

**FOOTBALL AS A SOCIAL INTEGRATOR.
A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE.
Case study: The British immigrants' integration
into the Brazilian culture in the late 19th century**

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Abstract

England and Brazil are, probably, the two most important nations in the history of football. The former, because it is the country where the rules of modern, organized football were set; the latter, because it is home to the most successful national team in the world. The aim of this article is to show how football helped the British immigrants of the late 19th and early 20th century integrate into the Brazilian society. The article does not present football just as a sport, but more as a driver of human integration, considering its social, not necessarily its sporting effects.

Keywords: human integration, football, immigration, social factor, intercultural experience

Introduction

History tells that football reached Brazil at the end of the 19th century, thanks to Charles Miller. Miller was born in Sao Paulo, in 1875, from British parents who emigrated to South America in search for work and money (Schulze-Marmeling, 2000: 57). The youngster, however, wanted more than just work. He was looking for education and this desire made him return to England at the age of nine for his studies. While in Europe, Miller also played football for Southampton Football Club. According to certain sources, after finishing his studies, Miller returned to Brazil with a "ball and a rulebook in hand" (Bocketti, 2008: 278); other sources mention he had two footballs and corresponding equipment in his luggage (Schulze-Marmeling, 2000: 57). In fact, Miller brought something more to Brazil than simple footballs: he "imported" the idea of the game.

Four years after Miller departed from England, in 1888, the Sao Paulo Athletic Club was founded by British immigrants who were in search of forming a tighter community.

Football: a community consolidator

The Uruguayan novelist Eduardo Galeano explains interestingly why a football supporter uses to say “we play” when he refers to his favourite team. (Galeano, 2006: 13). This comes from the strong impact football has on people. Football has the power to make “WE” happen, because it is a sport that attracts masses. The second half of the nineteenth century brought important changes to the British society. Life expectancy increased thanks to the improved technology and science, while more than a quarter of the population was younger than fifteen years of age. But, more important, employees gained the free Saturday afternoon (Carter, 2006: 11). From that moment on, people didn’t have to spend the Saturday afternoon working, but instead, they had the choice to watch a football game. And so they did, not only in their home city or town, but all over England, Scotland and Wales, as the rail network expanded – by the 1920s, no less than 120 railway companies existed (Jeremy, 1998: 206). So, towards the end of the century, some thirty years after its first set of official rules was approved, the mentioned social changes transformed football into the main free-time activity of the employees in the industrial sector (Schulze-Marmeling, 2000: 30). Back then, employees used to meet before the start of the match, gathered in a group and headed towards the stadium in order to see some of their colleagues play, as many teams belonged to business enterprises.

Nowadays, too, we can see the capacity of football to build masses of people. A football team has the power to attract people next to it. By gathering thousands of persons in the same place, namely the stadium, the team may consolidate a community. This often happens in the less developed places, for example, in industrial regions. People whose cities do not offer them too many cultural attractions like to gather around the local football team (Roşca, 2010: 65-66). Football attracts the people of a community together and brings them closer to one another by offering them a common interest: the game with the ball at the feet. Men and women, who otherwise would not have had topics to discuss about, begin talking about football. Being a simple game, compared to other sports, football is easy to understand and it gives many possibilities of discussion. There is a funny common expression that says the world is full of football “experts”. Almost each football fan has something to say about his passion. By sharing their points of view, football fans come close to each other and build what we would say *oneness*. Instantly, they find themselves in a community, which is permanently boosted by their shared passion.

The shared passion for football helped the community of British immigrants to easier adapt in Brazil. Like Miller’s parents, other tens of thousands of British people immigrated to Brazil in search of a better life. Besides the advantages the Victorian reign brought to the British Empire, like the development of technology and enrichment of culture, there were also many disadvantages, one of the toughest being poverty. During the 19th century, the population in Great Britain grew

enormously. The better living standards created by the Industrial Revolution helped people have a better life and motivated couples to have more children. Unfortunately, very soon, the accelerated growth of population turned those good living standards into poor living conditions. By the mid 19th century, housing shortage, overcrowding, child labor and high unemployment rates had already become characteristics of the British society.

Ironically, poverty brought a key contribution to the game of football, which was a very cheap mean of entertainment. For many poor people, it was even the only entertainment they could afford, theaters or concert halls being far too expensive. Attending or playing a football match were the best ways to make use of the work-free Sunday afternoon. Football attracted masses of industrial workers as no other activity.

