes and behaviors of its supporters. In 2009, Barcelona beat Athletic Bilbao in the King's Cup final. This was one of the most controversial matches in the history of the trophy, as Basque and Catalan supporters furiously booed the Spanish national anthem and King Juan Carlos I. As a response to this game, the following year witnessed a match between Real Madrid and FC Barcelona, with the former defeating the latter in a 1-0 victory. Following the match, a crowd of Real Madrid supporters gathered around the Cibeles fountain, located in the center of downtown Madrid. The supporters not only wore club gear, they also proudly touted the Spanish flag. The crowd proceeded to chant "I'm a Spaniard, Spaniard, Spaniard" (Rogdríguez Ortega, 2016). Real Madrid supporters associate their victories with triumphs over Basque and Catalan nationalism. In a similar vein to Barça, they use Real Madrid as a vehicle of Spanish pride and unity. So from the perspective of Spanish nationalists, Real Madrid stands as the manifestation of true "Spanishness" while FC Barcelona is the epitome of the separatist sentiments that threaten to dissolve Spanish unity.

Catalan-Spanish Sentiments in Modern Football

The ideological division between Catalan and Spanish nationalists has become more embedded in El Clásico over the last few years. In October 2017, Catalonia's pro-independence leaders proposed a full referendum for independence. Of the 2.26 million Catalans who voted on Sunday, 90% voted in favor of independence (Greenfield, 2017). This referendum, however, was declared illegal by the Spanish constitutional court, on the grounds that it was beyond Catalonia's constitutional powers to propose any referendums. Civil unrest erupted in Catalonia, resulting in violent police intervention from the central

government. And upon Catalonia declaration of independence on October 27, Madrid dissolved the Catalan parliament, sacked its leaders and set a snap election for two months later (“Catalonia’s bid...,” 2019).

Amid the civil unrest, Barcelona had played its game against Las Palmas behind closed doors. This served as condemnation over the use of brutality by national security forces against citizens. Indirectly, it showed support for Catalans in their struggle for independence (West, 2017). Only hours following Barça’s game, Real Madrid supporters raised the *Rojigualda* (Spanish flag) above their heads during the home game. As the Catalan flag *La Estelada* was associated with Catalan independence, the *Rojigualda* was identified as a symbol of Spanish homogeneity. The presence of the flag in Real Madrid’s Bernabéu Stadium, especially hours after Barça’s closed game, shows that Real Madrid supporters are opposed to Catalonian independence, unified in maintaining a cohesive Spain. In combination with *la Estelada* at FC Barcelona’s games, the two flags signal the role of El Clásico in “articulating two non-compatible views of Spain” (Rodríguez Ortega 2016, p. 632).

Real Madrid Favoritism in La Liga

Despite the equal playing field of football, many Catalan fans feel that FC Barcelona is still at a disadvantage in La Liga. This is because there appears to be an inherent bias in the perceptions and statements of La Liga president Javier Tebas. A lifelong Real Madrid fan, Tebas remains highly vocal about his political views (West, 2017). In 2019, Tebas went public with his support for the far-right Spanish party Vox, stating that he would vote for the party in the upcoming November 2019 elections. Among the party’s opposition to same-sex marriage, abortion rights, and immigration, Vox is known for its vehement disapproval of the Catalonian independence movement. Seeing a strong nationalist cause in the right-wing party, Tebas expressed how his identity fit with Vox’s political ideology: “If extreme right

means to defend the unity of Spain, life and the Catholic way of life, I am in that group and I continue to think the same...” (Mayalon, 2019, para. 8).

For the past three years, Tebas has been at the centre of antagonism against FC Barcelona’s actions in the Catalan independence movements. When FC Barcelona requested to postpone their match with Las Palmas, Tebas denied the club’s offer; he threatened Barça with a six-point penalty if they did not play. Tebas then approved the players of Las Palmas to play with a badge of the Spanish flag woven into their shirts. This proved to be a controversial and inflammatory move. It signified the Spanish support of Canary Islanders, whom arrived in a region where most people were determined to leave Spain (West, 2017). But his most controversial move was his decision to ban all Catalan clubs from La Liga should the region secede from Spain. From an economic analysis, this would have led to the loss in millions for Real Madrid, La Liga, and the Spanish economy, as no rivalry would have ever achieved the global recognition and revenue of El Clásico (Mazariegos, 2016). With his actions and statements, Tebas shows that he does not adopt an impartial stance in Barça-La Liga affairs. For many Catalan supporters, Real Madrid’s support from Javier Tebas reinforces the club’s identity as a centralist, Spanish nationalist character.

While Real Madrid supporters tend to be avid nationalists who oppose Catalan independence, this does not necessarily mean that the club identifies with Tebas’ political ideology and actions. On October 15, 2019, nine Catalan independence leaders were put on trial and given sentences of nine to thirteen years in prison. This resulted in clashes between Catalan protestors, right-wing groups, and state police throughout the month of October. FC Barcelona and Real Madrid agreed to postpone their El Clásico match dated for October 26. Due to safety fears surrounding the protests, both clubs and the Royal Spanish Football Federation (RFEF) decided to move their match to December 18, as this would be the best date for both teams to play (Lane, 2019). This was decided against the suggestions made by La Liga

committee, which suggested that the game either be played in Real Madrid's Santiago Bernabéu Stadium or the week after the original date. This shows that Real Madrid is not aligned with La Liga or the authority figures in this arena.

