BOOK REVIEW

Srđan Vrcan: “SOCCER - POLITICS – VIOLENCE: essays on sociology of soccer”


In Croatian sociological literature new books on sport sociology are quite a rarity. Therefore, the book “Soccer – Politics – Violence” is a great contribution to the works of sport sociology, particularly to the sociology of soccer.

The book by Srđan Vrcan is an interesting and rewarding piece of reading material for sport sociologists and kinesiologists alike, in general, for all people interested in the phenomenon of sport, soccer or association football in particular. It is a result of many years of research and critical deliberation upon the phenomenon of soccer and its social environment, and a kind of sequel to Vrcan’s previous study “Sports and violence here and today” (Sport i nasilje danas u nas), which was published in 1990. The thematic framework is built out of concepts soccer, politics and violence. It should be underlined here that soccer is investigated as a phenomenon per se. Soccer is established nowadays in the centre of social life, therefore, it has become much more than a game and entertainment—it has become a kind of a global game which has inundated the world.

In the introductory chapter of the book the origins and development of soccer are analysed—
was being prepared behind the curtains of the then politics and in the core of society’s essence.” (p. 85). The concept of soccer being a copy of the social-political climate of a particular community was corroborated again in this case - severe conflicts between adverse supporters’ gangs (of the clubs Dinamo and Crvena zvezda) were an overtone to the bloody warfare. Again, Garry Harrison’s statement about soccer as a metaphor of a society was proven to be true, as well as Vrcan’s statement that a society was, in fact, a metaphor of soccer.

The author writes about violence now and here in the third chapter of the book. Observing the territory Croats are living in, the author claims that violence has become a normal component of everyday life and social conformity. The violence of the supporters is part of the gang folklore – it always has its symbolic and deeper meaning. The author seeks a way out of the vicious circle of violence in an attempt to “lower the level of general social conflicts and consequently illegalize any form of violence which is used as a means of social, particularly political, goal achievement” (p. 196).

In the fourth study entitled Odd conflict: President of the Republic against the supporters gangs, the author applied sociological imagination to interpret the conflict that lasted several years between the then state authority, which led to active politics even in the stadiums, and the members of one group of supporters – Bad Blue Boys. Using political instrumental conditioning of soccer it was easy to create a critical mass which was easy to mobilise and “exploitable” for any concept. The nineties in Croatia were a period in which politics and soccer developed side by side. Sports achievements were a kind of remedy for failures in politics. The entire depoliticization of sport is impossible, but imposing political ideas onto supporters gangs may be counterproductive – it may turn them into rebels and ruffians.

Nowadays, soccer is a kind of surrogate for politics – it is “like contemporary democracy: twenty-two play and billions watch” (p. 16).

The last study Sociological analysis of soccer in the gap between normality and pathology suggests that there is a socially positive soccer, on the one hand, and a soccer that has a negative impact on society, on the other.

Stadiums are “places of deceptive egalitarianism” in which a supporter transforms himself into “somebody” and “something”. That makes stadiums places of deceptive unity and soccer becomes a game in which a person builds not only his individual identity, but a national identity as well. Despite the fact that the essential anthropological determinant of a human is, according to J. Huizinga, that he/she is homo ludens – a being of play, meaning that the need for play is inherent to him/her, it still does not explain the fact that in a contemporary society soccer is more than a game – a satisfaction (a compensation) for all the setbacks and misfortunes in life.

By observing soccer within a broader context as a phenomenon that can be described successfully, but hardly explained from the aspect of sociology, and by observing its relationships to politics and violence, Vrcan has contributed a lot to solving the problems connected to the game that has conquered the world (R. Giulianotti). Therefore, it is my opinion that the book is dedicated to a broad reading audience – from those who are meeting the sociology of soccer for the first time to students, lecturers and researchers.

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