

Pulling Up Stakes? Sport and Sub-National Solidarity for Catalonia's Independence

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Abstract: As of 2017, the pro-independence Catalan government prepares the region's secession in spite of a constitutional ban. The Catalan sovereignty process has been particularly intensive between 2009 and 2017, and frequently relied on sport and physical culture to mobilize people behind the idea of independence. Drawing on the agonistic nature of both sport competition and politics, Lluís Llach's famous resistance song *L'estaca* ("The stake") emerges as a new metaphor for state-region antagonism and sub-national solidarity. The song's logic of pulling a stake from multiple sides until it yields allows us to consider the binary and agonistic aspects of center-periphery oppositions, while also acknowledging that such struggles do not take place in isolation. Secessionist projects pulling away from a state often draw support and inspiration from analogous movements, in this case Basque nationalism, especially when directed at a common opponent. Historically and for the past years (2009-2017), several sport events featured Basques and Catalans as they accumulatively conspired towards the weakening of their sub-national ties to what they see as Spain's "stake," ultimately contributing to the current breakaway situation.

Key words: Basque Country, Catalonia, nationalism, solidarity, sport.

Resumen: En el 2017 el gobierno independentista catalán preparó la independencia de la región a pesar de su prohibición constitucional. El proceso soberanista catalán ha sido particularmente intenso durante los años 2009 y 2017, y ha contado a menudo con los deportes y la cultura física para movilizar a la gente tras la bandera de la independencia. Aferrándose a la naturaleza agónica tanto de las competiciones deportivas como de la política, la famosa canción de resistencia de Lluís Llach *L'estaca* ("La estaca") sirve como metáfora para interpretar el antagonismo estado-región y para la solidaridad subnacional. La lógica de la canción nos permite considerar los aspectos binarios y agónicos de la oposición centro-periferia, aunque tales luchas no se dan de forma aislada. Más concretamente, durante los últimos años (2009-2017), se han producido varios eventos deportivos en los que vascos y catalanes han perseguido el objetivo común de debilitar los mencionados lazos subnacionales, contribuyendo así en última instancia a la situación actual de ruptura.

Palabras clave: País Vasco, Cataluña, nacionalismo, solidaridad, deporte.

Early June 2016, my human tower team *Castellers de Barcelona* was invited to perform in the Basque province of Gipuzkoa, in the north-west of Spain, at a non-binding referendum about the region's independence. Basques held a symbolic referendum inspired by the Catalan precedent two years before, and they invited the *castells*, this intimately Catalan, folkloric traditional sport, to help vindicate the right to vote about independence. By then, I had spent two seasons with the Barcelona *colla* ("gang") doing ethnographic fieldwork on the interfaces of pro-independence politics and physical culture. On our way on the bus, the team leaders asked us not to wear any political signs when we perform. "But why," a performer exclaimed. "We are going to a political event!" There is a sense in which, I always found, nationalism dares not speak its name in Spain, and the campaign for a "yes" vote was carefully wrapped in a campaign for voting rights. Because "building a human tower is like building a nation," as Catalans would tell you, Basques invited a *castells* team to help them visualize, instead of verbalize, their own nation building ambitions through the iconicity of building these ambitious human structures.

Basques greeted us with great cordiality and friendship, and performed the *aurrezku*, a dance honoring the visitor, on the village squares of Arrasate and Azpeitia. When the two five-year-old "crowners," child performers who top the towers, pulled out an *ikurrina* and a *senyera*, the Basque and Catalan national flags, emotion and applause overtook the square. "We are so happy you came," a local woman told us. "It shows that we are not alone in this [pursuing independence from Spain]." "First you become independent," a man added, with reference to the intensity of the current Catalan sovereignty process, "and then we follow suit. Let's get away from this mammoth state!" While we were building human towers, Basques lined up to vote on a question: "Would you like to be citizen of an independent Basque state?" Several Catalan politicians and pro-independence NGOs were present, amicably socializing and observing the vote. "Basque urns with a Catalan accent," a local headline went the following day, and noted the cordial relationship between the two autonomous communities with marked historical nationalist and secessionist desires.

It is a truth universally acknowledged among ethnographers that the best revelatory incidents emerge in the cracks of grand display events, when the cameras are turned off, the journalists are gone, and the stage is dismounted. After locals went home for their Sunday lunches — the obliging rhythm of life asserts itself in villages —, a group of elderly

ladies and a man with an accordion emerged in the facilities where our team of about 120 people was having lunch. They were a local choir. They asked if they could disturb for a second, as they had prepared a song for us. After the first few accords, Catalans broke out in applause, ovation, and tears in their eyes with recognition: it was *L'estaca* ("The stake"), the Catalan liberty song written in the fashion of American ballads:

Grandpa Siset was talking to me
Early in the morning, by the front door,
As we were waiting for the sun to rise,
And watched the carts passing.

Siset, don't you see the stake
To which we are all tied?
If we can't break loose from it,
We will never be able to walk.

But if we pull it, it will fall down.
It can't last very long.
It will surely fall, fall, fall,
It must already be rather declined.

If you pull it strong here,
And I pull it strong there,
It will surely fall, fall, fall,
And we can liberate ourselves [...]