This is further exemplified by its opposition against La Liga in holding the Villarreal-Atlético match in Miami, Florida on December 6, 2019. The Madrid club sent a formal letter to the RFEF expressing its "surprise by LaLiga's intentions, and that of an [organization] which must always maintain impartiality" (Maroto, 2019, para. 2). Real Madrid's strongly worded letter accused Javier Tebas of pursuing interests beyond those regarding sport, fairness, and equality, taking disgruntlement with his desire to make decisions that do not adhere to the fair nature of football.

The club's decision to postpone the El Clásico match, and its disapproval of La Liga's actions, show that the club is not a representation of La Liga, let alone the president. Real Madrid symbolizes Spanish nationality and unity first and foremost. Its links with the central government are a result of those figures tying their political attitudes to the club's success. The external political context of Real Madrid, then, establishes the club as a manifestation of the central government. To most Spanish supporters, the Catalan separatists of FC Barcelona threaten the basis on which their own identity has been built. However, Real Madrid still upholds fairness and equality in sport. And any actions from the league that grant an unfair advantage will be shunned by the Spanish football club. The distinction can be made, then, that Real Madrid does not stand as the club of La Liga, Javier Tebas or the central government, nor does it maintain Francoist sentiments in its identity today. To its supporters, Real Madrid stands as a symbol of Spanish nationalism, against a Catalan club that seeks independence from greater Spain. On the other side, Barca's Catalan supporters still perceive Real Madrid as a figurehead of the central government.

Accordingly, they see themselves as caged birds in the ideological-political football arena—a prideful nation struggling to break free from the central government.

CONCLUSIONS

Purpose

The purpose of this dissertation is to analyze the self-reflections and external perceptions of Spain's nationalities through football club identity. As they are often influenced by external factors, understanding Spain's regional identities through politics proves extremely difficult. The struggle for power between parties are often influenced by external factors. Factors such as media, money, and government intervention skew the perceptions that can be made of Spain's regions, thereby leading to biased and partial analysis.

Football provides the perfect context for analyzing Spain's plurinationality. In this arena, in which regions are usually placed on an equal playing field, the struggle for power and acknowledgement is associated with victory. Accordingly, the more success a region's club has, the more power that region gains. It is in this arena that one better understands regional identity. Unhindered by external factors, football grants uncensored and fair insight into the ideological attitudes underlying a club and representing the club's region. It is in Spanish football that the nation's plurinationality is perfectly shown.

Summary

By focusing on the top three clubs in the league (FC Barcelona, Real Madrid, Athletic Bilbao), one comes to understand how Spain and its autonomous regions perceive themselves and each other. Real Madrid is the perfect example of the strength and international expansiveness that Spanish nationalists associate themselves with. Throughout its history, Real Madrid has always been associated with

centralism through associations with Franco and Spanish authorities. As a result, Real Madrid is seen as a beacon of Spanish nationalism by its supporters. But it will always be perceived as the “antagonist” centralist club that must be beaten. Madrid is an obstacle in Athletic’s path to a championship, while it remains the manifestation of the government obstacle in Catalonia’s path to independence.

For the Basque Country, Athletic is a symbol of Basque resistance and excellence. To most fans, adhering to its traditions is the best manner of winning. Remaining true to its localist recruitment philosophy in a globalized football arena gives Basque supporters pride in the peculiarity of their culture and way of life. While different in club model, Athletic is seen as ideologically similar to Catalan FC Barcelona. In the views of Real Madrid supporters, its philosophy makes Athletic the most “Spanish” club in Europe. Yet, its culture and identity are foreign to the values that Spain truly embodies.

FC Barcelona has become a globalized safehaven for Catalan expression, a beacon of hope in the region’s independence. Guided by its devotion to democracy, justice, and self-determination, Barça remains loyal to its supporters through a strong devotion to Catalonia. But on the international scale, Barça display its avant-garde character through its recruitment of foreign talent and regional prosperity. This perfect balance between foreign and homegrown talent speaks to the international vision, audacity, and modernized identity of Catalans. However, FC Barcelona remains an intense rival to Real Madrid, as its supporters see the club as a threat to Spanish nationalism and unity.

This complex triangular relationship paints a picture of the regional sentiments present in Spain. While Spanish nationalists continue to see Spain as a unified, homogenous character, the Basque and Catalans recognize Spain as a plurinational State. The difference in the perspectives of the Basque and Catalans lies in their desires for independence. Having been deterred by the ETA, the Basque Country enjoys its autonomy, yet still respects Catalonia in their fight against Spanish centralism. Catalans, fueled

by a desire to become their own nation, see the central government as an obstacle in their path to independence.

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