
The Political Football Stadium: Identity Discourses and Power Struggles

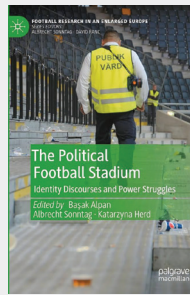
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What kind of relationship is there between football and politics? Can we separate sport from politics? Given the many connections between politics and football, these issues have influenced discussions in both academic and popular domains. For this reason, sports arenas have not been merely spaces of entertainment. Football has always been closely linked to social struggle, identity formation, and power dynamics. *The Political Football Stadium: Identity Discourses and Power Struggles*, edited by Başak Alpan, Albrecht Sonntag, and Katarzyna Herd, contributes to the literature directly within the context of this natural relationship. It analyzes stadiums as a place of conflict where intangible concepts of ideology, resistance, and commodification come to life, rejecting the notion that football is apolitical. By doing so, the research examines the arguments presented in studies that explore the connections between politics, identity, and football from various perspectives, including theoretical, historical, and case-study approaches.

The book consists of 14 chapters and is organized into five parts. The first part is the “Introduction,” which sets up the framework for the rest of the book and gives comparative socio-demographic statistics on stadium attendance throughout Europe. Following this,



the second part, titled “Historical Case Studies,” examines how stadiums have been instrumentalized for both totalitarian and democratic purposes, such as the Franco-German rapprochement, through the cases of Stadio Mussolini and the Adolf-Hitler-Kampfbahn. The third part, “Contemporary Case Studies,” explores the political roles of modern stadiums, addressing topics such as how FC Barcelona’s Camp Nou emerges as a site of resistance even within a commercialized context, and how even a grass pitch in Sweden can carry political meaning.

An important portion of the book, is the fourth part titled “Protest Cultures.” This part proceeds from the argument that stadiums serve as spaces of resistance, offering a detailed account of fan movements in Cairo and Istanbul, right-wing ideologies in Poland, the use of the implementation of the Passolig identity card system in Türkiye as a mechanism for regulating stadium entry and standardizing fan identification, and the strategies of Iranian women fans who resist regime restrictions through “cross-dressing” (p. 268). The book concludes with the last part titled “Outlook,” which presents two contrasting scenario drafts for the future of football stadiums in the post-pandemic era by 2050: highly controlled spaces detached from the public, and urban areas managed for the common

good. These two situations are portrayed as completely opposites.

The book's theoretical strength is derived from the distinction made between "politics" and "the political" (p. 12). The editors argue that stadiums in the contemporary era are inherently political spaces where social identities are manifested, rather than merely event spaces. In this regard, it is worth noting that stadiums are often perceived as contradictory buildings. The green pitch is described both as a mysterious place capable of generating collective memory and a sense of magic and as a disciplinary zone of control and surveillance. In Chapter 2, they employ data from the transnational Football Research in an Enlarged Europe (FREE) project, a survey of football in European public opinion, to analyze the socio-demographic reality of citizens who attend stadiums. In their analysis, the authors challenge the argument that the stadium constitutes a wholly proletarian space and show that high attendance at stadiums is more common among high and upper-middle socio-economic groups based on data from Türkiye and Germany. They also accept that these spaces are male-dominated. However, they show that this rate varies across countries.

The historical case studies also demonstrate that the political instrumentalization of stadiums is not a modern phenomenon, as illustrated by the analysis of Stadio Mussolini in Turin and the stadium in Stuttgart. It is argued that Stuttgart (initially Adolf-Hitler-Kampfbahn, then post-war Neckarstadion, and eventually Mercedes-Benz-Arena) constitutes a space that reflects Germany's ideological transformations, and that the act of naming itself is a political gesture. Expanding the political dimension of stadiums into the field of international relations, Philipp

Didion examines their potential to serve as diplomatic stages, reading these spaces as "emotional places" (p. 83) through the lens of tense matches in the 1950s and the friendship matches of the 1960s.

The book is at its best when it looks at the stadium as a space shaped by identity. Özgür Dirim Özkan's chapter offers a clarifying analysis of how ethnic and urban identities are spatialized in a post-conflict society. Hunter Shobe, in turn, discusses how FC Barcelona's Camp Nou functioned as a space of resistance during the Franco dictatorship, where banned Catalan symbols could nonetheless be displayed. The chapter on Swedish football, which addresses the debate between natural grass and artificial turf, also makes clear how modernity is perceived as a moral struggle among supporters. Chapter 9 also conducts a comparative study of the Stade de France and Wembley, adding another layer by examining how green pitches function as "sites of memory" (p. 180).

When the book turns to protest cultures, it opens a different discussion. By showing how fan groups such as Ultras Ahlavi and Çarşı drew on their accumulated experience in street clashes, Burak Özçetin and Ömer Turan draw attention to the revolutionary/anarchist potential of football fans. Radoslaw Kossakowski's chapter, in contrast, addresses the conservatism of fans. The evaluation of the Passolig e-ticket system in Türkiye by Başak Alpan and Tanıl Bora (Chapter 12) finishes this part of the book. Lastly, Caroline Azad criticizes a basic omission in her chapter on Iranian women supporters (Chapter 13): The stadium's ban on women. The problem of cross-dressing, in which Iranian women pose as males in order to access Azadi Stadium, is examined by Azad. Additionally, she characterizes this as a kind of political disobedience.

The story ends with an imaginative scenario that outlines two potential, completely opposite post-pandemic futures for stadiums. The initial one is a dystopian concept of studio-stadiums designed exclusively for VIPs. The stadium reappears as a common good incorporated into the neighborhood in the second utopian vision.

The book firmly situates itself at the intersection of Political Sociology, Urban Studies, and Sports History. It should be stated that its strength lies in its theoretical rigor. In particular, the application of Foucault's concepts to modern e-ticketing systems and the use of Laclau's notion of populism to understand supporter resistance provide researchers with valuable analytical tools. Nevertheless, the book does have its limitations. Although the authors position themselves as wide in scope, it is still predominantly Eurocentric; most of its case studies are drawn from Europe or its immediate surroundings (Türkiye, Egypt). The limited attention to Latin America (especially Brazil) and to the shifting dynamics of stadium politics in Sub-Saharan Africa leaves

a clear gap in what could have been a fully global comparison. Nevertheless, the book successfully demonstrates that the stadium is never merely a concrete bowl.

The book examines stadiums where the state, the market, and the public intersect and struggle for influence. It is essential to sports-politics literature because it ties big political theory to on-the-ground ethnographic observations of fan culture. The chapters are not limited to theoretical discussion. Authors draw on a range of methods, including archival research, visual studies of stadium architecture, and in-depth ethnographies of supporter communities. The language is academic and formal. Fortunately, the authors' sentences are understandable and clear, which makes the book accessible to a wide range of readers. Its effortless shift from sociology to history is proof of skilled and careful editing. The book primarily targets those interested in political science and sports studies. At the same time, it is valuable research that even a football enthusiast could read with ease and enjoyment.