The song was written in 1968 by Llach, in the depth of the Franco regime and the year of European freedom movements. It became widely known as a song of resistance, solidarity and common struggle against larger political forces. The call for collective conscience culminates when Siset dies, and the singer has to pass on the spirit of unity and struggle to the new generations. The Basque choir's performance received a storm of emotional applause. Rarely does a spontaneous revelatory incident achieve such dramaturgical perfection in its understanding of not only a rally, I thought, but also all that which "dares not speak its name."

A year later, just when the Spanish government raided printing shops, arrested high Catalan governmental officials, cut Catalonia's bank accounts, strengthened police presence, and Europe was observing, increasingly nervous, what would happen on referendum day, a new video of "The stake" song performed by Basque musicians swept

through the social media. Once again, the metaphor emerged before me as a heuristic device through which to approach contemporary nationalisms and sub-national solidarity. Anticipating objections about removing the resistance song from its original context, Francoism, and applying it to contemporary Spain, we must remember that Spain transitioned to democracy forty years ago, and socio-political circumstances are widely different today. And yet, Catalan president Carles Puigdemont wrote this in the *Washington Post* about the central government's crackdown on the preparations of the October 2017 referendum: "Four decades after the death of the dictator Francisco Franco, we still find that authoritarian instincts rule at the heart of the Madrid government" (Puigdemont). The democratic transition notwithstanding, pro-independence individuals and entities continue to consider Spain a "stake."

The *Agôn*ic Metaphors of Sport and Politics in Spain

A common element of both politics and physical culture in Spain is what Roger Caillois would call *agôn*: competitive combat. In the words of John Hargreaves, "the contest element in sport is especially significant because it allows opposition, conflict and struggle to be experienced and represented in extremely dramatic and spectacular ways, whereby sports can be made to map national struggles" (13). Sports turn into a favorite political allegory because, unlike in politics, their *agôn* takes place under more ideal conditions: an "artificially created equality of chances" (Caillois 14). This premise drives peripheral minorities to compete through sport as subjects against larger, centripetal political environments. In Spain, the "field" (Bourdieu) of sport is a system of social positions and agents whose interaction is determined by power relations and the specific character of the field: *agôn*. Spanish, Basque and Catalan nationalists are agents of this field and, by way of their varying historical trajectory, have aligned in a competitive-antagonistic relationship through sport.

For those familiar with past century Basque-Spanish relations over regional autonomy, it may come as only fitting that the first sport in which the Basque Country should become "independent" from Spain, i.e. present its own national team at international competitions, would be the most agonistic "body technique" (Mauss) of all: the tug-of-war (*sokatira*). "The tug-of-war of nationalism for a national team," the pro-Spain daily *ABC* hurried to observe, alluding to Basque-Spanish political dynamics as the Basque Country national team prepared to

compete in the world championship in 2014. With a similar aim to highlight an agonistic relationship, film director Julio Medem deployed the Basque pelota game to frame Basque-Spanish relations in his documentary *The Basque Ball: Skin Against Stone*. The pelota game is most noted for its head spinning interchange of a leather ball until one of the players fails to send it back (González Abrisketa). The dynamics of the game serve as analogy for the former “action-reaction cycle” (Fearon and Laitin 857-858) in the political terrain between Basque separatists and the Spanish state, as if each ball returned was passing on the responsibility of violence back to the other.

The Catalan body techniques adopted by the nationalist movements are less confrontational and agonistic. The round dance *sardana* condenses values that bourgeois Catalan nationalists appreciated: harmony, democracy, brotherhood, union and continuity, including “their own despised stereotype as selfish capitalist accumulators” (Brandes “The Sardana”), inasmuch as dance rules emphasize quantification. Its spread corresponded with a period of growing Catalan consciousness in the nineteenth century, and one felt already in certain intellectual circles “the necessity to bestow a weightier significance to the traditional heritage of the land:” the *sardana* offered a “symbiosis between a musical and a choreographic product and a specific idea” (Martí i Pérez 40-42). The current Catalan independence movement, however, drew on the castells’ performative iconicity to rally disparate social groups behind the idea of independence. The operative values of human tower building, strength, balance, courage and common sense (*força, equilibri, valor i seny*), building metaphors like *fer pinya* “make a foundation,” and the sport’s ethos of collaboration for a common objective feature heavily at political events in the hope of building a new political community.

For much of history, football was Spain’s greatest embodiment of national virility and masculinity in its national team the “Spanish Fury,” as I and others (Delgado, Vaczi “The Spanish,” O’Brien) note elsewhere. The forceful and physical game of the Spanish national team throughout its history inspired Spanish nation-building purposes: the nobility, courage, enthusiasm, vigor, energy and spirit of the national team’s game served analogous for the well-being of the Spanish state. The irony of the national soccer team is, however, that some of its emblematic players have been Basque or Catalan nationalists who were openly antagonistic to the idea of Spain. A rather under-researched, but nevertheless fitting sport for politics and nation building in the Spanish context is chess. Structurally, chess has special evocative power

for strategizing in politics. Before the hegemony of soccer, chess and emblematic chess players served as political sentimental education of the post-war generation. Strategizing as a Spanish political tool was fundamental for Spanish nationalist and civilizing processes.