Trying to escape from the poor living conditions mentioned earlier, British inhabitants made use of another result of the Industrial Revolution: the ships. The demographic crisis made British people leave for South America. On the one hand, they no longer had to bear with the poor conditions back home, on the other hand, the states of the American continent, but especially Brazil, were highly promising. The quantity of workforce in Brazil declined as rapidly as the demographics increased in Britain. The abolishment of slavery left the fields unworked and made the landowners search for new human capital, and so, the British immigrants fitted perfectly to their needs. Most Europeans settled down near Sao Paulo to find work on the coffee plantations, attracted also by the governmental policy, which allowed them to hold and make use of small patches of land as reward of their labor. Nevertheless, the immigrants soon found out that not even Brazil was offering very good conditions. It is true that there was a higher living standard than back home, but it was not free of agony and hard work. The British were badly paid and insecure of their workplace (Holloway, 1980).

As soon as they realized they were forming a community, the immigrants began to organize themselves. Social and cultural institutions were founded, and the British immigrants now had their own churches, newspapers, theaters, shops and many sorts of clubs where they could gather together and find the joy of life (Bocketti, 2008: 284). Among those clubs were also the sport clubs.

The Sao Paulo Athletic Club had the social aim to give the British immigrants their own club where they could do sports and participate in sporting events. The first types of sports practiced were horseracing, rugby, rowing and athletics (Bocketti, 2008: 284), sports with tradition in Great Britain. The fact that hurling, the Irish national sport, was not among them, indicates that Englishmen had the highest contingent in that area. As a matter of fact, Irish people did not choose Brazil, but Argentina, where they founded jockey, hurling and rugby clubs.

Back to Brazil, Miller introduced football to the Sao Paulo Athletic Club (Bocketti, 2008: 284). Football never imposed a high financial status, so it fitted well to the rather poor British immigrants. Then, as well as now, manufacturing or buying football equipment and renting a playground did not require much money. Football was a game affordable even to the lower class, and, as it was played in teams, not one, but more players were needed for starting a game. So, in order to play, people from all over the Sao Paulo immigrant community gathered at the ground. There were friends who played, but there were also people who met for the first time and entered the team together. Considering its rules and the need of a team to play, football demanded people to come together, thus encouraging their social interaction. In what concerns the people who did not play, football also was a bridge for interaction. These people, known as “followers” – because they followed the game without playing it – used to attend matches together. The going to the stadium was and still remains a habit done in groups, along friends, colleagues or relatives.

Presumably, Miller made the British community happy, by giving the people another mean to identify themselves with their patriotic feelings and a subject of discussion that had the power to bring them closer to one another, and gave them the possibility to meet more often. Before Miller’s return, football was not played in Brazil, and was known only by a few. Although at the Sao Paulo Athletic Club other different types of sport were practiced, football was missing. Miller introduced it and, all of a sudden, lots of British immigrants were interested in a game familiar to them, a game they were missing and a game in which they spotted the opportunity to better guard their national values. From a totally unknown activity in Brazil, football became a phenomenon that attracted lots of people.

Football clubs members respected the British values learned back home and, as Bocketti considers, they were “self-selecting bodies” (Bocketti, 2008: 279). That means, each club decided on who would be a member and who would not. That is why, in its first years of existence, the Sao Paulo Athletic Club chose its members from the British community, remaining a fully ethnic-oriented organization. The only condition of membership was the British nationality. The activity in the club contributed to the preservation of the British culture, because all practices were done according to British customs. The Sao Paulo Athletic Club adopted the rules of the English Football Association (a Brazilian Association did not even exist; it was founded much later, in 1914), the equipment was brought by Miller from Southampton and accounting and treasury were managed according to the British standards. The Athletic Club was “a small-scale Great Britain” in the city of Sao Paulo, which by 1900 had more than 200,000 inhabitants.

Brazilians were firstly surprised by this new “demonstration” of British values, because they could not understand the game. But, as soon as they did, the Brazilian and the British people began to have better relations. Football opened itself for Brazilians and it eased the integration of the British in the Brazilian society, by

bringing the two cultures closer to each other. Brazilians were attracted by the game, began to play and attend matches, and that is how contacts between them and the Europeans became a habit. The more time the members of the two cultures spent together, the better they coped with each other. Out of nothing, a mass of people of different origins but who shared the same passion was formed. The British and Brazilians were no longer strange to each other, because football brought them together and gave them the possibility to socialize. Soon, the British were invited into the until then-closed circles of the Brazilian society. Yet, despite this facility to deeper explore the private and working lives of the Brazilians, British immigrants maintained their group cohesion, forming a strong community which permitted guarding the national values they brought from the United Kingdom. Football had its important role in this case too. Immigrants who met at football matches or clubs became friends and began to be voluntarily active for their small community. Besides British theaters, British newspapers (among others, reporting about the football games of the Athletic Club) were established.

Football: a social integrator

The role of football as a social integrator was already presented earlier, with a focus on the example of social interaction between local Brazilians and British immigrants. It is worth adding that football is an elevator which helps people go further up in the society.