In order to extend on the agonistic, binary nature of sport and politics as reflected by the above, I will use Llach's metaphor of the stake to approach sub-national solidarity and center-periphery dynamics in Spain. On the one hand, the effort required to pull and loosen the stake is analogous with the binary, agonistic, and physical exertion required in sport, and most characteristically in tug-of-war. However, the stake also points at something that other analogies miss in their fixation on binaries: the accumulating impact of each individual's binary struggle on a third party. Thus, the logic of pulling up a stake allows us to acknowledge the binary and agonistic aspects of center-periphery oppositions, while also considering that such struggles do not take place in isolation, as secessionist projects often draw tangible or intangible support and inspiration from analogous movements elsewhere, especially if they single out a common opponent. Finally, the stake metaphor points at the temporal dimensions of secessionist projects. From this perspective, isolated display events do not only serve to give visibility to the nationalist agenda, but are also part of discreetly accumulating pulling efforts. After reviewing contemporary Catalan secessionism (2009-2017), I will identify a series of such pulling efforts as they accumulatively conspire towards the weakening of sub-national ties to the Spanish state.

Basque Inspirations for Catalan Nationalism (2009-2017)

In a Europe that is witnessing rising demands to reconsider state-region relations (Duerr), Spain is facing the greatest challenge in the post-Franco era to the nation's constitutional unity. Basques and Catalans have been claiming regional rights and liberties with varying degrees of intensity since at least the late 19th-century (Payne, Conversi, Guibernau). The Spanish center-periphery dialectic (Muro and Quiroga) is concerned with a basic question about the unity of Spain, and is characterized by two contrary impulses: the centrifugal impulse of unification, espoused by Spanish centralist nationalists who argue that Spain is one and indivisible, and the centripetal impulse of diversification, espoused by peripheral nationalists driven by various degrees of secessionism (Comas). The current economic crisis has led to significantly greater support among Basques (Gómez and Cabeza) and

Catalans (Dowling) for political movements that pursue independence, and the 2011 cease-fire of ETA (Whitfield, Murua) is directing Basque nationalist efforts into formal politics.

In the current section, my main focus is on the Catalan secessionist movement due to its current intensity, and how the Catalan sovereignty process draws from Basque politics. The former is catching its breath, as it were, after decades of political violence, as it is focusing on its “elusive peace” (Whitfield, Zulaika and Murua) after the end of ETA. The revitalization of Basque identity politics is taking place through the integration of formerly banned leftist nationalist parties into the political arena, Basques carefully follow Catalan and Scottish developments. Catalan politics has chosen more assertive strategies (Elias) for the past few years. “Things have changed here lately in Catalonia,” an interlocutor told me as we were cruising the streets of Barcelona at a massive pro-independence rally in September 2015. “Only a few years ago, most of us were either closeted *independentistes*, or were not *independentistes* at all.” What has changed in Catalonia?

After the end of the Franco dictatorship in 1975, Spain embarked on its democratic transition. The 1978 Spanish Constitution was drafted, put to referendum, and approved by 90% of the voters in Catalonia. Since at least the 1990s, however, Catalonia has experienced growing tensions with Madrid as a result of several identity-related conflicts. The push for the greater presence of the Spanish language in Catalan public education; the difficult institutional relations and debates about linguistic policy with Catalan-speaking neighbors; and the battle over the Salamanca papers, the Civil War documents Catalonia wanted back to heal the historical wounds caused by Franco, contributed to a polarization between Catalonia and Spain.

Antagonism was further aggravated by what Catalans see as the consistent disregard by Madrid of their Autonomous Government’s decisions. In 2003, the Catalan government started to push for a reform of the 1979 Statute of Autonomy with a view of extending its competences of self-government. In 2005, the Catalan Parliament approved a reformed Statute by a majority vote of 91%. The Spanish General Courts, however, overruled the decision by requiring important modifications to the text. In June 2006, a new draft was put to referendum and approved in Catalonia. After four years of deliberation, the Spanish Constitutional Court rejected the Statute in 2010. Among other things, the Catalan Statute was deemed unconstitutional for referring to Catalonia as a “nation” while from a Constitutional perspective, there is no nation

other than the Spanish nation. Regions may only refer to themselves as “nationalities.” The rejection of the Spanish Constitutional Court substantially altered the political landscape resulting in a series of pro-independence demonstrations. The Constitutional Court decision to delegitimize Catalonia as a “nation” drove 1,5 million Catalans into the streets under the banner “We are a nation. We decide.” What appeared a minor semantic detail majorly contributed to the current Catalan pro-independence fervor.

While Basque nationalist politics was busy disbanding ETA at this time, it had previously served as inspiration for Catalonia in at least two ways. First, it played an important, if indirect, role as historical precedent for the Catalan claim for a new economic agreement with Madrid. The Basque Country was the only autonomous community that negotiated an economic agreement during the Transition. Basques acquired their *pacto fiscal* in 1981, which allowed them to have control over their own treasury. In 2010, the Catalan government decided to acquire a new model of finance similar to the Basque *pacto fiscal*. With the 2008 financial crisis, the Basque agreement became a coveted arrangement for Catalan *independentistes*, who argued they lost significant amounts (arguably 10% of their GDP) to the central Spanish treasury. In July 2012, the Catalan Parliament approved an economic agreement similar to the Basque one, but the Spanish government would not negotiate it. The rejection of the Basque model for Catalonia was a turning point for Catalan nationalism. Formerly unconvinced of the idea of independence, Catalan president Artur Mas now called for “profound reflection,” and a push for independence.

Another important Basque inspiration for Catalan secessionism was a more assertive tone of political culture: a shift from *pactisme* (strategy of consensus) to an action-oriented attitude. If negotiation is about “getting to yes” (Fisher and Ury), Catalans were historically considered masters of the art for their consensus-seeking political attitude, which was often contrasted with the Basque “no-saying culture” (Zulaika 300). Where Basque politicians veto, boycott, or walk out, according to this popular view, Catalans embrace consensus. A prime example is the 1978 Constitution itself, which Basques rejected, while Catalans found its values congenial to the consensual symbolism they imagined for themselves and for Spain: a new beginning, democracy, reconciliation (Edles). On the other hand, the Basque political ethos of action (*ekintza*) has been “to some extent antithetical to the ‘spirit of consensus’” (Edles 340).

“We’ve been patiently negotiating, with no results,” a Catalan interlocutor summed up a changing attitude. “Now is our time for action.” After the Spanish Constitutional Court’s repeated rejections, Catalans increasingly feel that the era of *pactisme* is over. A more defiant, risk-taking attitude characterizes the current movement: the organization of an illegal referendum in 2014 sent Catalan President Mas to court; another referendum is projected for October 2017 despite a constitutional ban; and last year the Catalan Government announced it was ready to unilaterally declare independence in eighteen months, effectively placing itself outside of Spain and the European Union. The shift in tone was noted by Spanish centralists, who argued that the new Catalan political culture was reminiscent of, and in ways even surpassed, Basque political assertiveness. The leading Spanish daily, *El País*, published an editorial titled “Tribute to the Basque *seny* [‘common sense’],” contrasting the current “constructive and cordial nationalism” of the Basque government to the “terrible and hardly intelligent” conduct of the Catalan one (*El País*). Who would have thought, the article asked, that the much-praised *seny*, this Catalan word that evokes common sense and deliberation, would abandon the politics of its natural habitat and settle, of all places, in the Basque Country? The argument that even Basques, formerly so conflictive and defiant, had more common sense than Catalans aimed to undermine the nationalist side by telling them that their behavior was utterly un-Catalan, and ran counter to their tradition of sober consensus seeking.

My initial contention with the stake analogy was to show how physical culture progressively conspires to corrode Spanish sovereignty. In the following, I will identify the historical dialectic through which sport contributed to weakening sub-national ties to the Spanish state, identifying its most corrosive impact.

Playing for Spain: Is Their Skin in the Game?

In 2010, a highlight of Spanish nation building during the South African soccer World Cup was an Adidas commercial promoting the Spanish national team jersey. The commercial was titled *Nace de dentro*, “It is born within.” It featured two Basque players and an Asturian as they stand with naked upper bodies, handsome, muscular and sweaty. The players started stripping their own skin digitally, from under which emerged the national symbol of Spain, and the colours red and yellow: the Spanish national team jersey. “What unites us is born

within,” a voiceover said. The digital strip of the skin connotes a Spanish expression often used in sports: *dejarse la piel*, “leaving the skin,” or doing one’s best.

Rarely is the embodiment of a nation rendered so literally. The national team player’s body emerges as a primordial metaphor for a Spain where all are Spanish “under their skin,” in essence, while they may be Basque, Asturian, Catalan, Andalusian, etc. on the surface. The commercial illustrates the imposition of a symbolic persona that the national team was meant to achieve historically. However, the Spanish national team has featured several Basque and Catalan players who were openly anti-Spain nationalists, and the Spanish national team’s historical under-performance was sometimes attributed to their real or imagined lack of *sentimientos* for the Spanish colors: do Basque and Catalan nationalist players really have their skin in the game when playing for Spain?

For these players, in turn, an impasse of identification may emerge if they are uncomfortable with the symbolic persona the national team imposes. “Do I feel Spanish?” For some players, it results in an irreconcilable contradiction. The emblematic Athletic Bilbao goalkeeper Iribar was among the few known cases of a soccer player’s refusal to play in the Spanish national team in the 1970s and 80s. Iribar had been the undisputed goalkeeper of the Spanish national team for several years, and played for Spain on 49 occasions. As he gradually got involved with leftist Basque nationalism, ran for office and attended political rallies, there came a point when being involved in nationalist politics and playing for Spain became untenable. “For me, there was a moment of contradiction,” Iribar said in an interview in 1980. “I could no longer ask the release of Basque ETA prisoners, and then be ambassador of Spain with the Spanish national team” (Gómez 66).

A recent Catalan example is the former Barcelona defender Oleguer Presas, who explained to coach Luis Aragonés “how he saw the world,” and told him that “when there is no sufficient commitment or sentiment, it is better to convoke other persons” (*El Economista*). While as Presas confirms “there have been other cases too,” it remains everybody’s best interest to treat these withdrawals with discretion. They remain rare because, once in a dilemma, athletes tend to prioritize their personal careers over their national sentiments, or wait until they retire from active sport to voice their ideological convictions, as did former FC Barcelona player and coach Pep Guardiola, who now actively participates in the Catalan sovereignty process.