In the process of adapting to a new culture or society, learning the habits of the locals is a time consuming activity. Football seems to cut the required time to get along with locals, because the game is the same in all cultures and to all people. No matter where they live, who they are or what they do, people have the same understanding of football. Football is a global language that drops communication barriers. On the pitch, everybody speaks the same language, the one of the game. Not surprisingly, many friendships between locals and immigrants appear due to football games. When playing, people communicate not only by words or gestures, but also by their attitude and their way of playing the game. Football acts as an “icebreaker”: locals and immigrants meet on the pitch and set contact. When the game is over, they meet again, this time to discuss, to communicate – more or less comprehensibly by words or gestures, but definitely through feelings and interpretation – what happened during the football game and what each of them thinks of it.

Football gives poor or rich immigrants the chance of meeting people from their new homeland – be these locals or other immigrants – and of making new friends. The next step, as shown below, may well be developing joint businesses and, thus, raising the living standard of the immigrants.

The British product football proved to be one of the most important social integration factors in the late 19th and the early 20th century Brazil, because, following the example of the British immigrants, other immigrants, such as Germans, Italians, Spaniards or Portuguese naturally used this sport in order to make friends and to maintain contacts with their nationals and with the Brazilians. Sport Club Germania, Palestra Italia, Portuguesa de Desportos or Hespânia Foot Ball Club have all been established by European immigrants (Bocketti, 2008: 279). At the beginning, these clubs met and played against each other, and this may indicate how cosmopolitan the immigrant society was. Furthermore, this society met the local one. Football has had a huge impact on the birth of multiculturalism in Brazil, a social and economic phenomenon that at the end of the 19th century defined the world as well as it does today. The difference is that today there is a larger mix of instruments that accelerate the process of globalization; the internet and mass communication being just two interfaces of the many other possible. More than a hundred years ago, there was no such thing as the World Wide Web, but there was football. Sports, in general, and football, in particular, were the drivers of globalization and multiculturalism. Football was exported from Great Britain to other countries in Europe, then to South America and to the rest of the world. No wonder that the first football clubs outside Great Britain were established in port cities such as Le Havre, Bremen, Hamburg, Lisbon, Buenos Aires and Sao Paulo. It was in the ports that the immigrants descended. As transport facilities were not too developed at that time, travelling deeper into the country would have cost time and money. Immigrants rather stayed and searched for work in the first foreign town they set foot in, and while doing that they introduced football to the local culture. When playing the game, they were joined by other people in the community. Old and new immigrants met on the pitch and, playing football helped them create bonds of friendship. Football opened doors to newly arrived immigrants, who were granted permission in the community. Football was a strong enough reason to gather people and make them play or watch the game. New immigrants had the chance to meet old immigrants and, thus, easier integrate in the society. Locals were also an important part of the game. They were introduced to football and, thanks to the game, the immigrants had the opportunity to demonstrate the locals that they were honest people who respected the local culture and who did not want anything more than find a workplace in order to raise their living standards. No harm was intended.

Conclusions

That Sao Paulo offered better working opportunities and was more attractive for immigrants than the nearby cities of Santos or Rio de Janeiro can be demonstrated by the dates at which the first football clubs of these cities were established: Sao Paulo (1888; though football was first played in 1894), Fluminense Rio de Janeiro (1902) and Santos Futebol Clube (1912).

Next to football, British people also brought their culture and their values with them, presenting these to the Brazilians. That society made contact with a new culture and also experienced it by taking part in football games. But football was just a key to open the lock, it was the reason why immigrants and locals gathered together. After meeting face to face, they did not just discuss about football, but engaged into richer discussions that helped British people ascend the Brazilian society. Football was just the “small-talk” that broke the ice and made the boundaries between the locals and the foreigners disappear, enabling communication to start.

Locals were invited to play or watch matches next to the immigrants and often, their discussions on the terraces of the stadium were prolonged in the clubhouses. That is how the British began to ascend the Brazilian society. The football games as well as the meetings following them were also suitable occasions for local and British businesspeople to set up the context for various mutually profitable business activities. Not only businesspeople, but also other categories of Brazilians helped the British easier integrate in the new society they had chosen for enlarging their life chances. The welfare of the British community started to rise and it was football that helped the immigrants come closer to achieving their dreams of higher earnings and better living, things that were not actually offered by the local market and authorities.

It is admirable how football helped the British immigrants to preserve the values, the traditions and other cultural elements they had brought with them from home and, at the same time, it paved their way to integrating in the new society they had chosen to live in.

This paper is an attempt to demonstrate that football must not be seen only as a sport, but also as a social phenomenon that may add value to a society.

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