Catalan sport has emerged as the most forceful cultural factor to turn Catalonia into a categorical equal to Madrid, especially in two ways. On the one hand, Barcelona successfully organized the Olympic Games in 1992, which strengthened nationalist sentiments (Hargeraves), and turned the city into a fashionable cultural capital. Madrid, however, has lost three bids (1972, 2016, 2020), a failure in which Catalan nationalists revel. On the other hand, Catalan football has dominated the Spanish national team through play style and players in its greatest recent successes (2008, 2010, 2012). *Independentistes* are well aware of their increasing power, which has supplied them with a liberal dose of self-confidence. “If Catalan clubs are ousted from the Spanish league in case of independence, as they like to threaten us,” I was told by a representative of the Catalan Sport Federation, “it is all the worse for the Spanish league. Any European sport league would be happy to host our teams, and especially FC Barcelona.” This statement is undeniably true, and *independentistes* will not hesitate to rub centralist impasses under their nose: without its internal “Other,” Spanish soccer would lose its vitality and competitive edge. Furthermore, the country’s great brand, the national soccer team, is contingent on sub-national players that are often openly anti-Spanish. On the eve of the 2010 soccer World Cup final, 1.5 million Catalans protested against a constitutional court decision to curtail regional autonomy, and in favor of independence. That particular night before the historic game, the question of what would become of Spain without one of its greatest economic motors, Catalonia, gained another frightful dimension: what would become of the Spanish national team without its Catalan players?

Banning the Spanish Bull

Human cultures have demonstrated a great impulse to elaborate zoomorphic visions of politics. The proliferation of fantastic beasts in political imaginaries, the ideological figuration of the wolf, the fox, the lion, the lamb, the serpent, the eagle demonstrates, with Lévi-Strauss, our desire to single out animals not because they are “good to eat,” but because they are “good to think” (89). More particularly, some animals are singled out to think power, as Robbins argues about the greatest example of power display through animals: the French king’s menagerie, established in the palace of Versailles in 1661. It featured an impressive assortment of wild, exotic animals gathered through conquest, or received as gifts from all over the world. As symbols of

domination, they clearly had a “function as living fables, telling moral as well as political tales” (Robbins 41).

If animals, as Fernandez writes, “provide us with [...] reference points in our quest for identity” (46), bulls are “virtually synonymous with Spain” (Brandes “Torphiles”). Once again, skin is an important symbol in Spain: the country is also called *piel de toro*, “bull’s skin,” for the shape of the skin cut off from the animal after the bullfight is similar to the shape of Spain. The Spanish national soccer team is today popularly called *La Roja*, “the Red One:” the color red of blood and furious passion is loaded with significance for the bullfight. Skin is an imaginary link between the two ludic spectacles that constitute a temporal axis of Spanish identity: the bullfight of the past, and soccer of the future. Marvin called the bullfight as “something quintessentially Spanish,” and the bullfighter as a “heroic figure [occupying] a special place” in the Spanish national imaginary (xv). The bullfight never ceased to intrigue writers and commentators: it is art and culture for its *aficionados*; a “defense against femininity,” and “ritual revindication of masculinity” (Douglass 243); the symbolic “killing of the father” (*ibid.*, 242); the “*fiesta nacional*” for the lower, and “big business” (Pink 198) for the higher strata of society.

Spanish regions too have their politicized bestiary representations, often featured in opposition to Castilian authority (Brandes “Torphiles”). The Galician cow, the Basque sheep, the Andalusian fox, or the Catalan donkey, however — and let’s admit rather unsurprisingly — fall short of the evocative power of the black Spanish bull. The emblematic Osborne bulls that populate Spanish highways metamorphosed from advertising brandy to Spain’s National Heritage. When new advertising laws required that the “bullboards” be pulled down, national protest led to a Spanish Supreme Court decision to protect them as a national icon that by now everyone associated with Spain rather than liquor, to the point that its original creator, the Osborne Group, practically lost legal control as owner over the image (*ibid.* 782-784).

It was therefore particularly significant that in 2010, the year its nationhood was declared “unconstitutional” by the Spanish Constitutional Court, the Catalan Parliament affected a blow below the belt: it banned the bullfight. If the region wanted to do away with the sovereignty of the State, it first had to do away with its sovereign beast.

It is hard to overestimate the import of the symbolic killing of the Spanish bull for the Catalan independence movement. Bullfighting had suffered progressive social alienation and opposition both in spite of

its close association with Spain, and because of it. For the past decade (2007-2017), the number of bullfights dropped by 70% Spain-wise to what is still about 1,800 shows a year. In Catalonia, the decision to ban bullfighting was clearly a political rather than an animal rights question. It became part of the Catalan nationalist agenda, and a desire to identify with a modern, progressive Europe as opposed to an “antiquated,” “barbarous” Spain. A recent editorial titled “The Death of the Bull” is a good example of discursive boundary-making: it calls the bullfight a “delirium of death and machismo,” which summarizes everything anachronistic that a modern society should fight against. “The bullfight is the Spain of the lace head cover (*mantilla*), the decorative comb (*peineta*), of silent women praying the Lord’s Prayer, and of men exclaiming ‘Olé’ with excitement when they can write with the smoke of their cigars. They are the symbol of ideas about kings and ministers who serve a retrograde fatherland” (Farré). While the Spanish Constitutional Court overturned the Catalan ban in 2016, arguing that an autonomous region may regulate but not fully ban bullfights, it is currently unimaginable that the bulls will ever return to Catalonia.

What did Catalonia do with its bull rings? One of the most important arenas, in Tarragona south of Barcelona, hosts the bi-annual human tower competition, a two-day event that convokes the best teams, and is gaining increasing international attention. Catalonia has turned Spain’s main symbolic space into a Catalan one where, in the minds of most fans and participants, a new nation is built with each new tower.

Whistling Spain

“Why does the Spanish national anthem have no lyrics?” a joke went in Catalonia in 2015, as soccer fans prepared for the Spanish King’s Cup between the Basque Athletic Club, and the Catalan FC Barcelona. “Because it’s whistled!” Whistling the Spanish national anthem and the king catalysed nation-wide debates over national and sub-national sovereignty, and the freedom of expression.

The first notable football game whistling goes back to 1925 in Barcelona, to the regime of Primo de Rivera, who had just overthrown the constitutional government in 1923 with a military coup d’état, and established a military dictatorship. The friendly match between FC Barcelona and C.E. Júpiter took place in June 1925 in Catalonia. At half time, when the Royal Marines played the Spanish *Marcha Real*, fans whistled the anthem so furiously that the Marines, confused as to why the “Spaniards” whistled “their own anthem,” switched to their God

Save the Queen. To their further bafflement, the British anthem met with enthusiastic applause. The event had major political repercussions for its transgressions. The stadium was shut down for three months, and the president of FC Barcelona was exiled from Spain. According to anecdote, the Les Corts stadium would be re-opened only after 12 religious practitioners blessed it in order to exorcise the “malevolent separatist spirits” that had contaminated it (Burns 124).

The recent instances of King jeering include the 2009, 2012, and 2015 King’s Cup finals, all three played between the Basque Athletic Club and the Catalan FC Barcelona. Under its various historical names, the King’s Cup has always represented Spain’s centralist powers, and now it would be played between two regions of secessionist aspirations. As King Juan Carlos emerged in the VIP booth of Valencia’s Mestalla stadium in 2009, the Spanish national anthem would be played, but it was not heard: 55,000 Basques and Catalans were standing, holding innumerable Basque and Catalan national flags high, whistling the anthem and the royal family. On the stands, a giant billboard said “We are nations of Europe, good bye Spain.” The state-owned Radio Televisión Española reduced the sound of the whistling, and amplified the anthem to audible levels, which stirred a political controversy over censoring an act of free expression. The Foundation for the Defence of the Spanish Nation (Denaes) sued the whistling. In spite of the National Court decision that declared that whistling fell within the category of free expression, pro-monarchy voices continued to call for the criminalization of whistling each time the Basque and Catalan teams qualified for the Cup Final.

“Eighty-seven years later,” discussions went in 2012 before the King’s Cup final, where once again the same teams qualified, “[Madrid province president] Esperanza Aguirre ... evokes the ghost of the dictator Primo de Rivera” (*El Periódico*), who shut down Barcelona’s Les Corts stadium. Aguirre called for the cancellation of the final if fans whistled. This time, King Juan Carlos himself was not going to show up for the final that bore his name, as he was resting off the hip injury he had procured at a safari in Botswana. Instead, his son Prince Felipe represented the royal family. Fifty-five thousand Basque and Catalan football fans packed into Madrid’s Calderón stadium. The Spanish national anthem was reduced to a mere 27 seconds to mitigate the embarrassment of its furious whistling, but that wasn’t the only highlight of the anti-monarchy protest. Basque and Catalan fans were jumping and waving pro-independence flags, savoring the moment as

they sang together the well-known children's song to mock the king's wild game hunt: "An elephant was balancing/On a spider's web/And as he saw he didn't fall/He called another elephant. /Two elephants were balancing..."

By 2015, no pro-Spain region wanted to hold the Cup between these two teams, much less Real Madrid, where it was originally scheduled. Instead, ninety-five thousand Basques and Catalans packed in Barcelona's Camp Nou stadium, and produced a decibel that the press called "monumental," "stratospheric," and "thunderous." Spain's ruling conservative People's Party (PP) qualified the incident as "horror" that "offends us," declared that the whistling demonstrated "the disease part of the society suffers," and reiterated the proposition that insulting Spain's symbols should be punishable. The State's Anti-Violence Commission issued a fine of 123,000 Euros for the clubs, and the General Attorney launched an investigation about whether the whistling constituted punishable offense to the monarch, and insult to national symbols.

The impulse to ban political jeering and mockery is highly problematic in a post-Charlie Hebdo Europe, I argue elsewhere ("Football"), and misses sport's capacity to ease, rather than exacerbate, antagonistic political positions: the capacity of play to frame jeering and mockery as part of a *joking relationship*. Drawing on the carnivalesque premise of subverting power, joking relationships involve chiding and embarrassing, mocking and insulting, jokes and vulgar allegations, sexual overtures, crude scatology, horse-play, or a banter of obscenities (see Brant, Norman, Goldberg, Gundelach, Carty and Musharbash, Sorensen, Winkler Reid). As "ritual purifiers" (Douglas 372), the joking relationships of ludic arenas allow participants to see that an accepted pattern no longer has a necessity.

Because it produces "a shift of authorities and truths, a shift of world orders," Bakhtin (127) lamented that the carnivalesque element of culture was disappearing from modern urban life. Sport stadiums, however, still exhibit important carnival features, as profanation, blasphemies, insults, debasing, bringing down to earth, vulgarities, verbal agons and cursing matches thrive. Excessive measures to "civilize," sanitize, and gentrify (Cleland and Cashmore) sporting spaces, however, impede the organic development of joking relationships. If jeering remains a license proper to the marketplace publicity of games, as I think they should, sports will continue to be uniquely positioned to allow the "artful insulting" (Freedman 158) of not just the opponent or the referee, but state sovereigns as well. This has important democratizing

consequences. The play sphere opens the chance for the easing of traumatic political relationships, and the incorporation of disparate parties into a community of laughter through “permitted disrespect” (Radcliffe-Brown 196). The duality of the play frame’s interpretation allows for that incorporation. For the mocker, it is “more than a game,” and jeering constitutes a culture of resistance. The mocked, on the other hand, may save face by taking refuge in the interpretation of the situation as “only a game.”

Catalans Want to Vote: Sport for Democracy

“If Catalonia ever does become independent,” the *Financial Times* wrote in July 2017 in an extended analysis of the independence movement, “historians will probably look to September 13 2009, and the event that took place in Arenys de Munt that day, as one of the sparks that started the secessionist fire” (*Financial Times*). The Catalan small town of 8600 inhabitants organized an unprecedented local referendum, with 96% voting for secession. “Catalan Town Votes for Independence from Spain,” international news outlets wrote next day, mockingly. An avalanche of referendums followed all over Catalonia, to the point that most Catalans have voted about independence as many as three times — none of them binding, as the Spanish Constitution does not allow regional referendums on the question of independence.

Catalan desires to vote have surfaced in sport in various ways. The operative values of human tower building (“strength, balance, courage and common sense”), tower building metaphors like *fer pinya* “make a foundation,” and the sport’s ethos of collaboration for a common objective feature heavily at political events that campaign for the right to vote (Vaczi “Catalonia’s Human Towers”). Human towers are a staple of the annual September 11 pro-independence rallies: dozens of teams build castells at these events, attracting over a million people and the international media. Another example of how people constructed pro-independence ideology through body-practice-value linkages was the Catalans Want to Vote: Human Towers for Democracy event organized by the NGO Òmnium Cultural in June 2014. The event aimed to promote the following November’s nonbinding referendum, which called on the European Union to recognize the Catalan right to vote on the question of seceding from Spain. The campaign announced the simultaneous building of human towers in eight European capitals (Paris, Brussels, London, Lisbon, Geneva, Berlin, Rome, Barcelona),

and in its advertising made a clear parallel between the ethos of castells, and Catalan political objectives:

The Catalan people will decide our future in a referendum. Together we form a cluster [*fem pinya*] to build a better country. We believe in peace, effort, and cooperation. We are a sovereign nation that wants to live in a normal country. Our dream is shared; our path, democracy. We want to tell the world because the world has to know. That is why we are inviting you to the most important international event of the year. From the foundations of the human tower to the very top, together we will touch the sky. It is the chance to make our message reach Europe: Catalans want to vote. Help us build a foundation (*omniumcultural*).

Catalan soccer has contributed to the spirit of self-governance by providing an example of self-governance, even when it was transgressive and illegal to do so: under dictatorial settings. There are currently three clubs in the Spanish first division that operate through governance by their membership: the Basque Athletic Club, the Catalan FC Barcelona, and Real Madrid. In 1990, as a result of financial crisis and mismanagement, most clubs were obliged by law to turn into public limited sports companies (*sociedad anónima deportiva*). Only the above-mentioned clubs were allowed to keep their status as non-commercial entities, that is genuine clubs. Turning the rest of the clubs into companies had contradictory effects: infamously, they would land in the ownership of just one or a few proprietors, mismanagement would be rampant, and former members lamented their loss of membership rights such as running for office, initiating changes of the statute, direct voting on club president, and other matters.

In short, only three first division clubs continue to be owned and governed by their fans through democratic processes. The presidential elections I witnessed in Athletic Club (2011) and FC Barcelona (2015) were very much like political elections — except, locals would tell you, they were more important. These clubs hold presidential elections every five or six years; candidates carefully draft and vigorously campaign with their program; and members vote directly on them. It is hard to over-estimate the importance of this vote for club loyalty, and for its perpetuation of a democratic, participatory spirit in sport and society, when the everyday club member feels disenfranchised by globalization and obscure commercial-political maneuvers.

In 2015, less than two months before yet another pro-independence mega-rally, the FC Barcelona presidential elections emerged as a

reminder of what Catalans would vindicate on that rally: the right to vote. Football club elections became a grand display event of a political desire that went beyond sport. They catalyzed spectacular debates about sport performance, sponsorship, corruption, player signing — and, importantly, the club's position in the question of Catalonia's independence from Spain. Most importantly, to my mind, the town hall meetings with presidential candidates offered a scene rarely accommodated by a global, multi-billion business such as FC Barcelona. Fans of all ages and social strata addressed, challenged and criticized their leaders and candidates, some of the most powerful socio-economical agents of the country. If only for the duration of the campaign, and at the level of fantasy as sceptics would add, club members felt empowered as they held their leaders accountable.

Club operation on the basis of participation is, therefore, consequential for the message it sends about democratic rights and values in society at large. This became most noteworthy during the Franco dictatorship, where the regime appointed club presidents, elections were forbidden, and the sheer idea of voting was subversive. Namely, voting in football clubs, Shaw writes, “would have given the opportunity for an uncomfortable comparison with the lack of democracy in the national order” (122). And it did, as the club found furtive ways to exercise the act of voting. The 1953 elections were organized by exploiting a legal lacuna: the club called elections when Marti Carreto resigned after losing star forward Di Stéfano to Real Madrid, and the secretary realized that the 1948 reforms had not been formally incorporated in the regulations of FC Barcelona yet. This loophole opened the chance for a massive election held in the dead of the Franco regime, presenting a striking counter-example to political disenfranchisement in general. A great campaign ensued, and kept the city in suspense until more than 17,000 club members showed up to vote. Realizing the importance of a vote, any vote really, for maintaining a spirit of democracy under generalized disenfranchisement, FC Barcelona took every chance to hold them on minor issues the Franco regulations didn't care to cover.

It is perhaps not accidental that the member-governed Athletic Club and FC Barcelona should come from regions that spent much of their history vindicating local voting rights. Given the political mandate to vote whenever given the chance, it is perhaps not accidental, either, that the Basque and Catalan clubs should have had conspicuously more elections and presidents than Real Madrid. Since their first votes in 1989 and 1900, Athletic Club has had 33 different presidents,

FC Barcelona has had 40, while Real Madrid has had half that number only, 20. While this data could imply greater presidential stability, it also confirms the general view of Real Madrid having a more *señorial* leadership culture based on hierarchy, and the subtle usurpation of power by presidents. Currently, Real Madrid fans are worried about accumulating presidential power that intimidates potential candidates from running. Though “the façade of democracy remains,” as a commentator recently remarked (*Vice Sports*), in June 2017 there was yet again no contender to the presidency at what was now referred to as “the elections that are never held” (*El Confidencial* 2017). In a wider football culture where 29-year-long tenures like that of the President of the Spanish Football Federation (RFEF) are possible, the 2015 FC Barcelona elections, and its five finalists campaigning for the presidency emerge as a statement of democracy.

Conclusion

Insistence, solidarity and continuity is a main motif in Llach’s “The stake.” *I know very well that it is rotten*, the singer sings about the stake that prevents them from acting freely. *But Siset, it weighs so much / and when my strength slips from me / Sing me your song again*. The song culminates when Siset dies, and the singer has to take over the responsibility of passing the spirit of resistance to the next generation: *And as the new boys pass me by / I lift up my voice to sing / The last song of Siset / The last song that he taught me*.

In this paper, I reviewed the contemporary Catalan nationalist movement through the logic of its canonical resistance song. Secessionist movements are a result of cumulative social and political interactions that aim to erode central power, and they often gain strength from the work of the other movements. Sport and physical culture are particularly apt for the kind of pulling efforts Llach calls for in his song. Sports iconically represent agonistic confrontation, the exertion of effort, and collective work towards a common objective; they take place repeatedly, as every weekend thousands, and even millions, of people prepare for their games or performances; and they play a crucial role in the education of the new generations.

While not as coordinated as in Scotland, where “sport for yes!” was strategically deployed by the 2014 pro-independence campaign (Whigham and May), Catalan physical culture performed a range of political desires between 2009 and 2017. The strength and power of Catalan soccer helped Barcelona and Catalonia turn into a categorical

equal with regards to Madrid and Spain, and fostered a collective self-confidence that is indispensable for a risky move such as secession. Whistling and jeering the Spanish king and symbols subverted, if only for the duration of play, royalist power structures that are perceived as imposed, rather than chosen. Banning the bullfight was a blunt move away from what is seen as a regressive, patriarchal and violent Spain towards a progressive Europe. Club management and presidential elections in soccer have variously served as a routine confirmation of a governance model, and the sole reminder of a democratic spirit in a disenfranchised country. These events have relied on a great deal of sub-national solidarity, reflecting wider realities where the Basque, Catalan, Flemish, and Kurdish movements, for example, closely monitor and cite one another's strategies, exchange information, and wait for a precedent. "Catalonia is not alone," the *Guardian* concluded in September 2017 (Ascherson), arguing that global politics can no longer disregard secessionism, as globalization will continue to produce desire for smaller states. The strength of sport events rests in their cumulative impact on a new political ambiance where, according to demographic tendencies of voting practices, it may be only a matter of a new generation, the passage of "the new boys," that European geopolitics will have to seriously address the fate of new states.

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